

VAYIGASH

5th Tevet 5772 ~ 31st December 2011

Dr. Annette Boeckler

It is Joseph's story? Or is it Judah's? Who really is the main hero? Isn't Joseph rather a victim or at least only reacting to unlucky or happy circumstances? Judah's actions and words however, move the story forward.

Does Joseph's personality change during the story? No. Isn't it, that at the beginning he wished to be adored, at the end he loves to be adored (42:9). Does Judah change? Yes. This week's parasha is the proof. So who actually is the main hero of the story? Shouldn't it be called the Judah-Story rather than the Joseph-Story?

The Judah we encounter this week is not the Judah of the past weeks. Do you remember: It was Judah who suggested selling his then youngest brother Joseph, "for what gain do we have if we kill him. Let us make money with him." (37:26). The story of Judah and his daughter in law Tamar, however, is the key to understand Judah's change. He deceived Tamar and is deceived and humiliated. This changed him. Tamar changed him. (Interestingly Tamar's son Perez will become the ancestor of the messiah, as we sing in Lecha Dodi: ben parzi.) From now on Judah grows in responsibility. It was because of his plea, that Benjamin joined the brothers journey to Egypt (43:3-4), he guaranteed his youngest brother with his life (43:9). The story now suddenly speaks of "Judah and his brothers" (44:14) and Judah becomes their spokesperson for good (44:16, also 46:28). In this week's parasha Judah takes the full responsibility for his family, which finally leads to the revelation of truth: pharaoh is Joseph, everything is fine.

It was thanks to Joseph that Judah survived. This week's Haftarah makes it clear, that Judah and Joseph stand for political entities, they symbolize the two extremely different antique kingdoms in Eretz Israel: the northern Kingdom called "Ephraim" or "Israel" and the southern kingdom called "Judah". In Judah only kings from the Davidic line ruled whereas the northern kingdom Israel saw many dynasties coming and going; it was multicultural and very open-minded towards Assyrian and Canaanite cultures. However the northern Kingdom Israel had prophets such as Elijah; the books of prophets and the earliest traditions about the patriarchs originate here. The two kingdoms had rather an unfriendly relationship; each one regarded itself as the true representative of "Israel" or "the house of David". They treated each other like Judah treated Joseph in his youth. (The two books of kings tell the story of these two different kingdoms.) Especially the small southern kingdom of Judah looked arrogantly down to Israel and condemned its politics and behaviour and regarded its end by the Assyrians as God's punishment for idolatry.

The Haftarah now teaches: both kingdoms belong inseparably together. God's eternal peace and God's presence will only dwell in a united people (Ez 37:16-17; 26-28).

Till today, both belong together: Those groups of Jews who assimilate and adapt and change and those who keep the traditional line. Judah would have starved without Joseph. But also: Judah needed to leave Egypt again to build the identity of the Jewish people.

Judah and Joseph/Ephraim are two extreme poles. It is their encounter that keeps Judaism alive and that makes us learn and develop responsibility and it is their respect and care of each other that will guarantee God's peace and presence in Judaism.

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Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!" (Genesis 44:33-34)

Derash: Study

- "What does this resemble? A deep pit into which no one could climb down. Then a clever person came and brought a long rope that reached down to the water within, so he could draw from it. So was Joseph deep, and Judah came to draw from him." (Tanhuma Yashan)
- "Everything Judah said in his brothers' presence brought comfort to Joseph, comfort to his brothers, and comfort to Benjamin." (Yalkut Shimoni)
- "The word eved, slave or bondman, occurs thirteen times in the oration, and twice in the above verse, underlining their humble posture in front of the powerful ruler." (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Genesis)
- "This offer marks Judah as a man of exceptional character. He speaks for himself and also for his brothers; he speaks in accents of love and not sibling hatred." (W. Gunther Plaut, The Torah)
- "This of course stands in stark contrast to his willingness years before to watch his father writhe in anguish over Joseph's supposed death. The entire speech is at once a moving piece of rhetoric and the expression of a profound inner change." (Robert Alter, Genesis)
- "What pours out in Judah's address to Joseph is a vein of such pure feeling - pure in its contrition, pure in its sense of filial respect and sibling responsibility, and pure in its selflessness - that it breaks down Joseph's theatrical spell and precipitates his own unmasking." (Peter Pitzele, Our Fathers' Wells)

Questions for Discussion:

- Was Judah's speech actually necessary? What would Joseph have done had none of the brothers intervened on Benjamin's behalf?
- What accounts for Judah's strength of character in this situation? Why is it significant that it was Judah, and not another brother, who acted so decisively?
- What element in Judah's appeal was determinative in moving Joseph? Judah's manifest personal growth? Joseph's love for Benjamin? Jacob's pain? Joseph's own dramatic change in fortune? Sincere belief that all was part of a divine plan? Joseph's own need for "closure?" Remorse at his own youthful errors and at the fear he had again brought to his brothers? Grief at the sibling relationships of which he had so long been deprived? The newfound unity among his brothers?
- Is the Tanhuma's comparison of Joseph to a deep pit of all but inaccessible water complimentary? Is it supported by the Biblical account?

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

MIKETZ

Shabbat Chanukah

28th Kislev 5772 ~ 24th December 2011

Matt Plen

Parshat Mikketz is where the personal, family narrative of Bereishit coincides with the collective, national story of Shemot and the rest of the Torah. Historical events conspire to throw together the protagonists of a gritty, emotional, family drama. The personal story is the focus, the public one no more than a clever narrative device.

But as Joseph says in next week's portion as he reveals his identity to his brothers, 'God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here, but God' (45:7-8). He might have added that the family's descent into Egypt was the necessary precondition for the playing out of the Exodus narrative and the foundation of the Jewish people. In this reading, the family story is nothing more than a pretext for the national-religious narrative with which the biblical author is actually preoccupied.

Perhaps the personal and public narratives of Bereishit enjoy a more complex relationship with each other, each serving to shine the spotlight on an important aspect of the other. What, then, do the stories have in common?

In the family story, Joseph, victim of his brothers' earlier cruelty, takes the opportunity of his brothers' unexpected arrival in Egypt to enact justice. He imprisons Simeon and threatens to enslave Benjamin in order to establish whether the brothers' priorities have changed: where they once sold a brother for personal gain, will they now sacrifice themselves to save one? After the brothers have proven themselves, Joseph reveals his true identity and is reconciled with them.

However, Joseph's ostensible pursuit of justice conceals a less palatable tendency to replicate the cruelty with which he was treated in childhood: torturing and toying with his brothers and forcing his father to relive the experience of losing a son. Rather than the disinterested pursuit of justice, this represents the egotism of a damaged psyche.

So too in the public sphere. At the onset of famine, 'Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold [grain] to the Egyptians' (41:56). Yet later, the Torah informs us that Joseph exploited the famine in order to concentrate all lands in Pharaoh's possession and reduce the Egyptian people to the status of serfs (47:13-27). In public life, as in his personal life, Joseph's ostensible commitment to justice is undermined by self-interest and opportunism.

Joseph's political career began with his advice to Pharaoh to 'find a man understanding and wise' to guide Egypt through the years ahead (41:33). Ramban (Nachmanides) comments as follows: 'Understanding, in order to know how to support the people of Egypt from his hand with bread, in accordance with their family requirements, to supply them with their sustenance, and sell the balance to other countries in order to accumulate wealth and money for Pharaoh. Wise, in order to know how to preserve the produce so that it should not rot...' 'Understanding' signifies the capacity for empathy and commitment to the common good (spiced with a touch of realpolitik), while 'wisdom' is a value-neutral instrumental rationality which is limited to calculating the most effective means to any given end.

The connection between these private and public narratives highlights Joseph's failure to subordinate means to ends. Rather than capitalising on the opportunities he's presented with for the common good, he allows his good luck and talent to fatally compromise his moral sense.

Matt Plen is AMS Director

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, 'Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?'" (Genesis 41:38)

Derash: Study

- "The spirit of God: the divine gift of prophecy." (Targum Onkelos)
- "'In whom is the spirit of God' in the interpretation of dreams. All the more so as regards worldly affairs of state." (Rashbam)
- "This advice was prompted from beginning to end by the Holy Spirit. The prophet cannot restrain his prophecy and must unburden himself." (Abarbanel)
- "Joseph said all this so that Pharaoh would select him, for a wise man looks out for himself (literally, 'his eyes are in his head' - JHP)." (Nahmanides)
- "Joseph proclaims the omnipotence of God at all times, in the midst of an idolatrous world, emphasizing against Whom man sins, Who interprets dreams, Who foretells that which is to come and Who brings things to pass. All this Joseph achieves not by a lecture or a discourse but by the rhetoric device of repetition. In the end, even Pharaoh took the hint and thus he answered: 'Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the spirit of God is?'" (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Genesis)
- "What makes Joseph a religious figure worthy of a quarter of Genesis? Who could be more religious? To the seductress, fellow prisoners, Pharaoh, he spoke of God. He regarded dreams as divine orders. He made sure all eleven brothers bowed to him, fulfilling his youthful vision, before revealing himself. He forgave them for selling him, because 'it was not you that sent me here, but God'. And that style of religiosity is what irks. Who needs this overweening talk of God before the unbelievers, this certainty he knows God's plan, this erasing of human responsibility? Who needs a man willing to serve Pharaoh because he's sure he is serving God?" (Gershom Gorenberg, Seventy Facets).

Questions for Discussion:

- Is Joseph's advice to Pharaoh - which occasions his elevation to high office - a prophetic revelation he is compelled to deliver - or shameless self-promotion in the "spirit" of his boastful youth? Is his unbridled ambition merely an instrument of God's plan?
- Gorenberg criticizes Joseph for forgiving his brothers. Was Joseph in moral error? For what sins should human forgiveness not be given?
- Gorenberg also points out that Joseph waited to reveal his identity until after his brothers had fulfilled his vision by bowing down to him. Had he revealed his identity earlier and kept his brothers from bowing, would the divine quality of his dreams have been impugned? Did Joseph's delay demonstrate a lack of faith?
- To what extent is it constructive or desirable to speak repeatedly of God to unbelievers? To sceptics? To fellow Jews? To our loved ones?
- Through what qualities, actions, and attitudes do we perceive "the spirit of God" in the people we encounter?

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

VAYESHEV

21st Kislev 5772 ~ 17th December 2011

Rabbi Daniella Kolodny

Obfuscation, trickery, identification, recognition and acceptance. Through the use of repeating words, our parashah transforms a family melodrama in ancient Israel into a work of theological depth.

The parasha opens with Joseph, a little full of himself, parading his colourful striped garment in front of his brothers drawing their enmity. The brothers' hostility grows into outright violence when they find Joseph in a field, kidnap him, seek to kill him and instead throw him into a pit and then sell him to travelling Ishmaelites. Seeking to cover up their crime and punish their father Jacob, the brothers, including the oldest one Judah, show Jacob the object of their fury, the colourful striped garment now soiled with the blood of a goat. "We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?" (Gen. 37:32) Jacob is bereft over the loss of his favourite son.

Immediately following this episode, there is a break in the text with a story about Judah who is tricked by his daughter-in-law Tamar to observe the law of levirate marriage.

Denied Judah's son promised to her, Tamar covers her face, removes her widow's clothing and sits at the crossroads to meet and allure Judah, her father-in-law into fathering a child for her deceased husband. Judah does not recognize Tamar and thinks she is a harlot and promises to pay her later. As a pledge for payment, Judah gives his daughter-in-law masquerading as a prostitute some personal items to keep until he can send along the sum. Later, when it is apparent that Tamar is pregnant, Judah accuses her of harlotry, though he is unaware that the child is his. It is at this moment that Tamar produces his personal items: "Please examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these? Judah recognized them." (Gen. 38:25)

Both Tamar and Judah are deceivers, yet their motivations are very different. Judah's deceit is to cause pain and disguise the brothers' violence against Joseph, on the contrary, Tamar disguises her identity to ensure the observance of a commandment and the future of the Jewish people. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah observes that Judah the trickster gets his own just desserts. "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Judah: 'Thou didst deceive thy father with a kid of goats; by thy life! Tamar will deceive thee with a kid of goats.'"

It is the repetition of the verb, recognize, (the Hebrew root is h.k.r.) which ties these two stories tightly together. According to Prof. Jon D. Levenson, the use of the phrase, "Please examine" are the only instances of the expression in the Tanach. Rashi suggests that the use of the word is more profound than we might think. Recognition is not about the objects

themselves but something far greater. Paraphrasing a midrash (Sotah 10b), Rashi suggests that Tamar's use of the word, "Na" or please is her appeal to Judah to see beyond the objects themselves but the children in her womb and the Creator of the Universe and the destiny of the Jewish people.

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

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him." (Genesis 37:3-4)

Derash: Study

- "Israel loved Joseph above all his sons, for he was a wise child." (Targum Onkelos)
- "This passage is paradigmatic of the People Israel's entire future. Joseph, the son loved by his father above all his brothers, was forced to leave his father and homeland in the prime of his life, and was cast into another land among a degenerate people. Every effort was expended to obliterate any trace of him. But what happened? Quite the opposite: all his experiences conspired to elevate him to the highest peak of success. He provided for the various nations during time of famine, and even his brothers themselves - who had heaped shame, pain, and suffering on Joseph - later bowed low to him. So it will be with our poor, persecuted People in the future, the anger and cruelty perpetrated against our People in the lands of our dispersion will all work toward our ascendancy and good fortune." (Chafetz Chaim)
- "for he was the child of his old age." The explanation is a little odd, both because the fact that Joseph is the son of the beloved Rachel is unmentioned and because it is the last-born Benjamin who is the real child of Jacob's old age." (Robert Alter, Genesis)
- "Hated: Such a violent emotion nevertheless has once before (with Leah in 29:31) led not to disaster but to the fulfilment of the divine plan." (Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses)

Questions for Discussion:

- How does Joseph's status as his father's favourite relate to the history of Jewish suffering and Anti-Semitism, to which (according to the Chafetz Chaim) his life is so

analogous?

- What other details of Joseph's life find parallels in the historic experience of the Jewish People?
- The Targum's characterization of Joseph as wise seems inconsistent with his ill-advised bravado and awkward alienation of his brothers. How would his perceived wisdom or intellect have occasioned his father's favouritism? His brothers' hatred? How does this relate to the statement of the Chafetz Chaim?
- Fox notes that hate sometimes advances God's plan. Can hatred itself be an intrinsic part of the divine plan? Can hatred be God's will?

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

VAYISHLACH

14th Kislev 5772 ~ 10th December 2011

Lester Kershenbaum

In this week's parashah, we see the eventual reconciliation of the two brothers, Jacob and Esau. I have often wondered about the "bad press" which Esau (also known as Edom) has received in Jewish tradition. After all, if one looks at the p'shat (simple reading) of the stories in this week's and the previous two weeks' parashiot, it is not immediately obvious as to which of the two brothers is the more sympathetic character. OK, Esau comes over as a bit crude and "earthy", but he shows great love and respect for his parents and is honest and straightforward in his dealings. Jacob, on the other hand, gives the impression of being sly and untrustworthy, capable of deceit (of his brother, his father and Laban) and, as some form of poetic justice, being deceived, in turn, by Laban and, repeatedly, by his own sons (in this week's and next week's parashiot).

There are only a few negative references to Esau/Edom among the prophets and writings, but in later Rabbinic and Midrashic texts, Esau is portrayed as the embodiment of evil. His apparently benign actions in this week's reading are transformed by the Rabbis into something more sinister. So, Esau's gesture of going out with his entourage to meet his brother, forgiving him after 20 years' separation for having stolen his father's blessing is treated as a plan to kill Jacob; only God's intervention prevents disaster. Also, his running up to Jacob and kissing him is described in Midrashic tradition as threatening and not an act of true affection. His offer to accompany Jacob on his travels and his attendance at their father Isaac's burial are discounted as being insincere.

The reason for this harsh treatment by the Rabbis can be explained in one word: ROME. In Talmudic literature, the Roman Empire, destroyers of the second Temple and conquerors of

Judea, was referred to as Edom (meaning redness) possibly because of their ruddier complexion compared to that of the local population. And so, creative re-interpretation of the p'shat of the events in Bereshit manages to portray Esau's more benevolent actions as reflecting fundamentally insincere and evil intentions – hence his general “bad press”.

Fellow Marx Brothers enthusiasts will recall the wonderful scene in their classic film, “Duck Soup” in which Groucho is the Prime Minister of Fredonia, on the brink of going to war with neighbouring Sylvania. But the ambassador of Sylvania offers to come along and make amends in order to avoid war. At first, Groucho plans to accept this gesture and agrees to offer his hand in friendship. But then, Groucho begins to think: “What if he is insincere in this gesture of apology? What if he is coming along to deceive me and make a fool of me in front of my people? What if that swine refuses to accept my hand?” So when the Sylvanian ambassador enters to make peace, before he can say a word, Groucho slaps him and says “So you refuse to shake my hand!!” And the war begins.

In today's world of scams, internet fraud, identity theft and other forms of deceit, surely we must be wary. But perhaps we overreact by also regarding some honest pleas for help and gestures of kindness as insincere. Rather than rejecting these present-day Esaus out of hand (because of their possible ulterior motives), we might consider accepting the simple p'shat of the situation and be generous and trusting in return.

Lester Kershenbaum is a member of New London Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:29)

Derash: Study

- "It will no longer be said that the blessing came to you through deceit and trickery (as implied by the name Yaakov), but through open and rightful authority (deriving Yisrael from sherarah - authority)." (Rashi)
- "Striven. Sarita, connected with the first part of Yisrael. But the word may at first have been Yashar-el, the one whom God makes straight, as opposed to Ya-akov-el, the one whom God makes to limp." (W. Gunther Plaut, citing J.L. Benor)
- "Israel. The name is best explained etymologically as 'May El persevere'. But both Jacob and Israel are treated here symbolically, to indicate the transformation of a man once devious (Jacob) into a forthright and resolute fighter." (E.A. Speiser, Anchor Bible Genesis)

- "Jacob after wrestling with the angel and receiving the name Israel, exclaims 'I have seen God'. The etymology may derive either from reading Yisrael as a contraction of 'is raah 'el - 'a man who saw God' - or the equivalent of yasur 'el - 'he sees God.'" (David Winton, citing Philo, Philo of Alexandria)
- "Israel is not just Jacob's name but becomes the name of the people who trace their lineage back to him and to this moment. Israel is the God-wrestler, the brother-wrestler, the self-wrestler, who has known what it means to be alone... Israel is the paradigm for a soul that in its aloneness grapples with the most profound issues of its existence and wins a blessing that leaves it marked, infirm with a glorious infirmity." (Peter Pitzele, Our Fathers' Wells)
- "In names formed by a verb combined with 'el, the divine element is usually the subject of the action, not its indirect object. Yisra'el, therefore, should properly mean 'God strives,' not 'He strives with God.'" (Nahum Sarna, JPS Genesis)

Questions for Discussion:

- The meaning of Yisrael is a question of considerable moment, since it is both the name of a nation and, in Rabbinic Hebrew, the technical term for "Jew." How do the various theories of etymology reflect the political aspirations and theological concerns of the Jewish People?
- How is Jacob's transformation from "Devious" to "Forthright" a spiritual model to be emulated? Was Jacob a willing, active participant in this change? Does viewing Jacob as a model imply that human beings are by nature duplicitous and flawed?
- If, as Sarna states, Israel means "God strives," what divine goals, challenges, or obstacles are intended? What is the connection between "Yisrael," so understood, and "Yaakov?" How is a "striving" God appealing to the People Israel?

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

VAYETZE

7th Kislev 5772 ~ 3rd December 2011

Nahum Gordon

We all know that truth and truth telling rank among Judaism's highest values. EMET, the Hebrew word for truth is one of God's names.

But we learn from the lives of the matriarchs and patriarchs that truth is not an absolute value and that deception is sometimes validated as part of God's plan.

In this week's reading, Vayetze, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel and Jacob cries, Why did you deceive me? Jacob then responds by secretly fleeing Laban's home with his family and property, including Laban's household idols, stolen by Rachel.

The rabbinic tradition, reading these stories with care, imagines a number of situations in which deception can be the preferred path. Reflecting on Rachel's decision to steal her father's idols a Midrash comments, Her purpose was a noble one, for she said, What, shall we go and leave our father worshipping idols?' (Genesis Rabbah 74:5)

Finally, we learn from a discussion in the Babylonian Talmud that a lie might be told to protect someone's feelings. The question is asked, What does one say to a new bride? The Students of Shammai said Describe the bride as she is. The Students of Hillel said, You call her beautiful and graceful. But what if she is graceless and not beautiful, do you still call her graceful and beautiful? Doesn't the Bible say, Keep far from a falsehood?' The Students of Hillel responded, One should always find something positive to say (based on Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 16b)

We learn from these traditions that morality is complex and situational. Moral decision making is about balancing competing values, not about following a path that is clearly laid out for us. That is one reason why the bible teaches through both stories and law.

"....and Rachel stole her father's teraphim..." [Gen. 31:19]

Why? The answer must lie in why she took something that specific.

Today is the first time in the Tanach that we encounter teraphim, but it is certainly not the last. They were probably figurines. Their size varied; sometimes small like the ones that Rachel hid in her camel saddle [Gen. 31:34], sometimes large like the one that Michal used to fool Saul's soldiers into thinking that they had captured David [1 Sam. 19:13]. To Laban they were his gods [Gen. 31:30], but their function is not revealed. They could have been idols to be worshipped in the home (Rashi), but it seems that they were also used for divination (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides). Samuel warns Saul that just as divination breeds rebellion, so the teraphim engender defiance [1 Sam. 15:23]. The Israelites came to value them so highly that there is even a story that parallels Laban's desperate attempt to recover them [Judg. 18:17-26]. Zechariah condemns the teraphim and the diviners for making false predictions [Zech. 10:2].

So did Rachel steal her father's statuettes to wean him off idolatry? Unlikely, for what was to stop him acquiring replacements? So did Rachel remove them to prevent Laban realising that his daughters had abandoned him? Also unlikely. Laban knew exactly where they were going and, even though they had six days' start on him, he intercepted the fugitives a day later at Mt Gilead on the border with Canaan.

Owning teraphim may have secured rights to inheritance or leadership of the family. In a rare moment of sisterly solidarity, Rachel and Leah agree that their materialistic father has exploited them [Gen. 31: 14-16]. Rachel may have appropriated the teraphim as a way of asserting her rights to a share of Laban's wealth, but I wonder if she was exacting revenge for being supplanted as Jacob's first wife.

Worryingly, Rachel's deception may have backfired. Rashi believes that Jacob's vow to Laban that "with whomsoever you find your gods he shall not live" [Gen. 31:32] condemned his beloved wife to an early grave as she gave birth to her second son, Benjamin [Gen. 35: 18-20]. But God knew that Rachel was the culprit and it is undeniable that, notwithstanding the years of humiliation at the hands of her father, she was guilty of theft from and lying to a parent. At Shechem, Jacob buried all the family's idols [Gen. 35: 2-4]. If the teraphim had been included, surely Jacob would have recognised them and Rachel might have been exposed. Does she die prematurely for not relinquishing them?

There is a curious twist to this story; a similar vow is made by Jacob's sons (death to the culprit) when accused by Joseph's steward that one of them has stolen his master's silver goblet, a divining cup [Gen. 44:9]. And in whose sack is the goblet located? Benjamin's. I am left wondering why men like Jacob, his sons and Jephthah make rash promises that place members of their families in harm's way?

Dedicated to members of KNM's Torah Chat group who spent a month this summer exploring the uses of the ephod and the teraphim in Shmuel, Shoftim, Shemot and Vayikra.

Nahum Gordon is a member of Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!' Shaken, he said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gateway to heaven.'" (Genesis 28:16-17)

Derash:

Study

- "Jacob's flight from his home to an alien land presaged the exile of the Jewish people. Even as this heavenly vision went with him into a strange land, so the sanctity of the Holy Temple would accompany the Jewish people into exile and would be built into the synagogues and houses of study which they would set up in the lands of their dispersion." (*Melo Ha-Omer*)
- "Repetition of a term is usually a thematic marker in biblical narrative, and it is noteworthy that 'place' (makom) occurs six times in this brief story. In part, this is the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place through vision into Bethel, a 'house of God.'" (*Robert Alter, Genesis*)
- "What is it about ordinary, waking consciousness that seems to filter out experiences of the sacred? We intuit that something more must be out there, but in order to see it, we have to close our eyes. Jacob's dream is probably the most powerful and transformative personal encounters with the divine in the entire Torah." (*Lawrence Kushner, Five Cities of Refuge*)
- "Jacob's exceptional emotional response requires explanation. Undoubtedly it lies, at least partially, in his realization of the baseness of his behaviour toward his father and brother. He must have been beset with feelings of complete and deserved abandonment by God and man. Having fallen prey to guilt and solitary despair, he is surprised that God is still concerned for him." (*Nahum Sarna, JPS Genesis*)

Questions for Discussion:

- What measures, attitudes, and activities are necessary to transform a building into a "house of God" or to render it holy?
- What institutions other than synagogues and "houses of study" can attain this spiritual status, and how?

- Is a building or physical edifice necessary to fully experience the presence of God? Is this the significance of the simple pillar erected and dedicated by Jacob?
- How can we and our congregations enhance our ability to recognize the presence of God in our lives? How can we begin to redress the paradox of spiritual "sleeping" in our waking hours, even as we "dream" of a more direct experience of God?
- How might the emphasis on place/makom noted by Alter relate to the expression Ha-Makom - "The Place" - as a traditional name for God?
- How does Sarna's reading of Jacob, not merely as a spiritual seeker, but as a base sinner finding (and being transformed by) God, change our understanding of the chapter and, specifically, of Jacob's dream?

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

TOLEDOT

Machar Chodesh

29th Cheshvan 5772 ~ 26th November 2011

Meira Ben-Gad

This week, we read one of the most vivid and poignant stories in the Torah: the story of Jacob and Esau. Countless interpreters and scholars have remarked upon its literary and dramatic power—the eloquent way it draws the personalities involved; the masterful building up of tension; the pathos of that penultimate scene, when Isaac and Esau realise they've been duped. How did listeners react to this story, I wonder, if it began life as a folktale or oral tradition? It is hard to imagine ancient Israelites identifying with Jacob in the way that African-Americans identified with trickster characters like Br'er Rabbit, or the ancient Greeks with Odysseus. Tricksters in folklore and mythology can be villains as well as heroes. But that doesn't fit the Biblical context either.

Readers have also observed the strange literary construction of the sedra. "This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham", it begins—yet Isaac plays chiefly a supporting role in what follows. Isaac takes centre stage only in a strange interlude between Esau's selling of the birthright and Jacob's theft of the blessing. In that interlude, Isaac and Rebecca (the twins are not mentioned) go to Gerar, ruled by Abimelech, during a famine. There, Isaac tells Rebecca to pretend she is his sister so he will not be killed by potential rivals. This is the

third of three episodes that describe such a deception; the others involve Abraham and Sarah, first with Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10ff), then with the selfsame Abimelech of our sedra (Gen. 20:1ff). Scholars explain the presence of these three episodes by attributing the second to a different author or school (E rather than J, for those interested). But in Toldot, the Jacob-Esau story(ies) and the Isaac-Abimelech story are both attributed to J. So we can't explain the strange placement of this interlude merely as a clumsy stitching together of two sources.

If we look closely at the Isaac-Abimelech interlude, a number of familiar themes crop up. Isaac deceives Abimelech, who then sends him away—just as Jacob deceives Esau and Isaac, then must flee to Haran. At that point, Isaac comes into conflict with the herdsmen of Gerar over local water rights—just as Jacob comes into conflict with Esau over resources (represented by the birthright and blessing). Finally, Isaac and Abimelech make a pact—just as Jacob and Esau will reconcile in Genesis 33 (though some scholars attribute that reconciliation to the E source).

Why is the Isaac-Abimelech episode inserted between the two halves of the Jacob-Esau story in Toldot? Perhaps it is indeed a clumsy stitching together of two sources, both belonging to the J school and therefore hard for us to distinguish. Perhaps there is some common thread between the birthright and Isaac-Abimelech stories that made them fit together in ancient eyes (Esau's hunger and the famine, perhaps). Or perhaps the goal was to draw our attention to the themes of rivalry, deceit and reconciliation, as a prelude to the developing story of Jacob—and his moral growth—that will follow.

Meira Ben-Gad is a member of Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

- "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man, who stayed in camp. Isaac favoured Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favoured Jacob." (Genesis 25:27-28)
- Derash: Study
- "When the boys grew up Esau became a skillful hunter of fowl and game, a man well-suited to the outdoors, a killer, for he killed Nimrod and his son Enoch. But Jacob was a man of peaceful ways, who attended the Study House of Eber, seeking instruction from God." (Targum Yonatan)
- "'A skilful hunter - Always full of deception, for most animals are caught through trickery. But Jacob was the opposite of Esau, for he was ish tam ['a blameless, simple man'].'" (Ibn Ezra)
- "After the Roman conquest of Judea (first century BCE), 'Edom' [i.e., Esau - J.H.P.] came to signify Rome, oppression, and evil. Not only was this a case of prejudicial

stereotyping, it was also a misreading of the biblical intent. For Esau emerges from the text as a generally admirable man." (W. Gunther Plaut)

- "Life is full of hard choices between less than perfect alternatives... Jacob and Esau share both good and bad traits upon which to try to build leadership for the future. God is faced with having to choose between two combinations of traits and to select what would be better for leadership of his people... In essence, the Bible tells us that a bright, calculating person who, at times, is less than honest, is preferable as a founder over a bluff, impulsive one who cannot make discriminating choices." (Daniel Elazar)

Questions for Discussion:

1. How is the traditional vilification of Esau a "misreading of the biblical intent?" Why was a misreading necessary or desirable? Is it still desirable today? What are Esau's positive qualities? What are Jacob's shortcomings? How might contemporary Jewish answers to these questions differ from those of our recent and classical forbears?
2. There is considerable irony in Ibn Ezra's characterization of Esau as deceitful and Jacob as simple and uncomplicated. Shouldn't these descriptions be reversed?
3. The pre-eminence of younger brothers is a recurring biblical motif: Jacob supplants Esau, just as Isaac, not Ishmael became Patriarch of Israel. Moses was three years younger than Aaron, and King David was the youngest of eight brothers. What does this pattern say about Israel's self-perception? Perhaps Jacob had no "choice" but to secure both blessing and birthright, in order to perpetuate this biblical theme. How does this affect our understanding of Esau?

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

CHAYE SARA

22nd Cheshvan 5772 ~ 19th November 2011

Andrew Levy

A lady tells it as she saw it.

He was soooooo ugly – that was my first reaction to seeing Isaac, my future husband, wandering about in the field in Canaan when I was such a long way from home. And he was so obviously a mummy's boy as well; clearly someone refusing to talk to his father any more for whatever reason. It had been a long journey on that camel and I was incredibly tired. When I first laid eyes on him, I was so disappointed that I just fainted. Of course God could not write that I fainted – that would seem far too dramatic but God did

rather get the sense of it when they wrote in the scroll:-

“Rebecca lifted up her eyes, saw Isaac and fell off the camel”. I suppose that “fell off” is not a bad description because that of course is the exact consequence of what happens when you faint whilst riding a camel.

Then the fun started. Not only were the commentators not prepared to contemplate that I could have fainted, but they also began to deny that I had even fallen. They had a problem with this misinterpreting agenda because the text is utterly clear and unambiguous. God got it right – I did fall. So in English Christian translations going back to King James, they decided that this was all far too embarrassing and said that when I, Rebecca, saw Isaac, “she alighted from the camel”. How quaint – it sounds like what you moderns do when you get off a train. But it is clear that King James could never have ridden a camel if he thought it is something off which one “alights”. English Jews copied this misunderstanding in their translations.²

The Catholics went off on a frolic of their own. Their 1960s Jerusalem Bible says that “She jumped down from the camel.” What eagerness and how impossible on so many scores! First, I had been travelling for days and second no-one can jump off a camel; it’s a delicate operation of descent and in any case I am most certainly not some budding Frankie Dettori.

The Italian saying is so correct; Traduttore, traditore – “Translator, traitor.”³ All translation is treachery. Perhaps it is even more so when it is the Bible which is being translated and everybody has their own agenda. Why is no-one allowed to hear my own story from my own mouth in translation? Are they all scared of describing it as it was? I suppose we all have to check the original very carefully and doubt each translation – please allow my real story to be heard.

Rebecca was talking confidentially and exclusively to Andrew Levy

¹ Rebecca is here quoting Genesis 24: 64

² Regrettably Rebecca is entirely correct in this regard. If you have either the Hertz or the Etz Hayim Chumash, the damning evidence of mistranslation appears in the English at the verse Rebecca has quoted us.

³ Rebecca assures me that this is the correct translation. I have not been able to verify this.

Andrew Levy is a member of New North London Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"And he said, 'O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham.'" (Genesis 24:12)

Derash: Study

- "Three petitioners were answered by God while the request was still in their mouths: Abraham's servant Eliezer, Moses, and Solomon: 'He had scarcely finished speaking when Rebekah came out.'" (Genesis Rabbah 60:4).
- "The shalsholet [a rare trope which appears only four times in the Torah - JHP] is a quivering, hesitating kind of note that reflects some hesitation or ambivalence in the text. Abraham tells Eliezer to go back to Mesopotamia and find a wife for Isaac. It's an awesome responsibility. The future of the covenant rests with his choice of a bride for Isaac. He may fail. He may choose the wrong woman. Isaac is no Abraham. And Eliezer must find a strong enough and wise enough woman who can help carry on the legacy of Abraham. Eliezer prays to God for guidance and help in finding the right woman. And on the word for 'he prayed' [vayomar], there's a shalsholet. It is the tradition's way of expressing how apprehensive, how worried, how desperate Abraham's servant must have felt." (Rabbi Lee Buckman)
- "'Grant me good fortune.' The Hebrew verb here (hakrei) literally means 'make it occur.' What happens to be the result of chance (mikreh) may, in reality, be a deliberate determination of God. Nothing is more characteristic of the biblical outlook than the conviction about the role of divine providence in everyday human affairs." (Chumash Etz Hayim)
- "Implicit in the servant's prayers is the need to see a manifest indication of God's hesed [kindness, love, grace] to Abraham. His main criterion for the rightness of Rebecca's election is that he will sense in her the hesed that, since the Akedah, has been lacking from his master's experience. He prays to know that hesed is being done to his master, not merely that God should be so kind as to make it happen that the girl he speaks to is the right one. The hesed he asks for, in other words, is not a means, but an end in itself." (Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, The Beginning of Desire) .

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Abraham's servant merit inclusion among such a rarefied company of Biblical heroes as Moses and Solomon? For what major achievement or defining characteristic is each remembered?
2. The unusual musical tradition (shalsholet) associated with this verse invites the reader/listener to take special "note." What historic, theological, literary, or narratological elements in the servant's prayer demand such special treatment? Compare to the other shalsholet verses in Genesis - 19:16, regarding Lot; 39:8, regarding Joseph.
3. At what pivotal points in modern Jewish history might we perceive the divine in what appears to be chance or coincidence? At what other points in Biblical history? In our own lives and personal experience?
4. If we attribute chance and "good fortune" to the "deliberate determination of God," must ill fortune, adversity, and tragedy also be understood as part of a calculated divine plan? How do we know what events and experiences are the results of Providence?

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

VAYERA

15th Cheshvan 5772 ~ 12th November 2011

Adam Berkley

Vayera contains one of the most familiar stories of the Torah – the Akedah – the binding of Isaac; the story of a man who was told to sacrifice his son. It has been told and retold countless times, and inspired many – including Wilfred Owen, who applied the story to his experiences of the First World War, whose end we commemorated yesterday.

The most common and traditional explanation of what happens in the Parsha is that God is testing Abraham. There is, however, vast disagreement about how God was testing him. Two common opinions are that God was testing Abraham's faith, that he would do as God commanded, or that God was testing Abraham's humanity, hoping that he would say no to the demand. However, there could be another test going on in this story. It was put forward by Michael Brown in a piece called 'Knight of Faith or Man of Doubt? A Contemporary Reading of the Akedah' written in 1982. He suggests that Abraham was testing God.

First of all, Abraham's reaction to what God tells him is uncharacteristic. Abraham, who as a younger man railed against child sacrifice, who walked into the idol shop and went on a rampage, who earlier in the parshah argues with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. This same man, when asked to take his son up the mountain and prepare him for sacrifice, says nothing and saddles his donkey for the journey. Over the last four parshiot God has been introduced to us in a variety of roles. Firstly we met an all-powerful God, whose very voice causes creation and has the ability to breathe life. Then we see God as willing to interfere when things go too far, destroying the tower of Babel and scattering mankind across the earth. Early in this week's parshah we come across a similar God, but this time, God is reasoned with by Abraham in an attempt to lessen the punishment.

But now Abraham does not argue, he does not reason. In this reading of the story, he calls God's bluff. Michael Brown phrases it thus: "Now, that God, who had promised that Isaac would be the key to the future, was renegeing on His commitment. God was apparently no different from other gods of the day, heedless of human life, an arbitrary executioner... Abraham could not plead for Isaac, because he could not risk God granting him a special favour. Abraham had to know whether God respected human life in general, whether He protected children, all children, or devoured them. To find out, he had to test God, tempting Him by complying with His command."

Abraham doesn't reason with God, because he believes that unless God can show Abraham that He is different from the deities that others worship, there is no point in being the founding father of a large nation, if it is going to be headed up by a deity that is no different. By the end of the parshah, Abraham is convinced that God is a good God. His faith in God and the covenant is restored, and we have another face of God to consider when we say 'God of our ancestors'.

Adam Berkley is a member of New North London Synagogue and outgoing Mazkir of NOAM

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Abraham came forward and said: 'Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You. Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?'" (Genesis 18:23-25)

Derash: Study

- "This verse can be read as a declarative statement: 'The Judge of all the earth shall not deal justly.' If you want a world, there cannot be strict justice. If you want strict justice, there can be no world. You are trying to grasp the rope at both ends. You want the world and you want strict justice. If you do not let go of justice, there will be no world." (Genesis Rabbah 49:25)
- "Insofar as You are Judge of all the earth, if You judge the whole based on the majority, You will, no doubt, destroy them forever, for the majority of human beings are evil." (Sforno)
- "Abraham's struggle to apprehend the nature of God's purposes assumes that God must act according to a principle that man can try to understand. That principle is the passion for righteousness. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' he protests. It is this faith in God's justice that gives rise to the argument with God, whose intent to destroy Sodom appears to raise serious conflict with the patriarch's conviction about His moral governance of the world." (Nahum Sarna, JPS Genesis)
- "Abraham's argument with God raises one of the most troubling and recurring issues of theology. Can God's justice be judged by human beings according to standards of human justice? The alternative is to assume - tautologically - that whatever God does, regardless of how unjust it may seem to us, is by definition just. Whatever God commands must be done without question or challenge... Such an approach is the first step to fundamentalism. The Sodom narrative appears to reject the fundamentalist approach and to suggest that God has submitted Himself to at least some human judgment through the covenant." (Alan Dershowitz, The Genesis of Justice)

Questions for Discussion:

1. Genesis Rabbah and Sforno seem to agree that true justice is at best elusive. What are the benefits and the challenges inherent in this view?

2. If non-fundamentalist religion means subjecting divine law to human standards of justice, on what basis are we to make such judgments? How are we to distinguish between moral absolutes and transitory societal mores?

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

LECH LECHA

8th Cheshvan 5772 ~ 5th November 2011

Natasha Jade Mann

Lech Lecha, the third parasha in the Torah, is an intensely personal story. The first two parashiot cover thousands of years of history, with only glimpses at personal narratives between lists of fathers and sons; the story of Abram is the first personal storyline that is followed in such depth. This parasha takes us from Abram's calling to his circumcision, with details of divine promises and earthly adventures woven in such a manner that it is clear from the beginning that Abram is a central character, a person who will become deeply important long past his death.

What immediately strikes me about the journeys of Abram and Sarai is their unwavering courage. Anyone who has left their native land and their father's house –literally or metaphorically – knows that this is a terrifying ordeal. It is in the human nature to be wary of change, because change could bring danger; the transition that Abram and Sarai undergo will turn out to be beneficial (they become Abraham and Sarah, the parents of a nation), but they have no way of knowing this when they leave Haran. They walk into the wilderness with only the voice of an unknown God to lead them.

Not only is Abram to face the trial of leaving his native land and his native deities behind, of going on a physical and spiritual journey into the unknown, but the promise made to him places great responsibility onto the shoulders of this soon-to-be nomad. 'And you shall be a blessing,' God promises Abram; what exactly this means is unclear, but one Rabbinic interpretation is that God has now given Abram the ability to bless (an ability that previously only God had) whomever he wishes. The responsibility of Abram to be a moral person, not to abuse this ability, is huge. However, if this is the case, it strikes me that Abram's trust in God to keep him safe as he leaves the known for the unknown is comparable to God's trust in Abram's ability to 'be a blessing' without abusing the gift. We know from other stories (such as Sodom) that the relationship between God and Abram is a startlingly balanced one, with Abram challenging God just as God challenges Abram. Perhaps God is putting his faith in Abram just as Abram puts his faith in God.

The transition from pagans to monotheists, from citizens to nomads, comes full circle at the end of the parasha when God changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, and Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and all future generations of boys. These final changes are significant. In the beginning, when they were still Abram and Sarai, the promises made by God were wonderful but remained vague: Abram's nation would be great, he would be blessed, and the land would – at some unspecified time – be assigned to Abram's offspring. When the transition from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah is made – when the last of their pagan origins are left behind them – the promises finally become tangible for the wandering family. God tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son in a year's time, that his name will be Isaac, and that the covenant between Abraham and God will be continued through him.

Natasha Jade Mann is a member of New London Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the souls they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan." (Genesis 12:5)

Derash: Study

- "Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women." (Rashi)
- "Whoever teaches someone else's child Torah, Scripture esteems him as if he actually created the child, as it is said: 'The souls they had acquired (, literally "made").'" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 99B)
- "It is a positive commandment to love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's might... Included in this Mitzvah is the obligation to attract human beings to the worship of God, and to make Him beloved among his creatures, as did our Father Abraham, peace be upon him, as it is said: 'The souls they had acquired (, literally "made") in Haran.'" (Rabbi Yisrael Mayer ha-Kohen Kagan, the Chafetz Chayim, Sefer ha-Mitzvot ha-Katzar)
- "Why not open our arms to those who seek a spiritual way of life? ...The logic is clear and so is the theology. Judaism is not an exclusive club of born Jews. It is a universal faith with an ancient tradition that has deep resonance for people today... If Judaism is a world religion, then it has something valuable to offer the world." (Harold Schulweis)

Questions for Discussion:

- Is religious faith an entirely private affair? Is a "believer" compelled to articulate his beliefs and values to others? How does one communicate matters of faith differently to fellow Jews (whether more or less committed than we)? To adherents of other faiths? To sceptics? To principled secularists? To our own families and loved ones?

- Abraham and Sarah's first act following God's call is linked by the Midrash to their involvement in the process of proselytism. What programmatic and theological implications does this have for Jewish communities today? Discuss the Jewish People's historic reluctance proactively to "evangelize" among those not born to the Jewish tradition.
- The Chafetz Chayim, a pre-eminent, twentieth century ethicist, lists the obligation "to attract human beings to the worship of God" as the third Positive Commandment, following only the religious obligations to believe in God's existence, and to accept monotheism (that God is One, unique). By citing Genesis 12:5 in this context, he frames this obligation in terms traditionally associated with conversion to Judaism. Why would this European rabbi, writing in the 1930's, codify such a system of spiritual priorities? How might this relate to his mission as an ethical guide?
- How do Abraham and Sarah offer us a model of how to relate to newcomers to Judaism? To lifelong Jews seeking greater levels of knowledge and involvement? What special obligations do we, our congregations, and their own Jewish family members have to those who convert to Judaism? In what ways does the institution of conversion strengthen the Jewish community?

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

NOACH

Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan

1st Cheshvan 5772 ~ 29th October 2011

Robert Stone

Parashat Noach opens with the account of the Flood, but it also includes the story of the Tower of Babel (Bereshit 11:1-9). Only nine verses long, this story has haunted the imagination of people of all faiths and cultures to an extraordinary degree. A Google search for 'Babel' produces about 46 million results, compared to 38 million for 'Sinai' and 30 million for 'Canaan.'

God does a lot of severe punishing at the beginning of Bereshit: expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for disobeying God in order to know good and evil (3:1-24); banishing Cain for fratricide (4:11-12); setting a limit on the lifespan of human beings after the daughters of man married the Nephilim (6:1-4); and flooding the whole world because it was filled with lawlessness, or violence (chamas) (6:11). The human race at Babel was scattered all over the earth, and their single language was baffled, so that they

would not understand each other's language. What was their sin, and what kind of punishment was that?

The people said "Come, let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, to make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered all over the earth" (11:4). The main traditional exegesis holds that the sin of the people was to seek to reach the heavens, but Robert Alter in his wonderful translation of Genesis argues convincingly that "The polemic thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology."

The punishment seems to be founded on the principle that people who speak the same language find it easier to work together than those who do not. I am reminded of the Babel fish in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: if you stick this tiny creature in your ear, you can understand what anyone says in any language. This meant, according to the Guide, that "the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different races and cultures, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation." The most vicious conflicts often occur between people of the same language: the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland speak the same language, as do the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and the Serbs, Croats and Bosniacs in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The Jews of Nazi Germany spoke the same language, in the same accent, as their Gentile neighbours. On the other hand, people of very different languages and cultures can find ways of cooperating peacefully and effectively in great endeavours, from the eradication of smallpox from the earth in the 1960s and 1970s to fighting the famine in the Horn of Africa now.

If a common endeavour is motivated by a worship of technology for its own sake and by a desire for celebrity, then it is liable to end in miscommunication and dissention, even (or especially) among people who have a lot in common. If people with very little in common apart from their compassion work together for the greater good of humanity and the world, for *tikkun olam*, then they can overcome their differences, and indeed use them to strengthen the endeavour.

Robert Stone is a member of Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch." (Genesis 6:14)

1. "Why did the Holy One tell Noach to build an ark? So that people would see him occupied with its construction and repent. He will busy himself with building the ark and cutting lumber, and people will gather around and ask: 'Noach, what are you making?'" And he will say: 'An ark, for the Holy One is bringing about a flood.' In response to this, they will listen and repent." (*Midrash Tanchuma*)
2. "'Make yourself...'" Go your own way, as is your usual practice. For you did not want to mix with the people of your generation and you did not reproach them. You did not care to associate with them or to befriend them. So now, go, be in the ark with the wild animals and beasts of the field." (*Rabbi Moshe Alshich*)
3. "Ark: English as well as Hebrew etymology points to a box or chest, not strictly a boat. God, not human engineering, is the source of survival in the story." (*Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses*)
4. "The Mishnah uses the word *tevah*, ark,) to denote the Ark of the Covenant. Accordingly, *tevah* (which also means word) implies the word of Torah and prayer that can save man from drowning in the flood of grossness and materialism that has overrun the world." (*Sefat Emet*)
5. "The first boat we read of, floated on an ocean, that with Portuguese vengeance had whelmed a whole world without leaving so much as a widow. That same ocean rolls now; that same ocean destroyed the wrecked ships of last year. Yea, foolish mortals, Noach's flood is not yet subsided; two-thirds of the fair world it yet covers." (*Herman Melville, Moby Dick*)

Questions for Discussion

The reed basket in which the infant Moses floated in the Nile is also referred to as a *tevah*. Fox's point about God's utter control of the vessel's fate and direction applies to Moses as well. What else links the two biblical narratives of Moses' basket and Noach's ark? How does each account shed light on the other?

Alshich decries Noach's wilful separation from his fellow humans, and portrays the ark's voyage as a type of divine punishment for Noach's self-isolation. How does this reading

affect our understanding of Noah as “walking with God”? Is Noah a worthy moral and religious exemplar or is he not? Is it preferable to involve yourself even in a profoundly flawed society, or is there virtue in distancing yourself entirely from perceived corruption? With what societal problems should the Jewish community actively engage, and which demand a measure of isolation?

Noah is often criticized for not informing his contemporaries about the impending cataclysm, or attempting to effect their moral rehabilitation. Herman Melville, by contrast, appears to be offering an urgent warning to “foolish mortals.” What moral lessons are we to draw from his reference to Noah, and from his suggestion that Noah’s flood, as it were, is still in evidence today?

Sefat Emet describes a metaphorical “flood of grossness and materialism” that can be countered effectively by involvement in Jewish study and religious life. With what specific human failings and social ills is Jewish tradition concerned? What remedies does it prescribe?

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

BEREISHIT

24th Tishri 5772 ~ 22nd October 2011

By Melanie Kelly

A few years ago I hosted a children’s author at the primary school where I work. He led a story writing workshop for 8-9 year olds and advised that a good story needs a ‘kick up the tuches’! It needs an event that moves it forward, providing purpose and meaning.

Mindful of this advice, let us review the creation story and determine if it has a purpose and meaning.

Rashi explains the word Bereshit as ‘For the sake of the choice in starting to create’ i.e. creation was a choice with a purpose. Mythical creation stories use creation to identify why we experience the world in the way we do: why we wear clothes when other creatures don’t or why childbirth is painful. However this does not reveal God’s purpose for creation. What was the point of God creating the world?

Creation is the first story in the history and purpose of the Jewish people and can be seen from two opposing positions: does creation provide a platform for the story of Judaism or is Judaism and its history there to give meaning and purpose to creation. Did God create the world in order to give a platform for the unfolding story of his special people? Or are we here in order to continue to perform some function in the ongoing story of creation. Was the departure from Gan Eden the 'kick up the tuches' of the creation story, serving to re-direct it from a failure into an integral part of God's plan to enable us to continue with God's creative task?

This week's Haftarah is from the Book of Isaiah. The second verse reminds us of our role to be a 'light unto the nations', implying our special responsibility to lead, and be an example to, the world of God's ideals. Later in the portion we read, "All that is called by My name was created for My glory" - receiving this special task means we must fulfil it in order to reinforce the glory of God. If this is our task, why were we placed in a utopian paradise in the beginning? Perhaps we have a clue in that humans were created in the image of God, but since we are all physically different, our likeness must be internal and psychological. It is the way we behave and encounter the world and God must behave similarly to us! In the same way we learn and perfect our behaviour through experimentation and experience, so must God. Perhaps Gan Eden was an experiment in utopian existence that did not succeed and God realised that for us to be a 'light' and pronounce 'The Glory', a motivational 'kick' was needed. A God who learns and tries to work with others to perfect creation is a very welcome addition after the Godly images of awe, judgement and majesty of the Yamim Noraim encourage you to appreciate her with a sigh of relief and a renewed creative urge for a new Torah year!

Melanie Kelly is a member of Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce T. Newmark

And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened.
(Genesis 6:6)

1. A heretic asked Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah: "Do you people not maintain that the Holy Blessed One foresees the future?" Rabbi Joshua: "Yes." The heretic: "But does Scripture not say, 'and His heart was saddened?'" Rabbi Joshua: "Was a son ever born to you?" The heretic: "Yes." Rabbi Joshua: "What did you do?" The heretic: "I celebrated and had all others celebrate." Rabbi Joshua: "Didn't you know that in the end he would die?" The heretic: "Joy at the time of joy, and mourning at the time of mourning." Rabbi Joshua: "Even such was the experience of the Holy Blessed One." (Bereisheit Rabbah 27:4)

2. Even though it is revealed before Him that their end would be to sin and to be destroyed, He did not refrain from creating them for the sake of the righteous who are destined to arise from them. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France
3. When God came to create Adam, the ministering angels divided themselves into groups and parties. Some of them said, "Let him be created," while others urged, "Let him not be created." ...Love said, "Let him be created because he will carry out acts of love." Truth said, "Let him not be created because he will be filled with falsehood." Righteousness said, "Let him be created because he will do good deeds." Peace said, "Let him not be created because he will be filled with controversy." ...While the angels were arguing and fighting with one another, the Holy Blessed One he will be filled with controversy." ...While the angels were arguing and fighting with one another, the Holy Blessed One created man. He said to the angels, "What can you do? Man already has been made." (Bereisheit Rabbah 8:5)
4. For two and a half years, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel disputed. The House of Shammai argued that it would have been better for man had he not been created, and the House of Hillel argued that it was better for man to have been created. In the end, a vote was taken, and it was decided: "It would have been better for man not to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him examine his deeds." Others say, "Let him consider his future actions." (Talmud Eruvin 13b)

Sparks for Discussion

Why do you think God created human beings to be imperfect? Why did God make us with free will, able to disobey and to sin? Is human perfection possible? Is it desirable? Why do you think the House of Shammai argued that it would have been better if human beings had not been created? Why do you suppose the vote went its way.

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

CHOL HAMOED SUKKOT

17th Tishri 5772 ~ 15th October 2011

Rabbi Amanda Golby

The Yamim Noraim are over. With Sukkot there is a change of mood. It is z'man simchatenu, the season of our rejoicing, and Megillat Kohelet, the special scroll of Ecclesiastes which we read this Shabbat, seems to be different again.

Chapter 3, perhaps the most frequently quoted passage, begins: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot...", and that section ends with the words: "What do we gain from all our toil?". A strange question though one we all ask from time to time, 'what's the point of it all'? Or, perhaps the really strange thing is that the question is asked within a religious context, and we read it so soon after the Yamim Noraim.

Rabbi Harold Kushner followed 'When bad things happen to good people' with 'When all you've ever wanted isn't enough: the search for a life that matters', and examines Kohelet, which he considers a book for the middle years and even older age. We do ask 'what's the point of it all?' Relationships, work may not have turned out as we had once hoped. We are all too aware of how fragile life is. Doing 'right' does not necessarily bring what we sometimes consider its just rewards. Yet we know that this is what life is. We have to live it, and we must strive to make the most of it.

It can sometimes be miserable being in a sukkah, especially in mid-October, yet it teaches us many important things. In Kushner's words: "We celebrate Sukkot by building a small annex to our homes, just a few boards and branches, inviting friends in, and drinking and eating in it for the week of the holiday. Succot is a celebration of the beauty of things that don't last, the little hut that is so vulnerable to wind and rain... ripe fruits which will spoil if not picked and eaten right away...the friends who may not be with us for as long as we would wish..."

When we consider these things, it can be difficult for us to be 'joyful' throughout Sukkot. However, joy is not just 'fun', 'happiness'. In the words of Rabbi Alan Lew z'l, it is 'a deep release of the soul, and it includes death and pain. Joy is any feeling fully felt, any experience we give our whole being. We are conditioned to choose pleasure and reject pain, but the truth is, any moment of our life fully inhabited, any feeling fully felt, any immersion in the full depth of life can be the source of deep joy."

Sukkot contains many paradoxes, and yet, I am increasingly convinced that paradox is the only thing that makes sense. So we can be truly joyful, truly experiencing our lives, the whole lives to which we aspire, and Succot, for all its conflicting emotions, or, indeed, because of them, is a good time for this, the right time to read Kohelet.

Rabbi Amanda Golby is a member of New North London Synagogue

Megillah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

- The book of Kohelet, read on Sukkot known in English as Ecclesiastes is one of the five Megillot read through the year. Traditionally it is attributed to Solomon, who is said to have written it during the later years of his life. The author relates the

lessons his long experience has taught him.

- Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed, the one or the other, or if both are equally good. (Ecclesiastes 11:6)
- Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua comment. Rabbi Eliezer says: If you have sown in the early season, sow also in the late season, because you do not know which will succeed for you, whether the early or late sowing... Rabbi Joshua says: If you are married in your youth and your wife died, marry again in your old age. If you had children in your youth, have them also in your old age... Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva comment. Rabbi Ishmael says: If you have studied Torah in your youth, study also in your old age, because you do not know which [knowledge of] Torah will endure, whether that of your youth or old age... Rabbi Akiva says: I had twelve thousand disciples from Gabbatha to Antipatris, and they all died during my lifetime between Pesach and Shavuot, so that finally there remained to me only seven. (Kohelet Rabbah 11:6)
- Rabbi Yehoshua said: If you have given a coin to a poor person in the morning and another poor person comes to you in the evening, give to him, too. Do not tell him, "I already gave in the morning," for you do not know which of the acts is better, the morning or the evening one, or whether it is the combination of both that will stand you in good stead. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan)
- Every Jew is obligated to study Torah whether he is poor or rich, healthy or ailing, in the vigour of youth or very old and feeble... Until what time of life is a person obligated to study Torah? Until the day of his death. (Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1209, Spain and Egypt), Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah, 1:8, 10)
- You are not obligated to finish the task, but neither are you free to neglect it. (Pirkei Avot 2:21)
- For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: "It might have been!" (John Greenleaf Whittier)

Sparks for Discussion

According to Kohelet Rabbah, morning and evening in our verse refer to youth and old age. The fact that a person has done (or has not done) something in youth should not preclude doing that same thing later in life. Do you agree, or do you believe that people eventually become too old to marry, to raise children, or to study? Why do so many people ignore the opportunities that life offers? Is it fear of failure, reluctance to look foolish, or simply inertia? Why do shuls, schools, and other organizations reject ideas for new approaches and programs because "we tried it once and it didn't work" or "that's not the way we do it here"? How can we encourage ourselves and our institutions not to "hold back your hand in the evening"?

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

YOM KIPPUR

10th Tishri 5772 ~ 8th October 2011

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg Rabbi at New North London Synagogue and senior rabbi of the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues

The Faith on which Yom Kippur is Founded Yom Kippur is a day founded on faith, not just in God, but in human beings. Arguably, the latter faith may be even more important to us than the former.

In a saying which seems as rationally absurd as it is psychologically sound, the rabbis of the Talmud taught that Teshuvah, return, preceded creation. How can return or repentance possibly have been made by God before there were any people in existence to do wrong in the first place? The idea is presumably that everyday life would be impossible unless there was a process for expressing regret and making a fresh start. 'To err is human': though it would be better not to, we all inevitably make mistakes and inflict pain on one another. Human relations, even civilisation itself, depend on the possibility of apologising, making reparation and restoring our damaged relationships.

The faith in human nature implicit in the idea of Teshuvah is that we are capable, at least as individuals if not as communities and nations, of availing ourselves of the opportunity it offers. This assumes several steps.

The first is that we have an understanding of what we mean by the good and are drawn towards it. The powerful words of Isaiah read on Yom Kippur morning spell out what this vision is: 'To let the oppressed go free...to deal your bread to the hungry and bring the rejected poor to your house, when you see the naked to clothe them and not to hide from your own flesh'. But it's all very well having dreams if we can't be bothered to do anything about them, if our conscience has been so dulled that we find the moral status quo perfectly acceptable. God can forgive your sins, Jeremiah tells his contemporaries, but not your complacency. He wouldn't say anything different today.

The beauty of Yom Kippur, what the Talmud calls *Itzumo shel yom*, the moral power of the day, will have had its affect on us if it opens in our hearts a powerful desire to do better, to live more deeply, to follow our conscience more truly. Teshuvah doesn't just mean regret for the wrongs we've done, so much as the yearning for a far deeper return, to the person we might yet become, the person God wants us to be.

The second step concerns remorse. We know from experience that it is at once a terrible and a wonderful emotion; terrible because it sears our inner being, wonderful because its flame is the desire to be good and it lights us along the path to doing better. It leads us to the threshold of apology and teaches us what words to say. It motivates us to do everything within our power to make up for the hurts we've inflicted; it opens new vistas of understanding and action. In the words of Reish Lakish, it 'can turn even our worst deeds into virtues' because they become both the strictest and the most eloquent of all teachers.

The third step concerns forgiveness. We can't undo the past and it's an unhelpful fiction to pretend it never happened. But we often can, if we care enough and have sufficient humility, bring healing to sore wounds and restore our relationships. We mustn't let go of the wisdom it offers, but we can relinquish some of the pain of the past, for the sake of a future freed from bitterness and recrimination.

It's often said that people never learn. But Yom Kippur is founded on the opposite point of view, the faith that we not only can, but truly desire, to learn from our errors and create a better world.

Selichot: Some Reflections

Would people inflict unspeakable harm on others if they knew they would be called to account for their actions? Chances are, the answer to this question is a resounding "No." That is -- in Jewish terms -- if everyone recited and internalized the Al Het, the world would be an infinitely nicer place. This should not be taken to imply that everyone need be Jewish. Rather, this conclusion reflects a deep appreciation of the traditions, customs and teachings which are intended to keep the Jewish people within certain moral bounds.

There is much to recommend the notion of teshuvah. At the very least, it makes good sense that people who are forced to look inward on a regular basis and to atone -- sincerely -- for their wrongdoing will not be capable of gross inhumanity. But even more, the same teachings that cause people to turn inward for the purpose of rigorous self-examination will most likely cause them to cry out when others are oppressed.

Judaism has never accepted ostentatious breast beating as an acceptable substitute for true introspection and repentance. Rather, we demand that together with a confession of one's sins must come a firm and honest resolve not to repeat them. We are also obligated to act on our convictions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we read in the haftarah on Yom Kippur. God does not want empty sacrifices, declares the prophet. Rather, God desires that we show the same compassion towards one another that God Himself has shown the Jewish nation. During the High Holiday season, the Jewish people demonstrate a keen awareness that we are answerable to a higher authority.

Beginning with the selichot -- or Penitential prayers -- in which we confess our sins and beg God for forgiveness, and concluding with the Neilah service of Yom Kippur, in which we entreat God breathlessly to seal our names in the Book of Life before closing it shut, we acknowledge God's divinity, affirm our faith, and pledge to overcome our own shortcomings.

While, obviously, this fact alone cannot account for the "personality" of our people, it no doubt plays a strong part. Despite the many provocations we have endured, generation after generation, we have acquired a reputation not as aggressors but rather as champions of human rights. Even as our persecutors have refined their weapons, our penitential prayers have expanded and become more formalized.

Apparently, our Rabbis have gone to great lengths to ensure that we not become guilty of those same sins committed against us. And apparently also, they have great faith in the concept of soul searching. After all, if we are offering ourselves to God, shouldn't we, undergo some extensive form of self-examination? In fact, this makes good sense. As we approach the close of the High Holydays, let us reflect on -- and appreciate -- the unique beliefs and traditions that have furthered our moral development.

Just imagine -- a world where all men and women are required to search their souls and to resolve that they will not repeat their sins. "Then nation will not threaten nation, and mankind will not again know war." Certainly, a worthy New Year's wish.

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

Shabbat Shuva

3rd Tishri 5772 ~ 1st October 2011

Chazan Jaclyn Chernett

Ha'azinu – the Song of Moses - is one of the most beautiful of the poetic texts in the Tanach. Moses calls upon heaven and earth to witness his words. The song praises God, His justice, His creation of the world. It calls on the people to remember the wisdom of past generations, how God formed them into a nation and led them toward the highest state of moral being. It warns them that when times are good they go astray and God hides His face from them. In spite of this, God champions His people Israel. It is the ultimate hope, provided they live by its ideals.

Moses, about to die, summons up his whole being to give the people of Israel this final direction. The Song at the Sea (Ex 15:1-19) is a flood of exhilaration after the miracle of having brought them out of Egypt on dry land through water - and now Ha'azinu, the final Song, is his outpouring having led them through forty years in dry desert – always seeking water. The songs mark two major turning points in the history of the beginnings of the Jewish people. Moses' life's work is over.

The Song at the Sea is calligraphed in the Torah as 'brick on brick' and if you half close your eyes you might imagine light playing on waves. The Song of Ha'azinu, in contrast, is formed by two columns – parallel in meaning – as if there is a straight pathway through the text which can be understood from both sides. Moses delivers the song, standing with Joshua, his successor. It is a poignant and tragic moment. He has done everything he can to lead an often wayward people. He can do no more to instil in them an understanding of their responsibility as people of God with clear warnings as to the consequences of waywardness. He has brought them to the life-giving water of Torah. "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb" (Deut 32:2).

God tells Moses to go up Mount Nebo to die. He will see the promised land but not set foot in it himself because of his own sin. Greatest prophet of the Jewish people, nonetheless he has human failings. From the beautiful text of Ha'azinu comes our opening of the traditional Tsiduk Hadin – the burial service - "Ha-Tsur tamim po'olo..." For all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, Just and right is He..." (Deut 32:4). Only God is Dayan Ha'emet, the True Judge.

Like Moses, we also learn that life as we know it ends. We do not have to finish our life's work, but we have a duty to be on the journey. "Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor..." the famous jolly song from Pirke Avot goes. It isn't up to us to finish the work, but neither are we free to desist from it! Where we have served our purpose, strived to fulfil our potential and lived our ideals, others will pick up where we left off. There is eternal hope as long as we recognise our reason for living, in understanding Divine purpose. It is a cry for teshuva, for a deep acceptance of and return to our core values - a fitting message for Shabbat Shuva.

And here's a thought... what would you write for your final song?

Chazan Jaclyn Chernett is Chazan at Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue and director of the [European Academy of Jewish Liturgy](#)

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked – you grew fat and gross and coarse – he forsook the God who made him and spurned the Rock of his support. (Deuteronomy 32:15)

1. This is as people say – “A full stomach is the source of all troubles.” (Talmud Berakhot 32a)
2. Behold, you Jeshurun, the congregation of Torah adherents and men who are scholars and philosophers, have turned to material pleasures and grown gross, (incapable) of understanding subtle truths... Therefore, the multitude forsook God who made them. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. Satiety leads to rebellion. Thus you find that the people of the generation of the flood rebelled against the Holy Blessed One only out of [abundance of] food and drink and out of ease of life. For what is said of them? “Their homes are secure, without fear” (Job 21:9). Similarly we find that the people of the tower [of Babel] rebelled against the Holy Blessed One only out of ease of life, as it is said, “Everyone on earth had the same language” (Genesis 11:1)... Similarly you find that the people of the wilderness rebelled only out of (abundance of) food and drink, as it is said, “They sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance” (Exodus 32:6). (Sifre, Piska 318)
4. Nor is the decreasing of wealth an act of piety if such wealth happens to have been gained in a lawful way and its further acquisition does not prevent him from occupying himself with Torah and righteous deeds, especially for one who has family and dependents and whose desire is to spend his money for the sake of God... For you are, as it were, enjoying the Lord’s hospitality, being invited to His table, and should thank Him for His bounty, both inwardly and outwardly. (Kuzari (Rabbi Yehuda Halevi), 1075-1141, Spain)
5. Judaism’s concept of gratitude is rooted in the belief that we should take nothing for granted – not life, nor clothing, nor food. Those who do take these things for granted go through life with a sense of expectation, entitlement, and disappointment. Indeed, when their routine is interrupted – they don’t feel well, their clothes are dirty, or food is not prepared to their liking – they experience anger and frustration. In contrast, the rabbis teach: “For every breath that a person takes he should praise his Creator” (Genesis Rabbah 14:9). (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, A Code of Jewish Ethics: Vol I, You Shall Be Holy, pp. 492-493).

Sparks for Discussion

Our verse implies that prosperity and success lead to arrogance and ingratitude. Do you agree? Is it inevitable? Are those who are less well off more grateful for what they have? How can a person enjoy prosperity without becoming “fat, gross, and coarse”?

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

NITZAVIM/VAYELECH

25th Elul 5771 ~ 24th September 2011

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon

If you are reading this, in Shul or on-line, congratulations. You are one of the elite; preparing for the major celebrations of the coming days by engaging in Jewish life and study. In less than a week's time we will be joined by a goodly number of Jews who have been preparing for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur by well they won't have been preparing themselves for Rosh Hashanah at all.

I remember once passing a Shtibel – a little basement Synagogue – on New York's Upper West Side on the Shabbat immediately before Rosh Hashanah just as one of the daveners emerged from their Shabbat morning service. We chatted, 'How many people did you get today?' I asked, 'Oh, about seventy,' came the response. 'And how many will you get on Rosh Hashanah?' I asked. 'Oh, about seventy,' came the response. It took a while for me to understand what he meant. Then I realised, it's the kind of community where everybody always comes. They have about seventy people on the first Shabbat in March, the third Wednesday morning in April or the second Tuesday afternoon in May.

It would be easy, as 'one of the elite' slipping into our regular seat on Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilekh, to feel that Rosh Hashanah belongs to us. We are the regular attenders and the Talmud frequently teaches *ben tadir v'aray tadir maadif*, -between regular and occasional, regular is preferred. But that would be a terrible error, especially in the run up to Rosh Hashanah. These are the opening words of the parasha read the week before Rosh Hashanah - 'You are standing here today, all of you, before God, your bosses, tribes, wise leaders, officers, everyone of Israel, your children, your wives, your strangers; from wood cutter to drawer of water so you can enter into the covenant.' (Deut 29:10-11).

For the most important moments in our national history and in yearly calendar we stand together, wood-cutters and elite alike. The machers and the twice a year attendees are deemed equally necessary for the success of the covenantal relationship between God and the Children of Israel. The same is true of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. How could we pray, in the words of the Kol Nidrei, 'alongside the sinners,' if we were all perfect (a fine hope that). The language of mutual responsibility shared by an entire people before God infuses so much of the liturgy of the upcoming days, from the Zichronot verses of Rosh Hashanah to the confessional recitations of Yom Kippur. We are all in this together.

So my request to the elite, reading this, is this - watch out for the wood-carriers and the water drawers, come Thursday morning. Wish them a Shanah Tovah, introduce yourself, make sure they feel comfortable in your community, even if you have never seen them before. This covenant, these coming days, are for us all.

Shabbat Shalom and a sweet and good year to all.

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon is rabbi at NLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

The Lord said to Moses: The time is drawing near for you to die. (Deuteronomy 31:14)

1. No man when about to die can say, "I will send my slave in my stead." Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta said: No man can make weapons which will save him from the Angel of Death... No man has the power to say [to the Angel of Death]: "Wait for me until I have made up my accounts" or "until I have set my house in order, and then I will come." ...Lo, after all the greatness that Moses had enjoyed, when the day of his death came, he could not hold it back. Forthwith God said to him: "The time is drawing near for you to die."

2. Rabbi Eliezer said, "Repent one day before your death." His disciples asked him, "But does a person know on what day he is going to die?" "All the more reason, therefore, to repent today, lest one die tomorrow. In this manner, a person's whole life will be spent in repentance." (Talmud Shabbat 153a)

3. On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall leave this world and how any shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangling and who by stoning, who shall rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted. (Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow, The Rabbinical Assembly, p. 241)

4. Even Kohelet, cynic of cynics, proclaims, "God will hold you to account for everything you have not done and could have" (Eccles. 11:9). The Days of Awe are days for self-judgment. Celebrating life, we also judge the quality of our lives. Made aware as at no other time of how short life is, we ask ourselves the most difficult questions: During this past year, have we learned what we needed to? Have we helped others? Have we done enough? Have we created anything? Are we satisfied with what we have accomplished, with what we are? Where would we like to be when this season comes round again next year? (Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days*, p. xiii)

Sparks for Discussion

One of the major themes of the Yamim Nora'im (the High Holy Days) is that none of us knows how much time we will be given, so we must use that time well. If you knew that you had only one day, one week, or one month to live, how would you reorder your priorities? What are you waiting for?

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

The Assembly of Masorti Synagogues wish you a good, happy and peaceful New Year.

KI TAVO

18th Elul 5771 ~ 17th September 2011

Jon Boyd

"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people, and there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. And the Egyptians ill-treated us and afflicted us, and they imposed hard labour upon us. So we cried out to the Lord God, God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awe, and with signs and wonders.

And He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

The Torah tells us that it was this text that we were required to recite at the moment we presented one of the kohanim with the first fruits of our harvest. Why this one? Of all the other obvious possibilities – Sh'ma Yisrael, aseret ha-dibrot – why this text?

In his remarkable book, *Zachor*, the Jewish historian, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi z"l, calls this text “capsule history.” In effect, it takes the entire story of the Jewish People, and encapsulates it in just five verses. It deals with our origins, our development as a people, our history of persecution, our deliverance from slavery and our connection with God and the land of Israel. In short, it tells us who we are.

It does all this in an intriguing way. This is not history as we typically understand it today – there is no attempt to analyze historical events in order to establish their veracity or reconstruct precisely what happened to the Jewish People. There's no detail, no evidence, no data. Instead, it is more accurately characterized as “collective memory” – it is our mythic narrative or shared story. And myths don't need detail or evidence or data – their purpose is less concerned with truth and fact than it is with identity and purpose.

So, at that moment of great relief and gratitude – a moment when, after months of anxiety, we knew for certain that we would be able to put food on the table to feed our families – we were required to take our first fruits to the Temple and make a public declaration of our identity and purpose. At that moment of satiation, we had to acknowledge that they were not a given. It is as if the Torah recognizes that this was a particularly vulnerable moment for us – a time when the potential for us to forget ourselves and succumb to the ideas that we have control over nature and our needs come first. In order to counteract any such possibility, we were required to remember our origins, our story, and what we had been given by the grace of God.

Our lives today are littered with many similar vulnerable moments when we might forget ourselves. We have so much – personally, communally and nationally. Perhaps most significantly, as a People, we have the State of Israel, and located in the context of history, we have only very recently reaped that particular harvest. Yet so many of us forget ourselves – some forget just what a remarkable gift it is; others forget what it felt like to be ill-treated and afflicted, and that we were given it too by the grace of God. In Temple times, we had this text and custom as a device to counteract any such lapses in memory; what we wouldn't do for a similar tool today.

Jon Boyd is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

They shall serve as signs and proofs against you and your offspring for all time. Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve – in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything – the enemies whom the Lord will let loose against you. (Deuteronomy 28:46-48)

1. The Torah does not specify the sins for which the Jewish people will be punished. The only one which it mentions specifically is "Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness." (Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, 1765-1827, Poland)
2. Our rabbis taught: A person should not stand up to say the Amidah while immersed in sorrow or idleness or laughter or chatter or frivolity or idle talk, but only while rejoicing in the performance of the mitzvah. (Talmud Berakhot 31a)
3. The Divine Presence rests neither in the midst of sadness, nor in the midst of idleness, nor in the midst of frivolity, nor in the midst of levity, nor in the midst of chitchat, nor in the midst of inane talk, but only in the midst of joy in observing a commandment. (Talmud Shabbat 30b)
4. Service without joy is the work of slaves for those who exploit and hate them. Therefore, if you fail to serve God with joy and gladness of heart, it is like slaves serving the enemy. (Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, 1749-1821, Lithuania)
5. Would it not have been sufficient to say "because you would not serve the Lord your God"? Why add "in joy and gladness"? With this brief phrase the Torah encapsulates an approach to observance and worship that is central to Judaism. True service of God is joyful and enthusiastic service. It is not cold and formal, merely following the details of laws and rituals, but service that comes from a joyful recognition of the wonders of life. (Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *Entering Torah*, p. 290)

Sparks for Discussion

Why is the refusal specifically to serve God with joy that is punished so severely? What does it mean to serve God with joy? Does it mean we must be happy whenever we perform any mitzvah, or does it mean that we should be happy to be Jews who have mitzvot to perform, even if we may not feel joy at a particular moment? Do you feel that Judaism is a burden or a gift?

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

KI TEZE

11th Elul 5771 ~ 10th September 2011

Nahum Gordon

“.....wipe out the memory of Amalek.....” [Deut 25:19]

As the years roll by, I find this mitzvah increasingly problematic. Moses explains that God demands genocide because of Amalek’s cowardly attack on the weary stragglers at the rear of the march across Sinai. This infamy is not mentioned in the version in Shemot 17: 8-16 and God provides no justification for His decision. We can only surmise that the Amalakites deserved this fate because they signalled to other nations that they neither feared nor respected God’s power which He had just demonstrated at the Reed Sea. The apparent inconsistency between Devarim and Shemot could be reconciled if we accepted the former as literally Moses’ valedictory version of everything that had happened in the previous 40 years [Deut 1:1], but how can we then accept that Devarim was also dictated by God to Moses in the wilderness? Wouldn’t it be easier to accept that the Torah should comprise the first four books and Devarim is Moses’ commentary on the Tetrateuch? An alternative explanation is that Devarim and Shemot represent two different traditions recorded at different times, a theory which would be warmly embraced by devotees of the Documentary Hypothesis.

My next problem is why the Amalekites should receive such a punishment? Is it so surprising that they would fear for their survival when confronted by a large mass of strangers trampling through their territory and depleting their limited resources? And even if their crime were the most heinous, are all future generations to be sacrificed for the sins of their ancestors? Furthermore, Rashi and other commentators point out that the story in Shemot occurs immediately after the Israelites, desperate for water, ponder “is God present among us or not?” They have just been rescued miraculously from the Egyptians and they dare to doubt God. They still suspect that they have been liberated only to be condemned to die of thirst in the wilderness. So, Amalek is an instrument of God’s displeasure, sent to punish the people for their lack of faith. Why is Amalek different from all the other nations that God uses to castigate Israel when it strays from the halachic path?

Finally, we must confront the dilemma that Socrates posed to Euthyphro. To paraphrase, is genocide moral because God commands it (Divine Commands define Morality) or does God command it because genocide is moral? Rashi embraces DCM, but many of our greatest rabbis seem to sidestep it, eg, Saadiah Gaon, Maimonides, Nachmanides, Meir Abulafia, the Netziv, Abraham Kook, Joseph Soloveitchik, Louis Jacobs and Aharon Lichtenstein. Furthermore, our innate sense of morality trumps any halachic argument that Devarim rationalises the Shemot edict or conversely that eradicating Amalek is overruled by “do not murder.”

I’m left wondering how the halachah might have evolved if we had preserved our national power between 55BCE and 1948. Would a more fundamentalist interpretation of Devarim 25:19 have prevailed, as was exemplified on Purim in 1994 when physician Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Palestinians at prayer?

Nahum Gordon is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller. You shall not have in your house alternate measures, a larger and a smaller. You must have completely honest weights and completely honest measures, if you are to endure long on the soil that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 25:13-15)

1. It is forbidden to keep an inaccurate measure in your house, even if you do not use it for measuring, and even if it is used as a chamber pot, lest someone use it [innocently] for its proper purpose. (Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 231:3)
2. The Talmud states that the punishment for inaccurate measures is more severe than the punishment for incest. Someone who committed incest can repent. Complete repentance for someone who constantly deceives the public in weights or measures, however, is almost impossible, since it is obligatory to return that which was stolen to every individual who was cheated. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Love Your Neighbour, pp. 315-316)
3. Throughout the Talmudic period the rabbis appointed agronomoi – a Greek word for market commissioners – whose job it was to inspect measures and weights and to fix prices for basic commodities (Talmud Bava Batra 89a). The agronomoi eventually disappeared, but the ideal was still there as late as the nineteenth century, when Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: “As the rabbi must inspect periodically the slaughtering knives of the shoctim in town to see that they have no defect, so must he go from store to store to inspect the weights and measures of the storekeepers” (Dov Katz, Tenuat Hamussar, Vol. 1, Jerusalem, 1996, p. 281). (Rabbi David Golinkin, “Some Basic Principles of Jewish Business Ethics,” United Synagogue Review, Spring 2003)
4. “If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight” (Exodus 15:26) – In business dealings. This teaches that if someone is honest in his business dealings and the spirit of his fellow creatures takes delight in him, it is accounted to him as though he had fulfilled the whole Torah. (Mekhilta, Vayassa 1)
5. Rava said, “When a person is brought to judgment, the following questions will be asked: Did you conduct your business affairs honestly? Did you study Torah regularly? Did you bring children into the world? Did you hope for salvation? Did you argue with wisdom? Did you understand one thing from another?” (Talmud Shabbat 31a)

Sparks for Discussion

Logically, we should know that inaccurate weights and measures are forbidden by the prohibition of theft. Why do you think the Torah makes this prohibition explicit? What do you imagine a person brought before the heavenly court would be asked? Why does Rava say that the first, and therefore most important, question has to do with ethical business practices?

Today manufacturers often disguise price increases by reducing the quantity of product in each container – a can of coffee that once held one pound now holds twelve ounces, the two-litre soda bottle is redesigned and now holds one and a half litres. Does this violate the law of honest weights and measures? Why do you say that?

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

SHOFETIM

4th Elul 5771 ~ 3rd September 2011

Lester Kershenbaum

This week's parashah deals primarily with the matters relating to the establishment of a just society as proclaimed in the first verses of the parashah: "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof" – you should surely pursue justice (Deut 16:20).

But in addition to this general statement, there are specific instructions designed to ensure a fair, just, and civil society. These include: the establishment of a formal legal system (17:8-13); the keeping of a safe system of roads (Moed Katan 5a derived from 19:2-4); the warning of the danger of rulers getting rich while in office (17:16-17); the dire consequences of bearing false witness (19:18-21); the allowance of the exemption from military service on compassionate and practical grounds (20:5-8); and the requirement to spare no effort to investigate a murder and punish the perpetrator (Rambam on 21:1-9).

And yet ... With all of these sensible regulations, there is one which stands out as being, in our eyes, ruthless and incomprehensible. We are told (20:16-18) that, upon entering the land of Canaan, all the Canaanites (including women, children, and infants) must be killed – certainly what we would today call "genocide". Curiously, neither the Hertz nor the Etz Chayim commentaries provide much help: the Hertz simply seems to say that other nations, ancient and modern, have had similar policies of genocide and the Etz Chayim barely comments on the difficulties of this passage. The Talmud and the Rishonim were more troubled by this. Although Rashi interprets the instruction literally, the Tosafists, the Rambam and the Ramban disagree with his view and do not hold that the commandment to utterly destroy the Canaanites was unconditional or even necessary. A midrash (Yoma 22b) holds that King Saul hesitated before following God's instruction to kill the Amalakites (I Samuel, Chapter 15) because it involved killing the innocent along with the guilty.

One explanation which appeals to me personally compares this commandment to the one which we read next week about the "rebellious son" (Deut 21:18-21); he was to be brought by his parents before the elders of the town and killed by stoning. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 68b ff) puts forth so many restrictions to carrying out of this punishment that, after much discussion, concludes that "there never has been such a 'stubborn and rebellious son' and never will be". It further suggests that the purpose of the law is to point out forcefully to the young the dangers of immoral behaviour.

Similarly, a close look at the bloody battles with the Canaanites in the books of Joshua and Judges indicates that the commandment of total destruction was never carried out! Even the apparently total destruction of Hazor (Joshua, Chapter 11) left inhabitants who had escaped and re-established themselves elsewhere (Judges, Chapter 4). Furthermore, even in the time of Solomon (I Kings Chapter 9), the Canaanites were still living in the land and had not been annihilated. So, perhaps, as in the case of the rebellious son, the admonition was given to warn the people in the strongest possible way of the abhorrent nature of the abominations practiced by these tribes – among them child sacrifice – and that, as the Ramban and others suggest, it is these practices that must be totally destroyed and the people could (and should) be spared if they repented from such evil and changed their

ways. Viewing the passage this way allows it to fit more comfortably into the general spirit of the parashah.

Lester Kershenbaum is a member of NLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Then all the elders of the town nearest the corpse shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi. And they shall make this declaration: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, O Lord, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel." And they will be absolved of bloodguilt. (Deuteronomy 21:6-8)

1. Now would it enter our minds to assume that the elders of a bet din are shedders of blood? What, then, is the intent of "Our hands did not shed this blood"? He [the dead person] was not in "our hands" and dismissed without a meal; and we did not see him and let him go without an escort. Whereupon Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi derived: The ritual of the eglah arufah (the heifer whose neck is broken)] is brought about only because of the "narrow eyed" (the inhospitable). (Talmud Sotah 48b)
2. The rabbis of [Eretz Yisrael] took the text to refer to the murderer. That no one came within our jurisdiction whom we discharged and failed to put to death, that we overlooked him and failed to bring him to justice. The rabbis of [Babylonia] took the text to refer to the victim. (Talmud Yerushalmi Sotah 9:6)
3. "Our hands" – We did not allow any known murderer to remain in the land. "Our eyes" – It did not occur in a place where it could be seen, for if there were those who saw it happen, they would have risen up and testified. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
4. That we were not indirectly instrumental in this murder on account of not providing the murderer with food, for the lack of which he was driven to commit this capital crime, or because we did not provide the victim with an escort that he should not go alone in a place of danger. (Malbim (Rabbi Meir Yehuda Leibush ben Yehiel Michal), 1809-1880, Russia)
5. When murderers increased in number the rite of breaking the heifer's neck was abolished. Mishnah Sotah 9:9)

Sparks for Discussion

The ritual of the eglah arufah implied that the community's leaders bore some responsibility for this unsolved murder, but just what were they responsible for? Did they turn away a stranger without a meal and an escort so that he became a victim or so that he became a criminal? Were they lax in prosecuting a murderer, leaving him free to kill again? Malbim

suggests that the murderer was driven to kill because of his dire poverty. Do you believe that poverty causes or contributes to crime? Why do you think this ritual was abolished when murder became common?

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

RE'EH

27th Av 5771 ~ 27th August 2011

Allan Myers

Why be good? This is a timeless question which has exercised Jewish thinkers through the ages.

Do you do it because you're altruistic? Do you do it because, that way, you'll have it done back to you? Do you do it because you'll get a reward in heaven? Or do you do it because it's the right thing to do?

The opening lines of this week's sedra are, "See. I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse – a blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day and a curse if you will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God but turn aside from the way which I command you this day to go after other gods which you have not known." [Deuteronomy 11:26-28]

However, if we have free will to choose between a blessing and a curse how is it that we are obligated to perform mitzvot? Are we automata – slaves forced to obey commands – animals whose instinct directs them? No. A normal person does not just perform mitzvot unless he has the strength to impose a discipline on himself to obey the rules of his Creator.

So, given that we do have free will, what are the considerations that come into play when making that choice? Well, we clearly have to work harder to carry out a mitzvah than not to. We have to put ourselves out – for our fellow man or to observe kashrut or to keep Shabbat. But there are some mitzvot that do require less effort – resting on Shabbat, for example.

There is a school of thought which says that, just because Moses discovered the commandments, it doesn't necessarily make them valid. Rather, Moses discovered the commandments because they are valid. In other words, the mitzvot are natural laws which we would come up with if we had to work them out from first principles.

Every year in the BarMitzvah class that I teach, I start the year by asking the class to arrive at a set of classroom rules. I always find that, by holding a reasoned discussion with the pupils, we arrive at the rules which I had already formulated.

Nevertheless, being good is difficult. Even given the fact that we may receive a blessing (whatever that is) if we are good and that we may receive the opposite (is that no blessing?) if we are bad, it is still difficult to be good.

When Queen Victoria ascended the throne, she said, “I will be good.” That is as brief a manifesto as any of us needs. She had obviously read the first line of Re’eh and chosen a blessing over a curse!

Shabbat Shalom

Allan Myers is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

If however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. (Deuteronomy 15:7)

1. [If a rich man says to a poor man], “Why don’t you go out and work at a job? Look at those thighs! Look at those legs! Look at that belly! Look at that brawn!” the Holy One will then say to the rich man, “Is it not enough for you that you gave him nothing of yours? Must you also begrudge what I gave him?” (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 34:7)
2. If you are mean to your needy kinsman, not only will you not help him, but you will seek reasons to justify why he does not deserve to be helped. “He will cry out to the Lord against you” (15:9) – if that is the case, in Heaven they will begin to investigate your actions as well, “and you will incur guilt” – and they will remember all your sins. (Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, 1726-1778, Poland)
3. “Do not rob the poor because he is poor” (Proverbs 22:22). If you don’t want to give Tzedakah, don’t give any, but do not steal from the poor man his poverty – do not say that he is not worthy of receiving Tzedakah. (Rabbi Ze’ev of Strikov, 1807-1891, Poland)
4. We have been taught that when a poor man says “Provide me with clothes,” he should be investigated. When he says “Feed me,” he should not be investigated. (Talmud Bava Batra 9a)
5. Rabbi Chaim of Sanz (d. 1786) said: “The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud.” (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Wisdom, p. 19)
6. Our rabbis taught: If a man pretends to have a blind eye, a swollen belly, or a shrunken leg, he will not leave this world before actually coming into such a condition. One who accepts charity and is not in need of it, his end will be that he will not leave this world before he comes to such a condition. (Talmud Ketubot 68a)

Sparks for Discussion

How do we determine who is entitled to receive our Tzedakah? Our commentators clearly are suspicious of the motives of those who would investigate claims of poverty too closely. Why? Do you think fraud is very common

among those who seek support from the community or from government welfare? What about beggars on the street? Do you give money to panhandlers? Why? In this time when online fraud is likely, are we allowed to be more sceptical?

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

EKEV

20th Av 5771 ~ 20th August 2011

Michael Gluckman

Forty years of wandering are nearly over, the land flowing with milk and honey is in sight. Devarim is devoted to the final nine weeks of Moses' life and the speeches he makes to the new generations of Israelites tracing their history and iterating God's laws.

A important theme of Ekev is that of gratitude. "You shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God on the good land which He has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:10) On this verse the rabbis based the whole concept of Birkat HaMazon—blessing for food or Bensching. A close reading of this verse might suggest that you only thank if full. However, the rabbis expanded this law to include giving thanks to God even if we have only eaten an amount of food the size of an olive. Furthermore in the Sidrah we are exhorted not to think that our achievements are totally our own but through our God given attributes.

In our intensely secular world this begins to feel an alien concept. It feels as if the ethos of our society runs counter to this whole idea. Everything that you achieve is down to your own luck and ability. We run around trying to amass more things and are blind to the idea that our well being has a spiritual connection. It is easier to pray when we are ill or in trouble but the Torah seems to be reminding us is that it is when you have achieved, when you are full and satisfied that you should be praying and acknowledging that there is something beyond your own effort that has empowered you.

Maybe this is due to a different understanding of the penultimate section of the Sidrah which will be familiar as including the second paragraph of the Shema. In very stark terms its sets out the rewards and punishment for following or disobeying God's Mitzvot. Couched in the agricultural terms of the original listener it promises rain and abundance if we obey but warns that if we disobey "...there shall be no rain, and the ground will not yield her fruit; and you will perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD gives you." [Deuteronomy 11:17]

The difficulty to us as the modern listener is that it just don't work like that. There is no direct cause and effect. Were our ancestors less sophisticated and able to "buy" this teaching? I cannot believe that they were substantially less aware than us. One only has to look at texts like Job and Kohelet to realise that they also wrestled with reward and punishment and the burden of having everything we want.

In the destruction of the Temple the Rabbis saw a devastation that was to them equivalent of the Shoa of 20th century. Despite all this they went ahead and developed the rabbinic system which underpins our practise today.

What I think they were saying is that whatever your lot, whatever your position it is an act of faith to understand that God has granted you what you have and for that we must be grateful. Unlike the moans of our children there is no such thing as “it’s not fair” That’s how it is. But we also know that to sit back with blind acceptance stifles achievement and progress. To have that level of faith and balance it with the human need to strive for ourselves is one of life’s great challenges!

Michael Gluckman is Executive Director of AMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

For the Lord your God is God supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favour and takes no bribe. (Deuteronomy 10:17)

1. Takes no bribe – to appease Him with money. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. How could one possibly associate God with monetary bribes? The implication of this comment by Rashi is that one cannot buy Divine forgiveness for wicked deeds by giving large donations to charity. (K’tav Sofer (Rabbi Abraham Samuel Benjamin Schreiber), 1815-1875, Hungary)
3. “What need have I of all your sacrifices?” says the Lord... Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime – Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; and the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defence the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:11, 14-17)
4. He will not reduce the punishment for a transgression because of the merit of a mitzvah which the sinner performed... And all this teaches us that if we sin, we cannot rely on any merit to save us from punishment – except perfect repentance. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
5. Our masters taught: “Do not take bribes” (Exodus 23:8). It goes without saying that a bribe of money is prohibited, but even a bribe of beguiling words is prohibited, for Scripture does not say, “Do not take [monetary] gain.” (Talmud Ketubot 105b)

Sparks for Discussion

Who would ever think that God could be bribed with money? Our commentators understand this verse to mean that God cannot be “bribed” with good deeds or sacrifices to ignore a person’s sins. How common is the belief that a person can earn a pass for bad behaviour through prayer and charity? Some people make promises to God (“I’ll go to shul every week”) if only He would grant their requests. Is this a form of (attempted) bribery? Why do you think people make these promises? How often do you think they actually keep them? Why do people continue to try to bribe God?

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

VAETCHANAN

Shabbat Nachamu

13th Av 5771 ~ 13th August 2011

Alan Orchover

After the first Sedra of Devarim which gives a general account of the resting places (many unidentifiable) travelled to by the Children of Israel this Sedra has an unusual introduction the title of which literally means "I sought the grace of the Lord". This seeking God's grace was clearly to no avail as it was Moses' pleading again to be allowed to cross the Jordan and set foot in the promised land.

It is clear that although Moses accepted the Divine ruling it rankled with him since he refers to it several times. He is even told not to mention it again. In fact, he even implies (Deut. 1:37 and 4:21) that he was punished for Israel's sins which is not what was said at the incident of the rock (Numbers 20:12) when he lost his temper and struck the rock for water. He also apparently referred to the people as "you rebels" an expression that seems out of character with his normal responses. It may have been this outburst (Nachmanides) that was his serious error. However, in this situation it is hard to see how the punishment can be justified, but a leader has to have higher standards than those he leads.

The main interest in the Sedra (apart from the first part of the Shema which follows) is the repetition of the 10 commandments for the first time here referred to as "Aseret Hadvorim" – the 10 sayings. The word "Hadibrot" for commandments first appears in the Mishnah.

There are several notable differences from Shemot (Yitro) but it has always been the Shemot version which has been recited separately (formerly part of morning service) and on Shavuot. The two main differences are in the fourth and fifth commandments. For the fourth Commandment the rabbis had no problem reconciling "remember" (Shemot) with "observe" as they explained that the two words were said simultaneously by the ineffable voice of God as one word, which no mortal can do or understand (referred to in Lechah Dodi).

The reason for Shabbat observance is not the concept of resting from Creation but the Exodus from Egypt. Ibn Ezra's eminently sensible comment was that the first time it was the rest from creation because Israel needed to know that their God was the Lord of all creation, but did not need reminding about the Exodus as they had just left Egypt. 40 years later, and with a different generation, a reminder about the Exodus was necessary. We are reminded every time we make Kiddush and on every festival. The change in the 5th commandment has the addition that honouring parents will bring a good life as well as a long one on the land given to us.

There is a problem in this promise. Many commentators state that it only applies to the Holy Land as that was the only country ever promised to us. As with every promise relating to Israel, it is dependent upon keeping the mitzvot in the land and not if we have defiled it by immoral behaviour (eg idolatry) However, this makes an individual mitzvah dependent on national observance.

The remaining commandments are here all linked by the letter "vav" – "and", showing that they are all of equal importance and interconnected.

Alan Orchover is a member of Edgware Masorti Synagogue

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

1. How can commandments be given about those things that are not under a person's control? It is inconceivable that a person should be charged to do things not dependent on his own will. (Akedat Yitzhak [Rabbi Isaac Arama, 1420-1494, Spain])
2. It is asked: Love is a human emotion, and how can a person be commanded to love? And what should a person do if he does not have that emotion? Rather, it appears that deep within every person there is embedded a love for God, but we must bring this emotion out into the open. That is what this commandment of "You shall love" implies – that you should take such actions as lead to bringing this emotion to the fore. (Sefat Emet [Rabbi Judah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1874-1905, Poland])
3. Make Him beloved to humanity, as did our father Abraham in the matter referred to in the verse, "And the people [literally, souls] that they had acquired in Haran" (Genesis 12:5). But is it not true that if all the creatures in the world were to convene in order to create just one gnat and endow it with a soul, they would not be able to do so? Hence we learn that Abraham converted people, thus bringing them under the wings of the Shekinah. (Sifre)
4. That the name of heaven should become beloved through you; that a Jew should study the Bible and Mishnah and minister to Torah scholars and be on good terms with his fellow creatures. What do his fellow-creatures say of him? Happy his father who taught him Torah! Happy his teacher who taught him Torah! So-and-so who studies Torah – see how well-mannered he is and how proper are his actions. To him the text applies: "And he said to me: You are My servant, Israel in whom I glory" (Isaiah 49:3). But he who studies Torah and Mishnah and ministers to Torah scholars, yet is not honest in his dealings nor on good terms with his fellow creatures – what do people say of him? Pity so-and-so who studies Torah! Pity his father who taught him Torah; pity his teacher who taught him Torah. So-and-so who studies

Torah – see how corrupt are his deeds and how ugly his behavior! To him may the text be applied: “In that it was said of them: These are the people of the Lord, yet they had to leave His land” (Ezekiel 36:20). (Talmud Yoma 86a)

5. We must be careful, however, not to mistake love of God for sentimentality. The love of God that Moses describes is not merely an emotion or some abstract feeling, rather it is love that leads to action, to the fulfillment of God’s will and to a life dedicated to the pursuit of the good: “Love, therefore, the Lord your God, and always keep His charge, His laws, His rules, and His commandments” (Deuteronomy 11:1). (Rabbi Reuven Hammer, “Entering Torah,” p. 262)

Sparks for Discussion

Can love, or any emotion, be commanded? Our commentators understand that this verse commands actions, not feelings. Why do you think they chose to make that shift? What is the relationship between meaningful love and behavior? What does it mean to love another human being? What does it mean to love God?

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

DEVARIM Shabbat Chazon

6th Av 5771 ~ 6th August 2011

Rabbi Michael Foulds

After forty years of wanderings in the wilderness, Moses and the people are now on the east bank of the river Jordan and all but Moses are about to cross into Canaan.

The book of Deuteronomy contains Moses’ farewell to his people, and in three mighty discourses he recalls and recounts their journey from Horeb (Mount Sinai). Almost immediately Moses begins by retelling the story of the spies (1:22-36); we first learn of this episode in their history earlier at Numbers 13:1-13. In a later sidrah (Ki Tetze), we shall read Moses’ account of the attack by Amalek on the people as they were leaving Egypt. This cowardly attack was first mentioned in Exodus 17: 8-16.

In his recollections and retellings, Moses makes subtle changes to his accounts. Why does Moses make these changes? It could be that when he viewed their history through the prism of time, there were recalled elements that at the time of the events themselves seemed less important. Another reason for change could be that he made them in order to enable lessons to be drawn from history.

In his Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, Hegel, the German Philosopher, states, 'What experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.' Perhaps Moses, some 3000 years before Hegel, would have agreed with his somewhat cynical (but quite possibly true) view of our inability to learn from history! So what changes did Moses make in his repeating of these two quite different events from which we, three millennia later, may learn a lesson? In Exodus (17: 14) God said, 'for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.' In Deuteronomy (25:19) this becomes, 'thou (the people) shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.'

We are told in the first account of the spies (Numbers 13:1f) that God instructs Moses to send spies into Canaan. However, in our sidrah this morning we read (1:22f) that the people approached Moses and asked to send spies; a request with which he was happy to agree. In both cases the Torah subtly changes the emphasis from God's responsibility to ours. Thus in the change to the story of Amalek Torah teaches, and so we can learn from it, that it is our responsibility to make the world a better place; to help to eradicate evil whenever and wherever we encounter it.

In the case of the spies the outcome of that episode was that the people who had requested the spies, rather than trust in God, were denied entry to Canaan. As Nehama Leibowitz observes in her Studies in Devarim, Moses is teaching the later generation that we have to take full responsibility for the outcome of our own actions. These changes to the two accounts therefore, teach valuable lessons for us today. The question is – Do we learn from them?

[Rabbi Michael Foulds](#) is rabbi at [Buckhurst Hill Masorti Synagogue](#).

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Sihon with all his men took the field against us at Jahaz, and the Lord our God delivered him to us and we defeated him and his sons and all his men. At that time we captured all his towns and we doomed every town – men, women, and children – leaving no survivor. (Deuteronomy 2:32-34)

- In the towns of the latter [Canaanite] peoples, however, which the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must proscribe them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – as the Lord your God has commanded you, lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-28)
- Ramban remarks that the inhabitants were Amorites and, as such, came under the Divine ordinance, "in the towns of the latter peoples... you shall not let a soul remain alive." (Deuteronomy 20:16) But that fate was only conditional on their refusal to

come to terms of peace by giving up polytheism and undertaking to dutifully keep the general laws of humanity, the seven Noahide laws. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)

- When adulterers increased in number, the application of the waters of jealousy ceased; and Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai abolished them, as it is said, "I will not punish their daughters for fornicating nor their daughters-in-law for committing adultery; for they themselves turn aside with whores and sacrifice with prostitutes..." (Hosea 4:14) (Mishnah Sotah 9:9)
- To place the Bible's aggressive and cruel mode of warfare into context, one must remember that three thousand years ago, this is how wars were fought. "Ancient documents from Mesopotamia to Egypt," a recent book notes, "abound in joyous references to annihilating neighbours..." (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "Jewish Literacy," p. 69)
- When the Holy Blessed One said to Saul, "Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him," he said: If on account of one person [found dead] the Torah said perform the ceremony of the heifer whose neck is to be broken, [see Deuteronomy 21:1-9] how much more [ought consideration to be given] to all these people! And if human beings sinned, what have the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the little ones done? A divine voice came forth and said, "Do not be overly righteous." (Kohelet 7:15) (Talmud Yoma 22b)

Sparks for Discussion

The Torah appears to endorse the wholesale slaughter of enemy populations. This is only one of several Torah texts many modern readers find difficult, among them sections permitting slavery, prescribing the death penalty for adultery and homosexuality, and allowing a jealous husband to subject his wife to a trial by ordeal. How do we deal with such texts? Our commentators offer different approaches – by justifying the Torah's position, by rabbinic legislation that makes troubling laws effectively inoperative, and by understanding that each text reflects a particular historical reality that no longer exists.

Are there Biblical texts you find troubling? How do you come to terms with them? What do you make of the passage from Yoma in which God tells Saul, "Do not be overly righteous?"

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

MASSEI

28th Tammuz 5771 ~ 30th July 2011

Shabbat begins in London at 20.39 and ends at 21.49

Dr. Annette M. Boeckler

With Parashat Massei we finish the book of Bemidbar. It began with a list of person's names; it ends with a list of places. The individuals, who were standing at Sinai in chapter one, have become a wandering people, finally a people who will teach the next generation how to act differently, as the generation of the scouts is about to die on the move (14:29-34), and the long sermon, the book of Devarim, which we will start next week, is their intellectual heritage and warning to the future generation(s).

What is the relationship between this weeks Haftarah to Parashat Massei? I wonder how much attention it gets anyway - this is the usual "You really behaved badly!" style of prophetic admonition. Honestly: Will this disturb your shabbes today?

Are we not used to have admonitions as Haftarah, luckily read in Hebrew so that most of us wouldn't pick up by accident this or that phrase and feel uncomfortable?

Today's Haftarah prepares us for Tisha beAv. It is the second Haftarah of the three of admonition telat defur'anuta leading to Tisha b'Av, which is then followed by the seven [Haftarot] of comfort sheva denechamta leading up to Rosh Hashanah. The Haftarot cycle connects Tisha b'Av and Rosh Hashanah, so that, similarly as with Purim followed by Pesach, we look at a new beginning from two very different perspectives.

Today's Haftarah - together with last weeks and next weeks - explains in a very delicate, difficult and dangerous way, why congregational catastrophes and completely new situations happen. The message is not easy and I would warn to simplify it. We can not better-knowingly simply say: "They have forsaken the Eternal One their God" (Jer 2:19), so that's why that catastrophe happened. First of all: a confession of sins can only be done by the congregation or the individuals themselves, never used as an outside logical explanation. The Talmud said the temple was destroyed because of baseless hate (Gittin 55b-56a). Again: we have to treat this suggestion most carefully. But what we may learn from a Haftarah like today's is that blessed conditions for a congregation and its individuals can't be taken for granted. We permanently have to work to improve ourselves and ask ourselves, if the admonitions of today's Haftarah really do not apply to us. It's better to constantly self-check to try to avoid catastrophes and a forced new beginning after a painful learning process. The core check according to our Haftarah today is about our relationship with God, not about this or that outer aspect.

But, allow me to feel like the prophets: admonitions won't work, human beings will identify the real mistakes and change for sure only after the crisis, won't they?

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

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by the Lord. (Bamidbar 33:1-2)

1. Why are these stations recorded here? In order to publicize the loving acts of the Omnipresent; that although He had decreed to move them about and make them wander in the wilderness, you should not think they wandered and moved about from one stage to another the whole 40 years and that they had no rest, for you see that there are only 42 stages... [After deducting the 14 stages mentioned during the first year and the 8 mentioned during the last], all 38 years they journeyed only 20 stages. And Rabbi Tanhum offered another interpretation: To what may it be compared? To a king whose son was ill and whom he took to a distant place to cure. As soon as they returned home the father began to enumerate all the stages, saying to him: Here we slept, here we caught cold, here you had a headache. So the Holy One said to him: Moses! Enumerate all the places where they provoked Me to anger. (Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France])
2. Since the Holy One brought them out of Egypt till they arrived at the gates of the land of promise, much had befallen them, both favourable and unfavourable. This short listing of the stages of their wanderings was designed as reading material for them after they settled down in their homeland. Each stage that they noted in the reading would enable them to recall what had befallen them at that place. They would accordingly take to heart the kindness shown to them by the Omnipresent and the sufferings they endured for their disobedience so that in future they would act rightly and not sin. (Be'er Yitzhak [Rabbi Yitzhak Horowitz of Yaroslav, d 1864, Poland], supercommentary to Rashi)
3. The Lord desired that the stages of the Israelites' journeyings be written down to make known their merit in their going after Him in a wilderness, in a land that was not sown, so that they eventually deserved to enter the land. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
4. Why were all these stations privileged to be recorded in the Torah? In return for their having received Israel, the Holy One will in the future give them their reward; as it is written, The arid desert shall be glad, the wilderness shall rejoice and shall blossom like a rose. It shall blossom abundantly, it shall also exult and shout. (Isaiah 35:1-2) Now if the wilderness will be thus rewarded for having received Israel, is it not certain that one who receives scholars into his house will be rewarded all the more? (Bamidbar Rabbah 23:4)

Sparks for Discussion

The Torah devotes 49 verses to the list of the stages of the Israelites' journey in the wilderness. Why? About half of the places listed are not mentioned elsewhere in the Torah and we do not know what happened there. What can we infer about the wilderness years from this list? What questions do you wish the Torah had answered?

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

MATTOT

21st Tammuz 5771 ~ 23rd July 2011

Harriett Oppenheimer

This parasha examines some difficult choices that Moses and bnei Israel face, and the decisions they make as a result. There are two episodes which are interesting to contrast, where the motivations of individuals hold in balance their personal preferences and the broader duties associated with their commitments to their tribes and to God.

In the first episode, God tells Moses to avenge bnei Israel against the Midianites. The commandment is quite specific to Moses himself as an individual: "Avenge [second person singular] the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin." Yet Moses, without an explanation, immediately passes this duty on to others, and takes no active part in the bloodshed himself. There is a Midrash which provides a reason for Moses not following God's commandment personally – that Moses believes it is not right for him to cause distress to a people who have been good to him – because his father-in-law Yitro was a Midianite. Moses understands that this is an appropriate vengeance for God to command, so he does not as on previous occasions argue with God for mercy. He commands a thousand from each tribe to go to war, but his personal loyalties hold him back from joining them.

The second episode is later in the parasha when the Reubenites and Gadites spot some fertile cattle farming terrain just short of the border into Israel. They own a lot of cattle, and they instantly see that it makes eminent sense for them to finish their journey here, not to cross the Jordan, and to settle their people and cattle down for a prosperous life. Yet when they bring this suggestion to Moses, Moses rails against them, and reminds them of their duty to God and to the rest of bnei Israel. Moses says that their brothers will go to war to settle in Israel, the land that God has given them. He even likens the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites to the cowardice and dishonesty of the spies when they tried to convince bnei Israel not to continue on their journey to Israel. The response of the Reubenites and the Gadites to Moses' admonishing is to agree to join their brothers in the fight that they are bound by duty to be part of, and to remain until every one of bnei Israel has the land they need and have been promised – but then to go back to the land that they have spotted just outside Israel; they understand that history and tribal loyalty compels them to fight for the land even though they do not personally want to live there.

Both Moses, and the Reubenites and Gadites, have to consider their personal preferences and destinies, within the wider context of their tribal history and responsibilities. For Moses

this means orchestrating a war that he cannot bring himself to fight personally; for the Reubenites and Gadites this means fighting a war in loyalty to their brothers even though they have no personal interest in its outcome.

Harriett Oppenheimer is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the Lord has commanded: If a man makes a vow or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips. (Bamidbar 30:2-3)

1. All of the Torah depends on "this is what the Lord has commanded," this being the most fundamental of all principles, namely that a person should not violate that which he has accepted upon himself as a vow or oath. Without this, there is no basis for the entire Torah, which we accepted as a covenant. (Hatam Sofer [Rabbi Moses Schreiber, 1762-1839, Pressburg, Hungary])
2. God said to Israel, "Be careful what you vow, and do not become addicted to making vows, for whoever is so addicted will, in the end, sin by breaking his oath, and he who breaks his oath denies Me without hope of pardon. (Tanhuma Mattot 79a)
3. Rav Dimi the brother of Rav Safra said: He who vows, even if he fulfills his vow, is called a sinner. Rav Zevid asked: And the proof? 'You incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing' (Devarim 23:23); hence, if you do not refrain, you do incur guilt. (Nedarim 77b)
4. We have been taught that Rabbi Nathan said: He who vows is as though he built a high place [for an idol] and he who fulfills his vow [rather than seeking to be released from it] is as though he brought an offering upon it. (Nedarim 22a)
5. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. For He has no pleasure in fools; what you vow, fulfill. (Kohelet 5:3) The verse states that the Lord has no pleasure in fools who imagine they are doing His will by making many vows in order to spur themselves to fulfill a precept. Lacking prudence and understanding, they do not stop to think that perhaps it may turn out impossible for them to fulfill them all. On the contrary, they imagine they will be credited with the good intention that they had at the time of the vow. (Ramban [Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain])

Sparks for Discussion

The vows and oaths described here are not merely promises or pious wishes. Once a person made a vow in the prescribed form, his vow – e.g., not to eat apples – took on for him the force of halakhah and eating an apple would be no different from eating a ham sandwich. Halakhah does provide a procedure for annulling vows.

Why do you think people would choose to make vows? Why do the commentators have such a negative view of vows? What is their concern? Why does Rabbi Nathan equate fulfilling one's vow with a great sin? What can we learn from this about the promises we make to God, to other people, and to ourselves?

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

PINCHAS

14th Tammuz 5771 ~ 16th July 2011

Susannah Alexander

Parashat Pinchas begins with a paradox. Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, is blessed with a covenant of peace after having committed a double killing. Indeed, it is explained that Pinchas' act is sufficient to turn away Divine vengeance from the entire Israelite people.

Pinchas' act is often justified in terms of its stand against sexual immorality. Zimri, son of a Chieftain, it is explained, was flaunting his relationship with Cosbi, a Midianite woman in front of the Tent of Meeting. This act is seen by some commentators as a fundamental threat to the survival of the Israelites, and in this context Pinchas' actions are perceived as a necessary form of defence.

I find it hard to accept that the act of killing could ever merit a blessing of peace, but in this case, the status of the individuals involved is a significant factor. Zimri and Cosbi were the children of prominent members of their communities, and as such, it could be argued that they had an obligation to behave in a manner that others might admire and emulate.

Today, we are faced with similar questions when leaders and role models in our society behave in ways we consider unacceptable. At the time of writing, the debate centres around Nick Clegg's choice of secondary school for his children. Having repeatedly spoken out against faith schools, Mr. Clegg is contemplating sending his son to a leading Catholic school. By the time this article is published, there will no doubt be at least one new example of a politician or celebrity who has inflamed public opinion through inconsistent, unwise or hypocritical behaviour.

It is not the purpose of this article to pass judgement, but rather to ask what we have a right to expect of our leaders in terms of the example they set. Perhaps we are over-ambitious in asking higher standards of our public figures than we ask of ourselves. In the case of Zimri and Cosbi, they were young, and presumably infatuated, and which of us has not acted unwisely in similar circumstances? On the other hand, a degree of gravitas affords dignity and respect. Had the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge behaved in a similar way to Zimri and Cosbi, they would, in all probability, neither possess nor deserve the public support they currently enjoy.

It seems to me that one thing that can be asked of every public figure, as it can be asked of ourselves, is personal integrity. We are taught that, at the final reckoning, we will not be asked why we were not more like Moses, but why we were not true to ourselves. Yet even this is problematic. Pinchas, the text explains, acted with passion, according to deeply held principles, but his actions resulted in the death of two young people. He may have received a blessing, but he did not escape unscathed. In the Sefer Torah, the letter 'yud' in Pinchas' name is written smaller than the other letters. This represents the weakening of the Divine spark within an individual who commits violence. When people in positions of leadership commit ill-judged acts, they not only damage the people they are charged with representing, but diminish what is best in themselves. It is here, perhaps, that the real poignancy of the story lies; in a situation where a leader's actions fail to invoke the yetzer-ha-tov, there can be no winners.

Susannah Alexander is head of Cheder at NLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

On the tenth day of the same seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion when you shall practice self-denial. You shall do no work. (Numbers 29:7)

1. Our rabbis taught: You shall practice self-denial. You might assume that you must sit in heat or cold in order to afflict yourself, therefore the text reads: "You shall do no work;" just as [the prohibition of] labour [means] sit and do nothing, so does affliction [signify] sit and do nothing. (That is, deny yourself certain things, but do not seek out activities that cause affliction.). (Talmud Yoma 74b)
2. Dr. Kaplan reminds us that the prohibitions should not be construed as mortification of the flesh. "Thus, while abstinence from food and drink and the other forms of bodily gratification on the Day of Atonement is commanded, self-torture for the purpose of mortifying the flesh is discountenanced. When we refrain from indulging our physical appetites for a limited period, in order to devote ourselves for a time more exclusively to demands that rank higher in our hierarchy of values, we are not denying the physical appetites their just place in life; we are simply recognizing the need of putting them in their place." (Rabbi Isaac Klein, "A Guide to Jewish Religious

How can I damn whom God has not damned,/ How doom when the Lord has not doomed?/

As I see them from the mountain tops,/ Gaze on them from the heights,/ There is a people that dwells apart, / Not reckoned among the nations,

Who can count the dust of Jacob, / Number the dust-cloud of Israel?/ May my soul die the death of the upright, / May my end be like theirs! (Num 23:7-10)

What kind of prophet was Bilam? What future did he forecast? A glorious conquest of Canaan? What death did he wish to share? The death of a victor?

The remaining two blessing hymns uttered by Bilam would initially seem to hint at no more. He envisions:

Lo, a people that rises like a lion,/ Leaps up like the king of beasts,/ Rests not till it has feasted on prey/ And drunk the blood of the slain. (Ibid. 23:24)

and celebrates:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,/ Your dwellings, O Israel!/

Like palm-groves that stretch out,/ Like gardens beside a river,/ Like aloes planted by the Lord,/ Like cedars beside the water;

Their boughs drip with moisture,/ Their roots have abundant water./ Their king shall rise above Agag,/ Their kingdom shall be exalted.

God who freed them from Egypt/ Is for them like the horns of the wild ox./ They shall devour enemy nations,/ Crush their bones,/ And smash their arrows.

They crouch, they lie down like a lion,/ Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them? (24:5-9).

All is prosperity and military triumph, brought about by divine protection. And yet, the death of the upright (Mot Yesharim) is not merely the death of the victorious warrior and prosperous farmer. "Yesharim" (upright) is a common synonym for "Tzaddikim". A Tzaddik is a just person, someone with a strong moral code and sense of justice. The Tzaddikim are also the tragic martyrs of our people whom we commemorate, be they from the distant past (rabbinic leaders martyred by Roman governors) or from a past still only too recent (e.g. the Shoah). Bilam does not say so very explicitly, perhaps because he is speaking in the language of his audience (Balak and his court). Prosperity and military power is what they understand. But we, the readers, know more. We are made to

understand by Bilam's word choice that he is not merely rooting for the winner, but has recognised a moral code worth following. To die the death of the upright is to live the life of the upright, and Bilam is yearning to join this life, so different from the world of his audience at that moment.

Eva Frojmovic is a member of LMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! (Numbers 24:5)

1. He saw that their doors were not directed one opposite the other, lest one look into the tent of his fellow. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. People are naturally curious and are interested in knowing about the comings and goings of their neighbours. This is exactly why our forefathers, during their forty years in the desert, encamped in such a manner that would ensure the greatest amount of privacy. We have an obligation to respect the right to privacy of others. When passing someone's window, we must resist the temptation to look in. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Love Your Neighbour, p. 359)
3. The person who utters foul language commits a great transgression and becomes despised in the eyes of others, for that person has abandoned the traits of decency and modesty that are the distinguishing marks of his people Israel and walks the path of an insolent and defiant person. (Menorat HaMaor (Rabbi Isaac Aboab), 14th century, Spain)
4. Everyone knows why the bride enters the bridal chamber, but if anyone speaks obscenely about it, even if seventy years of happiness have been decreed for him on high, the decree is changed for him into evil. (Talmud Ketubot 8b)
5. A disciple of the wise should be modest at eating, at drinking, at bathing, at anointing himself, at putting on his sandals; in his walking, in dress, in the sound of his voice, in the disposal of his spittle, even in his good deeds. (Derekh Eretz Zuta 7)

Sparks for Discussion

The arrangement of the tents praised by Bilaam accomplished two things: it made it more difficult for people to snoop, and it prevented people from becoming inadvertent witnesses to their neighbours' offensive, inappropriate, or private behaviour. Most people associate the word tzniut, modesty, with Orthodox women's clothing, and modest dress – for men as well as women – is part of it. But modesty applies to all aspects of behaviour. Modesty means avoiding behaviour that distracts the people around you or screams “look at me!”

Today it is rarely possible to avoid immodesty – seeing people engaged in “public displays of affection” , hearing the details of others' medical problems or intimate relationships as they conduct cell phone conversations in public, being inundated with all types of inappropriate language and images in the media and on the internet. How do you feel when you are confronted with inappropriate behaviour or language in a public place? Do you say something or do you simply turn away? Is modesty a lost cause, a relic of an earlier age, or is it worth fighting for. How do we learn to be more modest in our own behaviour?

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

CHUKKAT

Rosh Chodesh Tammuz

30th Sivan 5771 ~ 2nd July 2011 20112002011

Norman Bar

In Chukkat (A 'Chok' is a commandment for which no reason is given, a commandment of obedience) 38 years pass, covering the additional period of desert wandering following the spy incident at Canaan's border; there is the ritual of the red heifer, Miriam's death and burial, Moses' anger and his striking instead of speaking to the rock for water, his and Aaron's punishment, and a number of confrontations between Bnei Yisrael and other nations

A perennial enigma occupying our commentators concerns the ritual killing and burning of a blemish-free red heifer, whose ashes can purify those ritually impure through contact with the dead. The ritually pure involved in the ritual are themselves rendered ritually impure. Hertz describes this as 'inscrutable' (p.652, 1st edition) and writes, “King Solomon in his wisdom despaired of learning the secret meaning of the red Heifer regulations.” He quotes Jochanan ben Zakkai telling his disciples “.. the dead man doth not make impure, neither do the ashes dissolved in water make pure; but the law concerning the red heifer is a decree of the All-holy, Whose reasons for issuing that decree it behoves not mortals to question.”

I can sympathise with those who zerbrech dem kopf (break their heads) trying to fathom the meaning. On a purely physical basis it seems unfathomable – how can the ashes purify and make impure? It's like describing something as light and heavy, or like those cod sayings with their paradoxical contrasts, "They knew everything, and yet (long pause)..... nothing".

It seems to me that the problem for the worriers, many intelligent and learned, is, they do want to understand commands of

obedience, to understand what seems an impossible paradox, ashes having diametrically opposite properties (purifying and making impure). At the risk of inviting egg on my face and missing the point completely (and who doesn't at least once a week?) here is a tentative reason: when Jochanan ben Zakkai started his explanation to his disciples with "... the dead man doth not make impure, neither do the ashes dissolved in water make pure." I thought that before his second part (i.e. it's simply one of God's decrees) he might say something like, "The point is, God has decreed that the ritual has spiritually transformative powers –it will transform ritual impurity into purity and purity into impurity." It is the ritual, sanctified and authorised by God, which has the power of transformation, not the physical materials: so why not pure to impure? Transformation can work both ways. That seems to me perfectly reasonable. Why did God ordain that decree? Different question: no idea.

But uncovering an explanation is not at the core. It is not the point. The fundamental question is whether one believes that God commanded the ritual and ordained its consequences. If one does not, then whether or not there is an intelligible explanation is irrelevant. If one does believe, then there is no problem. The belief comes first, not the explanation.

Norman Bar is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Moses did as the Lord had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days. (Numbers 20:27-29)

1. "All the house of Israel" The men and the women, for Aaron used to pursue peace and bring love among men of strife and between a husband and his wife. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. "All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron" – whereas for Moses only men wept, because he rendered judgment strictly according to the truth and used to rebuke people besides. Likewise, when two men quarrelled, Aaron would go, sit with one of them, and say, "My son, look how your friend beats his breast and tears his hair out as he says, 'Woe is me, how can I raise my eyes and face my friend? I would be too embarrassed, for it is I who acted offensively toward him.'" Aaron would sit with him until he removed all rancour from his heart. Then Aaron would go and say the same thing to the other man. Later, when one met the other, they would hug and kiss each other. Hence, it is said, "All the house of Israel bewailed

Aaron.” (Avot D’Rabbi Natan 12; Yalkut Shimoni, Hukkat, 764)

3. [The people deeply loved Aaron and deeply felt his death. They mourned for him even more than they did later for Moses; for the latter only a part of the people shed tears, but for Aaron, everyone. Moses, as a judge, was obliged to mete out justice to the guilty, so that he had enemies among the people, men who could not forget that he had pronounced them guilty in court. Moses, furthermore, was sometimes severe with Israel when he held up to them their sins, but never Aaron. (Rabbi Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, Volume III, p. 328)
4. A king had cups made of delicate glass. The king said: If I pour hot water into them, they will [expand and] burst; if cold water, they will contract [and break]. What did he do? He mixed hot and cold water and poured it into them, and so they remained unbroken. Likewise, the Holy One said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world be expected to endure? So I will create it with both justice and mercy, and may it endure! (B’reishit Rabbah 12:15)

Sparks for Discussion

Following the death of Moses, the Torah says, “The Israelites bewailed Moses,” but concerning Aaron it says, “All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron.” Therefore, the rabbis understand that Aaron was more beloved and the people mourned him more deeply. Why? Do you think that Aaron’s efforts to make peace and avoid conflict are the best approach? What are its drawbacks? According to the midrash, at least some of the people resented Moses because he called people to account for their sins and their crimes. Do you think that Moses’ efforts to execute justice are the best approach? What are its drawbacks? To what extent should a leader worry about his or her popularity?

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

KORACH

23rd Sivan 5771 ~ 25th June 2011

Vicky Fox

Let’s start a discussion of disagreements with a non-contentious statement: Jews have always argued. Throughout the millennia, from Biblical times right up to our own modern times, Jews have argued and accused each other. We often differ sharply on what we see as “absolute truth” in Judaism and show little tolerance or respect for people holding alternative views.

Is it good to argue and disagree? Debate and argument is part and parcel of taking ideas and values seriously. We Jews have always thought our ideas and opinions are worth a good argument – as illustrated on every page of the

Talmud. The truth is that we often have deep and profound areas of disagreement in both theology and practice. And those differences cannot be swept away - but how should we approach the debating of them?

In direct contrast to Korach's challenge to Moses and Aaron in this week's parsha, the Talmud cites the arguments of Hillel and Shammai as the right sort of argument - arguments that are "for the sake of heaven": a debate for the sake of clarifying the truth and endeavouring, to the best of our ability, to determine God's will.

The Talmud (Eruvin 13b) records how, for three years, there was a halachic dispute running between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. After three years of going back and forth with no resolution, a heavenly voice called out: "Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim" - "These and these are the words of the living God, but the halachah is in agreement with the rulings of Hillel".

Thus the correct ruling is revealed while maintaining that both views reflect God's truth. Since both Hillel and Shammai's views represented the words of God, what entitled Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? The Talmud explains, because they were kind and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Shammai, and were humble enough to mention the words of their opponent Shammai before their own. This passage also confirms the importance of accepting pluralism as an authentic Jewish approach - the possibility of opposing views both representing truth; more than one approach can be an interpretation of God's will.

The Mishnah extols the greatness of the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai: despite their strident differences of opinions over fundamental matters of halachah, each would eat in the others' houses (often requiring sages to eat food that was ritually impure by their own understanding) and they would marry into each others' families. Can we Anglo Jews describe ourselves in the same way?

The Mishnah states that only arguments for the sake of heaven will ultimately "lehitkayem." This term can be translated as either "sustained" or "resolved." Is this text trying to give us hope that genuine, respectful disputes can ultimately be resolved, or is it challenging us with a message which is harder to handle - that of pluralism - the really meaningful debates are bound to accompany us, without resolution, for our entire lives? If so, it becomes even more important to follow in the footsteps of Hillel and Shammai and to manage our disagreements whilst maintaining respect and friendship for others. As Moses points out to Korach, "God will make known who is holy and who is not" - it is not for us to do so. Our time can be better spent.

Vicky Fox is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

All the sacred gifts that the Israelites set aside for the Lord I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters who are with you, as a due for all time. It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for you and your offspring as well. (Numbers 18:19)

1. He made a covenant with Aaron with a thing that is wholesome and lasting and that keeps other things wholesome. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. The world can live without wine, but the world cannot live without water. The world can live without pepper, but the world cannot live without salt. (Talmud Yerushalmi Horayot 3:6)
3. The Torah is compared to salt, the Mishnah to pepper, and the Talmud to spices. Just as it is impossible for the world to be without salt, without pepper, and without spices, and the rich man provides himself with the three of them, so it is impossible for the world to be without Torah, without Mishnah, and without Talmud. (Massekhet Sofrim 15:6)
4. Just as salt causes an item that is pickled to decrease in size, yet at the same time ensures that it will not be spoiled for a lengthy period of time, the same is true when one brings different offerings. The person may lose something belonging to him, but giving these offerings helps ensure that he will keep that which is his. (Rabbi Yisrael Yehoshua Trunk of Kutno, 1821-1893, Poland)
5. After the blessing of ha-motzi a little salt is sprinkled on the piece of bread before it is eaten. For this a number of reasons are offered:
 - a. We sprinkle salt on our bread to emphasize the similarity between the table at which we eat and the altar of Temple times, and between our food and the sacrifices. The Bible states: “And with all your meal-offerings you shall offer salt” (Leviticus 2:13).
 - b. Salt reminds us that the poor should be welcome guests at a Jewish table. According to the Midrash, the people of Sodom were severely punished for their inhospitality by being turned into blocks of salt.
 - c. Salt reminds us of the sin-offerings offered on the altar in the Temple. The Hebrew word machal, to forgive, is composed of the same letters as melach, salt.
 - d. Salt reveals the wonderful way in which God has created the world. The scientific fact that salt can change its state, and after being dissolved in water it can be crystallized into salt once more, was known in Talmudic times and seemed to the rabbis to highlight the wisdom of the Creator.
 - e. Salt is a common and inexpensive ingredient. When people are surrounded with plenty, they should give a thought to more austere ways of living and remember that food is a gift from God.
 - f. Salt and bread must go together because the letters comprising the word melach – salt – are identical with the letters of lechem – bread.
 - g. In the manufacture of salt, two opposite forces are at work: water and fire. Salt is crystallized from water boiled at high temperatures. Water irrigates the wheat fields while the fire of the sun dries and ripens the crops. Both join, at God’s command, in the benevolent act of producing the fruit of the earth.

(Rabbi Abraham Chill, The Minhagim, pp. 85-86)

Sparks for Discussion

In the ancient world salt was extremely valuable (the word salary is from the same root) because it was the most effective food preservative available. Clearly this is how Rashi understands “covenant of salt.” What do the other commentators add to your understanding?

Rabbi Chill lists seven reasons for the custom of sprinkling salt on bread or dipping the bread in salt before eating it. Which do you find meaningful? Why?

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

SHELACH LECHA

16th Sivan 5771 ~ 18th June 2011

Nahum Gordon

“And Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before allIsrael” [Num. 14:5]

The majority report of the tribal leaders who scouted the land of Canaan has convinced the Israelites to return to Egypt. Don't be surprised. Ever since the first crisis when Pharaoh had seemingly trapped them at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:12), at the first sign of danger or a shortage of water or food, the Israelites have yearned for their former lives. They prefer the certainty of slavery to the uncertainty of freedom.

For Moses' sake, God does not exterminate them, but having been sorely provoked ten times (Num. 14:22) by their lack of faith, He sentences everyone over 20, with two notable exceptions, to death in the wilderness. They're not spiritually ready to conquer Canaan. Incidentally, don't dismiss the ten provocations as mere hyperbole; from the panic at the Red Sea to the defeatism of ten of the 12 spies, the Torah records ten incidents of communal complaints and rebellion. Even after the Children of Israel are condemned to 38 more years in Sinai, they disobey God another six times – all in the next 11 chapters of the book of Bamidbar. Torah may mean instruction, but I wouldn't recommend it to parents as a manual for how to deal with difficult children!

What should surprise you is Moses' and Aaron's response to this week's crisis. You won't find a similar reaction in any of the previous nine upheavals. However, a little later in Bamidbar, there are four more instances where Moses or Moses and Aaron “fell on their faces” – three in the story of Korach's rebellion and its aftermath, and the last after their sister, Miriam, had died. This cannot be coincidental. Invariably, the brothers are pleading with God not to commit genocide and to forgive the recalcitrants. But here, they collapse before the people, not God. Commentators suggest their apparent disintegration is born out of despair, helplessness, sorrow, shame, a frustrated inability to exercise effective leadership or they might be imploring the people to abandon their foolish plan.

Interestingly, in Devarim, Moses' version of his intercession after the Golden Calf debacle (Deut 9:18) involves him falling before God. Of all the insults to God, the Golden Calf is usually considered the most heinous. However, this Pesach, on the seventh day, I wondered if the first verse of the leyning (Ex. 13:17) might not suggest that the people's decision to return to Egypt was the most flagrant challenge to God's authority and that might explain Moses' and Aaron's unusual behaviour. God does not take the Israelites to Canaan by the shortest route because they would encounter the Philistines and war might prompt them to return to Egypt. Only 17 verses later, He must endure their first grievance as Pharaoh pursues them and His worst fears are realised this week. The people wanted the Golden Calf to lead them to Canaan; they had not yet lost heart. That was accomplished by the ten spies who, by undermining Moses' and Aaron's leadership, undermined God.

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

1. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord: as the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf as a gift; you shall set it aside as a gift like the gift from the threshing floor. You shall make a gift to the Lord from the first yield of your baking, throughout the ages. (Numbers 15:18-21)
2. Regarding bread: one of the three special mitzvot assigned to women is the law of challah, removing a token amount of dough (the size of an olive) from a yeast batter, and throwing it into the oven fires while reciting the proper blessing. This is a residual practice, symbolic of ancient Temple rites of gift offerings to God from nature's bounty. (Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, p. 111)
3. The observance of the commandment to take challah, because we believe that all that human beings have is derived from the Lord and that therefore the first portion of whatever human beings possesses must be given to the Lord as an offering of gratitude, constitutes the most effective repudiation of paganism. It gives the lie to the erroneous notion that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17), which is the most heathen idea of all. As the Psalm has it: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands" (115:4). Their idolatry is that they regard the silver and gold they possess as having been obtained by their own might, by "the work of men's hands." These are the "idols" that are destroyed by the observance of the commandment to take challah from every mass of dough that is prepared. (Avnei Ezel (Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman, 1897-1943, Poland))

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

Sparks for Discussion

While the Temple still stood, residents of the land of Israel were required to separate a portion of each batch of dough (known as challah) and give it to the kohanim. Since that time, Jews, both inside and outside of Israel, have maintained the practice of removing a small portion of each batch of dough. Why? Avnei Ezel explains that we need constant reminders that what we have comes from God. Do you agree? How do you remind yourself of God's role in your life? Why do you think we call our Shabbat bread challah?

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

BEHA'LOTACHA

9th Sivan 5771 ~ 11th June 2011

Matt Plen

The relationships between two parents and their children can be complicated. The relationships between God, Moses and the Israelites are presented in this week's parsha in a way which sheds light on this often challenging dynamic.

At first, the relationship between the 'parents' is harmonious. The combination of two seemingly contradictory verses ("At the command of the Lord the children of Israel journeyed and at the command of the Lord they rested" [9:18]; "When the Ark set forward Moses said 'rise up Lord' ... and when it rested he said 'return O Lord...'" [10:35]) is taken by the Midrash to imply absolute unity and identity of desires between Moses and God.

This harmonious account accords with the beginning of the Torah's narrative. Shortly after leaving Egypt, the people complain that they have no food or water. Moses remonstrates with them, ordering them to show gratitude and faith in God. For his part, God sends them water to drink and manna to eat.

With the sin of the Golden Calf, the parental dynamic changes. In an angry exchange, God threatens to wipe the children of Israel out and to found a new people with Moses at its head. Moses mollifies God and, by playing on his self-interest, manipulates him into giving his children a second chance.

This week, the relationship reaches a crisis. The first time the people complain before God [11:1], he strikes out at them with fire, which only dies down at Moses' intervention. But when the people weep for the food they used to eat in Egypt [11:4-5] Moses finally loses patience. 'Why have you treated me so badly, making me responsible for these whingers?' he asks God. 'It's too much for me – I'd prefer to be dead.' This time, Moses does not interfere when God strikes the people down with a plague.

These stories depict the gradual degeneration of the family dynamic, as the parents' capacity is worn down by their children's incessant demands. As the first parent, God, reaches breaking point, it's up to Moses to protect the children against His immoderate anger and even violence. But the second parent is also eventually exhausted and, when this happens, God punishes even more harshly. Not only has Moses' restraining influence been removed, but God's anger against his children seems to intensify in response to the hurt they have inflicted on His partner. In this complex struggle, the parents' loyalty to each other ultimately trumps their patience and responsibility for their children.

In an alternative reading, however, this story points out another danger. In this account, Moses sustains his defence of the children of Israel before God but, buffeted by the people's complaints and perhaps by God's immoderate responses, begins to suffer his own crisis of faith. Just as the people doubt God's ability to give them food, so Moses expresses similar reservations: "The people who are with me number six hundred thousand men; yet You say, 'I will give them enough meat to eat for a whole month.' Could enough flocks and herds be slaughtered to suffice them?" [11:21-22].

Rather than the exclusivity and strength of Moses' relationship with God getting in the way of their parental responsibilities, it's the cracks in their relationship which lead to a lopsided alliance between the children and one parent. In this scenario, no one has the power to prevent the emergence of a vicious circle of discord, anger and punishment.

Matt Plen is AMS Director

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

1. The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed: a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. (Numbers 11:1).
2. K'mit-on'nim, took to complaining, is only a term denoting a pretext; that is, they seek a pretext whereby to separate themselves from the Omnipresent, a pretext that is evil in the ears of the Lord; that is, they intended that it should reach His ears and that He should be provoked. They said: Woe unto us, how weary we have become on this journey; it is three days that we have not rested from the misery of the journey. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France).
3. As a result of experiencing the frustrations connected with the tedious journey. (Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir), 1080-1158, France, Rashi's grandson).
4. Regarding the travail of the road; not that they truly complained in their hearts, for they had no worthwhile reason to murmur. Rather, they murmured with their words to test God. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy).
5. As they got further away from Mount Sinai, which was near an inhabitable settlement, and entered the great and dreadful wilderness on their first journey, they became upset and said: "What shall we do? How shall we live in this wilderness? What shall we eat and what shall we drink? How shall we endure the trouble and the suffering, and when shall we come out of here?" . . . They spoke in the bitterness of their soul as do people who suffer pain, and this was evil in the sight of the Eternal, since they should have followed Him "in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything" (Deuteronomy 28:47) that He gave them, but they behaved like people acting under duress and compulsion, murmuring and complaining about their condition. (Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman), 1194-1270, Spain).
6. "Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (11:6) It is not nourishment we lack – what we lack are the tasty stimulating foods that excite the appetite. We miss the change of diet so necessary for health; the complete monotony, the unvarying sameness of our food makes it unbearable. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany).

Sparks for Discussion

Complaining in the wilderness is a frequent occurrence in the Torah. What were the people complaining about this time? Were they tired, bored, rebellious, or something else? Were their complaints justified? Why was God so angry? What is the best way to pursue a legitimate complaint? What is the best way to respond to whiners?

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

NASO

2nd Sivan 5771 ~ 4th June 2011

Chazan Stephen Cotsen

In Naso, we reach the day of the dedication of the Mishkan – for the third time in the Torah! In Sh'mot 40 it seems to be all about Moses, He set up, he placed, he fixed, he lit, he burnt incense, he, he, he. God had clearly commanded him to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests (40:12), but he set up the altar and offered the burnt offering himself. And what happened? – the cloud covered the tent so that he could not enter. It wasn't right. Moses was still trying to do it all himself. Not a good leadership model!

Vayikra 9, it is the priests, the professionals as it were, who take on the dedication of the Mishkan. This time the people were a little involved in bringing an offering for the priests to sacrifice. It was better, but ended in tragedy as two sons of Aaron offered "a strange fire" which cost them their lives. It is one of the great mysteries in the Torah as to what happened. Perhaps, Moses stepped back too much and failed to supervise his team. As a leader, finding the balance between supervision, control and not interfering too much, is difficult.

Naso, it all comes together and the dedication proceeds smoothly. What has changed? In chapter 7 we return to the original story. Moses had set up everything and the princes of Israel came with a gift. An offer of help. They brought wagons, a beautiful metaphor for sharing the burden. Moses didn't know what to do. God had to teach him to say "Thank you for your offer of help". He then wisely distributed the carriages appropriately. He was learning how to manage his community.

Thinking about this longest of Torah readings, I have finally understood the seemingly tedious repetition of the gifts brought by the princes of the twelve tribes for the consecration of the Mishkan. Every tribe contributed equally. Using another metaphor, the repetitive verses of the Prince's gifts enable the Torah reader to achieve a massive number of verses with little effort.

Sharing the burden we ease the load. It is in the repetitive every day things, that the real strength of our communities is measured. Like the number of people who can lead services using the correct nusach, like the ability to achieve a daily Minyan - something that we need urgently to address in the Masorti movement. find it frustrating and sad that if I need to say Kaddish I have to go elsewhere during the week.

Ends with a beautiful moment in the development of the community. We know Moses has now got it right because in the last verse of the Sidrah (7:89) Moses is able to go into the Tent of Meeting and God speaks to him there. All is now in harmony.

Finally the Children of Israel are ready to move away from Sinai. There is a rocky road to come but hey, that's life!

Chazan Stephen Cotsen is Chazan at NLS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

The chieftains also brought the dedication offering for the altar upon its being anointed. As the chieftains were presenting their offerings before the altar, the Lord said to Moses: Let them present their offerings for the dedication of the altar, one chieftain each day. (Numbers 7:10-11)

1. But God gave orders for the princes that each tribe represented by its prince was to have a separate day allotted to it for bringing its offering. For each tribe represented a special kind of social activity, and its being purified and being penetrated with the spirit of the Torah and using its activities in making the demands of the Torah a reality, formed a completely essential specialized contribution for accomplishing the common mission of the nation. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany).
2. Seeing that the offerings of the princes were all identical and in the same amount, why should the Torah mention the offerings of each prince separately? Because each of them brought his offering of his own accord, not in order to ape the others, but solely of his own free will. (Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, 1765-1827, Poland).
3. During the twelve days of the dedication of the Tabernacle the heads of the twelve tribes each brought an offering. Although the offerings of the twelve leaders were the same, the Torah repeats them over and over with all of their details. The Ralbag [Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, 1288-1344, France] comments that this is to teach us the lesson that one person should not try to outdo another in order to boast or to feel above him. Therefore the Torah elaborates on how each one brought the same thing. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Growth Through Torah, p. 317).
4. Rabbi Shimon taught: Be careful when you recite the Sh'ma and the Amidah. When reciting the Amidah do not make your prayer a prescribed routine but a plea for mercy and grace before God. (Pirkei Avot 2:18).
5. Prayer should always be a combination of set words and spontaneous expression. We utilize the magnificent texts that others have written and we add to them, through variations and interpretations and whatever words we wish to add in order to bring our feelings to the fore. (Rabbi Reuven Hammer, Entering Jewish Prayer, p. 12).

Sparks for Discussion

Why do you think the Torah repeats the same paragraph twelve times? Is it meant to teach us that different people can perform the same actions for very different reasons?

Why do we pray the way we do? Why do we recite prayers fixed more than 1,000 years ago, day after day, week after week? How can we express what is truly in our hearts with other people's words? Have you ever tried to compose your own prayers? Were you successful? What can the fixed prayers of the siddur teach us? How do they help us focus on what it means to pray? What do you think would happen if every congregation wrote its own prayers?

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

BEMIDBAR

24th Iyar 5771 ~ 28th May 2011

Rabbi Marcus Lange

On God Glamping* in the Torah

Leaving numbers, censuses and genealogies aside, here comes an observation of a different kind. The detailed description of the marching arrangement of the tribes (Num.2) makes the point that the Tabernacle, the Ohel-Mo'ed, is at the centre of the formation. Everything is arranged in reference to it and the priestly activities which come with it; "they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting (saviv l'Ohel Mo'ed) at a distance." (Num.2:2) We have seen this picture before in Exodus (Ex.25-27; 35-40. But we might be rightfully puzzled when we notice that it also says the following in the Torah: "Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the Tent of Meeting (Ohel Mo'ed), and whoever sought Adonai would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp (Ohel Mo'ed asher mi-chutz la-machaneh)." (Ex. 33:7).

The question is: Where is God? Outside or inside the camp? Amidst the people (or ourselves), or at a safe distance?

Rabbis and scholars alike have noticed this discrepancy and have offered various explanations trying to reconcile the two pictures. Whereas traditional Jewish comments suggest that the Ohel in Ex.33 is Moses's own dwelling, his own private tent, modern scholarship sees two different groups of authors behind those opposing descriptions.

Given that both images of God are in the Torah, one in which God is at the centre of the camp surrounded by all and one in which God is outside and further away, why not try to think the two ways of looking at God and our relationship with God together - as I find both aforementioned attempts spiritually unsatisfactory. I believe the Torah is much richer and even much more compelling than that.

From my own experiences, my own journey with God, I can relate to both ideas, the idea of God inside the camp and God outside the camp; God near and God further away. There are times when God feels near and I feel closer

to God; and at other times I sense a distance or a disconnect. Also, there are moments where I want either one or the other: I want the Divine Presence very near to me and those around me when I need to feel God's power (for instance when someone is very ill or even dying). Or, I want God kept at a safe distance when God's greatness and might is perceived as too much, too big and too scary and might crush me.

This in mind, it becomes possible to bring our two images together in a much more meaningful way. The Torah as a whole acknowledges and reflects both our experience of AND our inner need for closeness as well as distance in relation to God - depending on where we are, how we feel, what we see and hear.

And further: No matter where God's glamorous tent is, be it inside or outside the camp (i.e. me, my community, this world), whether near or a bit further away, another beautiful message of the Torah is that God is on the move too, that the Divine Presence travels with us on our journey through life.

*The two words 'glamorous' and 'camping' combined referring to luxurious outdoors activity.

Rabbi Markus Lange is Resident Chaplain to the Marie Curie Hospice, Hampstead

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sacred objects and all the furnishings of the sacred objects at the breaking of camp, only then shall the Kohathites come and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die. These things in the Tent of Meeting shall be the portorage of the Kohathites... The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off from the Levites. Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each to his portorage. But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die. (Numbers 4:15, 17-20)

1. For if they touch them, they are punishable with death at the hands of Heaven. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France).
2. They loaded the Ark of God onto a new cart and conveyed it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Abinadab's sons, Uzzah and Ahio, guided the new cart. They conveyed it from Abinadab's house on the hill, [Uzzah walking] alongside the Ark of God and Ahio walking in front of the Ark. Meanwhile, David and all the House of Israel danced before the Lord to [the sound of] all kinds of cypress wood [instruments], with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and cymbals. But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out for the Ark of God and grasped it, for the oxen had stumbled. The Lord was incensed at Uzzah. And God struck him down on the spot for his indiscretion and he died there beside the Ark of God. (2 Samuel 6:3-7).
3. "Do this with them" – that is to say, do on behalf of them that they may live and not die, by incurring the punishment of karet (excision) when approaching the holy of holies, since the human soul, on

approaching that which is holy, naturally yearns to see beyond the boundaries that are permitted it. Therefore you must cover up and conceal so that they shall not die, as a result of breaking through to see. (Don Isaac Abravanel, 1437-1508, Spain and Italy).

4. It is stated above that the sons of Kohath were given the vessels to carry only after they had been covered. It was forbidden for them to be present when Aaron and his sons were engaged in covering them. We suggest that the reason for this was that the holy vessels should not be regarded simply as material articles of use. The people should realize their inner symbolic significance. The Levites were charged with understanding the symbolic nature of the vessels that had been entrusted to their care. Had they kept their gaze directed in the holy vessels while they were being covered, this inner perception of their sacred purpose would have suffered, and they would have profaned their task. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany).

Sparks for Discussion

It is clear that unauthorized contact with the holy is dangerous, but what is the nature of that danger? Do you believe that coming into contact with the sacred is dangerous? Why? Do you think it is more likely that the danger is falling into mystical speculation and religious mania or losing the sense of awe about the holy?

In the middle of the last century, most Masorti congregations maintained a certain distance between laypeople and the sacred. Services were conducted by robed rabbis and cantors set on a raised bimah several feet above the congregation. Few laypeople – none of them women – saw the inside of a Sefer Torah. Today most of our congregations encourage lay participation in all aspects of Jewish ritual – leading tefillot, reading Torah, giving divrei Torah, and more. Contemporary synagogues are being designed with low central bimahs surrounded by seating close to the Ark and its Torahs. Do you like these changes? Why? How does the physical nature of the building affect the spiritual nature of what takes place inside? What impact have they had in your community? Does coming closer to the Torah in this way bring you closer to God?

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

BECHUKOTAI

17th Iyar 5771 ~ 21st May 2011

Rabbi Paul Arberman

"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit." (Lev.26:3-4) What a beautiful way to open this week's parasha -- with a list of brachot that will come to the children of Israel if they follow God's commandments.

However, just a bit further on, we read the "tochecha"-- a long list of less-good things that will happen to Israel if they do not follow the laws and statutes – a lot of spurning, smiting, and destroying. One of the verses that I think is especially interesting begins: "Im telechu imi ker..." In the Jewish Publication Society version, editor Baruch Levine translates "keri" as "hostile:" "If you remain hostile to me...then I will smite you sevenfold for your sins."

If this is correct, then it means that we should not act in a hostile way toward God and the commandments. And in fact, throughout the Talmud there are different ways of breaking laws and commandments – and being "hostile" to God. According to the rabbis' understanding of God's accounting of our sins, if you do something wrong because you don't know the law, it's one, relatively low level of sin. If you know the law but you do something wrong by accident or you forget, or you are addicted to something/ you have a weakness – then it is a little worse. But if you do something wrong just to thumb your nose at God, to be hostile to God, then according to this understanding, you are in trouble.

It is interesting to note however, that the word "keri," can be translated in many different ways. Rashi offers two other possible translations. He says that "keri" could be like the word "be'mikreh," which means "by chance," or, "in a casual way." If this is correct, then the text is saying – don't take your relationship with God lightly – don't treat my commandments casually; like the parent who says to her child: "I'm not your friend, I'm your mother!"

In Rashi's second translation, he explains that "keri" is an expression of holding back, "withheld of spirit". If you are spiting God, then you at least acknowledge the relationship, but if you ignore the relationship – then you are truly separating yourself from the Jewish people. It seems that nothing gets people, or God, more hot under the collar than when they are ignored.

A final note: In the first printed edition of Rashi instead of "be'mikreh – by chance," it has "ke'mikreh," which means, "like an event." Now the text reads: "If you behave with me as if I am an "event" – something that only occurs occasionally -- then I will smite you..." I think this translation brings an important lesson for us. We so often separate our lives into different parts – and there are times when we are on Jewish time and there are times when we are not e.g. Kosher at home but not at the Chinese restaurant.

Today, in parashat Bechukotai we read the tochecha, and I suggested that the rebuke is for those who consider each part of their lives a "separate event." On the other hand, the blessings are for those who work toward building a relationship with God and our tradition that permeates all parts of our identity at all times. And so may it be with us – may we learn to integrate our tradition of justice, kindness and spirituality into each part of our lives.

And when we behave like Jews at home and in the street, in shul and at work, then we may confidently call on God to remember the covenant with Israel and ask that God grant the rains, falling from heaven, at times gentle and at times driving -- always in their season.

Rabbi Paul Arberman is rabbi at HEMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

If anyone consecrates his house to the Lord... (Leviticus 27:14)

1. The Kotzker rebbe commented on this verse: When a person is involved in spiritual matters, it is relatively easy for him to do so in a sanctified state. But true holiness is when a person sanctifies the seemingly mundane daily activities of running his house. When one behaves in an elevated manner in his own house, he is truly a holy person (From Amud Haemes). Torah ideals and principles are not only for when one is in a yeshiva or synagogue. Rather Torah principles and values apply to all areas of our lives. At home one has many opportunities for acts of kindness to one's own family. Also, behaving properly towards members of one's own family at home is frequently more difficult than behaving properly towards strangers. But the more difficult it is to apply Torah principles the greater the reward. The more sanctified your behaviour at home the greater you become. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Growth Through Torah, p. 304).
2. While on a lecture tour, the nineteenth-century Rabbi Israel Salanter accepted a man's invitation for Shabbat dinner. As he and his host were preparing to sit down for the meal, the man threw an angry fit at his wife for forgetting to cover the challot. Wounded by her husband's words and ashamed in the presence of their distinguished guest, the woman ran off to the kitchen and remained there. Rabbi Salanter, shocked by the man's behaviour, leaned over and said to him, "Excuse me, but I'm getting older and my memory is weakening. Could you remind me of the reason we cover the challot until after we recite the Kiddush?" The man, proud to be of assistance to so prominent a sage, explained the symbolism behind the custom; the challot are covered so that they be spared the "embarrassment" of being exposed while all the ritual attention is being focused on the wine.... After he finished, Rabbi Salanter rose and rebuked him: "You are so meticulous about a mere custom of not 'embarrassing' a loaf of bread. And yet you are so quick and ready to dishonour your wife and hurt her feelings. I cannot eat with you." Only when the man hurried into the kitchen and pleaded with his wife to forgive him did Rabbi Salanter consent to remain. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, The Book of Jewish Values, pp. 483-484)

Sparks for Discussion

Rabbi Pliskin writes that it is often easier to treat strangers well than to act properly and kindly to your own family. Do you agree? Why do you think this is the case? In the story about Rabbi Salanter, why do you think the host yelled at his wife? Have you ever been in similar situation, in the position of the host, the wife, or the horrified guest? What did you do? What might you do better next time?

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

BEHAR

10th Iyar 5771 ~ 14th May 2011

Rabbi Chaim Weiner

You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord am your God. [Lev 26:1]

The reading this week is about social justice. At the heart of the Torah's concept of social justice lies the Sabbath. Shabbat is more than a day of doing nothing. Shabbat alludes to the time of creation – when people were free, when nature was bountiful and pure and society was untainted by divisions and injustice. Three different Shabbatot are mentioned in our reading: the Shabbat (every 8 days), the Sabbatical Year (every 7 years) and the Jubilee (every 7 Sabbatical years).

The Shabbatot in our reading are also connected to the idea of freedom. Every seven years there is a Sabbatical year – when slaves are set free – able to start again and try to make a better success their lives. Every 50th years there is a Jubilee, when all debts are reset to zero and each individual has a chance to start from scratch. Both of these measures are an attempt to break the cycle of poverty and turn failed individuals into productive members of society. Both of them suggest that a fair society needs to provide a way back to the original Shabbat of creation.

The Torah's concern for the poor isn't limited to once in seven years. We read that falling into poverty doesn't happen all at once – that there are key moments when a person is at risk, and that there are interventions that can be made along the way to prevent a person from losing their freedom. We also learn that the Torah legislates procedures to make sure that the option of regaining independence is always available – and should an enslaved person be in the position to redeem themselves, they are always able to do so.

Surprisingly, after dedicating 55 verses dedicated to issues of social justice – the Torah finishes with an admonition against worshipping idols! What is the connection between this verse – and the rest of the portion?

The Midrash [Safra, 106:26:1-2] sees the prohibition against idolatry as a continuation of the laws that regularise slavery. The Torah wants to warn the slave that even while enslaved he or she is forbidden to worship idols. Slave shouldn't think that they have lost their humanity and are no longer responsible for their own behaviour. Quite the opposite – even in slavery there are obligations and expectations. By keeping the faith, the slave will not despair of the day he or she will be free.

According to the Portuguese/ Spanish commentator Abravenel the verse isn't speaking to the slave but to society at large. When Jews become slaves, they will most likely no longer be able to observe Shabbat or avoid idolatry. It is society's responsibility to make sure that this doesn't happen, by making sure that people don't reach the kind of desperation that drives people into slavery.

While both these interpretations make sense, there is a deeper connection between idolatry and social justice. The meaning of monotheism is a belief that all people are created equal in the image of God, that all people are valued and that there are universal moral and ethical principles to which we are all obligated. The concepts of monotheism, Shabbat, freedom and social justice are all connected. The Mitzvot of Shabbat, Shmitta (the Sabbatical Year) and Yovel (the Jubilee) aren't just three more commandments – they are manifestations of the very essence of Jewish belief.

There is a Jewish tradition that sees Shabbat as the most important commandment and as the main purpose of creation. Parashat Behar, one of the shortest readings of the whole year, reminds us why this is the case.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the Lord am your God. (Vayikra 25:17)

1. Here it warns against wronging by words, i.e. that you should not provoke your fellow or give him advice that is not appropriate for him... And if you should ask, "Who knows if I intended evil?" Therefore it is said, but fear your God; He who knows the thoughts [of human beings], He knows... (Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France])
2. For example: If a person is a penitent, you should not say to him, "Remember the way you used to act." If he is the son of proselytes, he should not be taunted with "Remember the way your fathers acted." If he is a proselyte and comes to study Torah, you should not say to him, "Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah, which was uttered by the mouth of the Almighty?" If a person is visited by suffering, afflicted with disease, or has just now had to bury his children, you should not speak to him as Job's companions spoke: "Is not your piety your confidence, your integrity your hope? Think now, what innocent man ever perished? When have the upright been destroyed?" (Job 4:6-7) If ass drivers ask to buy grain from him, he should not say to them, "Go to So-and-so, who sells grain," knowing full well that So-and-so has never done any such thing. Rabbi Judah said: He should also not feign interest in a purchase when he has no money, since this is a matter turned over to the heart, and of everything turned over to the heart, it is written, but fear your God. Rabbi Yohanan

said on the authority of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: Wronging through speech is more heinous than wronging in money matters. For of the first, it is written, but fear your God, whereas of the second, but fear your God is not written. Rabbi Eleazar said: The first affects a victim's very person; the second only his money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said: For the second restoration is possible; but not for the first. (Talmud Baba Metzia 58b)

3. Any words that will distress someone or hurt his feelings are forbidden. Whatever you would not want someone to say to you, do not say to someone else. This rule should be remembered constantly; careless words cause much pain and suffering. (Pele Yoetz [Rabbi Eliezer Papo, 1785-1826, Bulgaria])

Sparks for Discussion

Rabbi Yohanan says that wronging with words is worse than wronging with money. Do you agree? How far should a person go to avoid hurting another's feelings?

The rabbis prohibit a person who has no intention of buying from asking a merchant the price of his goods. Why do you think they did this? It is not uncommon today for a person planning to make a major purchase to visit local retailers to test drive cars or compare different big-screen TVs or even to try on many pairs of expensive shoes. Once the person knows exactly what he wants, he searches the internet to find the lowest price. Is this "wronging with words?" Do you think it is wrong?

EMOR

3rd Iyar 5771 ~ 7th May 2011

Moshe Lavee

This week's Sidrah, Emor, begins with the special permit given to the priests to defile themselves by the presence of the dead body of the seven closest family members: father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter and spouse. The Rabbis saw this permit as the foundation of mourning laws. This list of relatives defines the people one should mourn for, for whom one should sit Shiva. In this legislation the Torah and the sages reflected a deep understanding of mourning laws. The moment of separation from our beloved is a moment to which entire life is drawn into, a moment in which our closest relations are declared.

In Talmudic discussion we find that the boundaries of mourning have been extended to second degree relatives, to fit the social structure of the extended patriarchal family (in contrast to the nucleolus family reflected in our sidra): "every one that mourns for him should mourn with him". A few mourning practices have also been applied to rabbi-student

relationships, showing the strength of the intimacy that evolve through the study of the torah, reflecting the strong social bonds in the study circles. A touching story tells us about the refusal of Rabbi Eliezer to accept visitors after the death of his maid-servant, implying that at times, even the working power of one's household can become close as a relative. Mourning is hence a significant moment in which people declare their feelings of love, intimacy and their sense of proximity to each other. The boundaries of these emotions, it seems, go past and beyond the basic biological family, and keep expanding according to our ability to contain others as part of our circles of belonging.

This week we will celebrate Yom Ha'Atzmaut (Independence Day) in Israel, preceded by Memorial Day. Memorial Day is a time for the group to share the mourning of individuals, a time of collective bereavement, a time of common mourning of the entire group. This is another example for the function of mourning in defining human bond. The circle of mourning is expanding, from first degree relatives to second degree relatives, to the circles of fraternity of the dwellers of the house of study, to the circle of belonging of the entire people.

I believe that this allegedly coincidental encounter of Emor and Memorial day should be a moment to reflect about the boundaries of human partnership. Is there a boundary to our circles of belonging? In the last decades, thanks to Globalization, humanity had the (unwanted) merit of experiencing shared mourning, as in the Tsunami event in the Indian ocean and in Japan. We have to remember that the beginning of our Sidra was first dealing with a limitation – these are the relatives that the priest may become impure for – these and not others. Understanding mourning as a moment in which we define our circles of belonging might also become a moment of exclusion. In this week, in which Israel celebrates its 63rd Independence Day I am bothered more than all others by the question of our ability to expand the boundaries of human compassion, and to be able to take part in the mourning of the "other", even if he or she seems to us as enemies. Let this ability be a guide that will make the state of Israel slightly closer to our messianic aspirations.

Moshe Lavee is lecturer of Talmud and Midrash, The University of Haifa

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God. (Leviticus 24:19-24)

1. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai stated: "Eye for eye" – money. You say money, but perhaps it means literally an eye? In that case if a blind man blinded another, a cripple

maimed another, how would I be able to give an eye for an eye literally? Yet the Torah states: "You shall have one standard" – a law that is equitable for all of you... It was taught in the school of Hezekiah: "Eye for eye, life for life" and not a life and an eye for an eye; for should you imagine it is literally meant, it would sometimes happen that an eye and a life would be taken for an eye, for in the process of blinding him he might die. (Talmud Bava Kamma 84a)

2. "An eye for an eye" This would have been the fitting (punishment) according to the strict law of measure for measure, but we have a tradition that he should pay money, because our conjecture may be at fault, and we may unwisely exceed the exact measure (in punishing) the guilty one. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. "The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him." This verse cannot be applied in any other way than the way our sages have seen fit to understand it. The thrust of the verse is to indemnify the injured party in a manner commensurate to the injury he has sustained, not by depriving [the one who caused the injury] of a limb of his own. It would be physically impossible to cause a person an exact duplicate of the injury he himself has suffered. If he were to cause either a lesser or a greater injury than the one he had sustained, he would be in violation of what the Torah wrote as he would not have complied with the Torah's demand "the injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him." In the case of monetary compensation, experts can evaluate the precise amount of the value of the loss sustained. (Rabbenu Hananel ben Hushiel, 990-1053, Tunisia)
4. One who injures his fellow is liable for five things: for damage [the value of the injury itself], for pain, for healing, for loss of time [from work], and for embarrassment. (Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:1)

Sparks for Discussion

What is your initial reaction to the words "an eye for an eye"? In the Talmud, the rabbis derive a number of proofs (examples in Source 1) that this phrase must mean and cannot mean anything else but monetary compensation. The Mishnah (Source 4) teaches the actual halachah to be applied in the case of injury. What do you think the Torah meant to accomplish by commanding "an eye for an eye"? Why does this passage conclude with "You shall have one standard"?

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

KEDOSHIM

26th Nisan 5771 ~ 30th April 2011

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

The words of Vayikra 19:18 are among the best known in the Torah, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself, I am the Lord'. But what has made them famous across the world is neither Hillel's popularisation of them in his famous response to the prospective convert, 'What is hateful to you don't do unto others', nor Rabbi Akiva's elevation of them to a klal gadol ba'Torah, 'a great principle of the Torah'. Their familiarity is due to the fact that the Gospels place them, as they do so many core Jewish teachings, in the mouth of Jesus.

It's therefore strange and somewhat disappointing to search how the Talmud uses them and find the following example: How do we know that those who incur the penalty of death by the sword are to be killed at the neck? 'Rav Nachman quoted Rabbah bar Avuha: 'Because the Torah says, "Love your neighbour as yourself", [which means] choose a respectful way for him to die'. (Ketubot 37b) The rabbis instituted procedures which made it all but impossible for a court to apply the death penalty. Yet so long as death by the sword remained a theoretical category of punishment the Talmud understood 'Love your neighbour' as requiring us to find the least painful way of carrying it out.

Or take the following instance: 'Rav Yehudah quoted Rav: it is forbidden for a man to marry a woman without first seeing her, lest he sees in her anything unseemly and she becomes ugly in his eyes, for the Torah has said "You shall love your neighbour [here understood as 'partner'] as yourself"'. (Kiddushin 41a)

It feels as though we have gone from the sublime to the somewhat sordid. It's a relief to encounter more recent rabbinic commentaries such as that of Samson Raphael Hirsch, the leader of neo-orthodoxy in mid nineteenth century Germany, who maintained that our neighbour here means our Mitmensch, our fellow human being, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, with whom we are full partners within the same society.

Yet it is worth considering who in fact applied the Torah's commandment with the broadest imagination. I find myself reflecting on the Talmud with renewed respect. To Rav in the passage from Kiddushin our neighbour is the poor girl about to be married off to a man she has not seen and who has not seen her, to begin a life of misery. As a young woman in that society she would be all but powerless; yet Rav declares her to be our neighbour whom the Torah commands us to 'love'. Presumably today he would see the tens of thousands of girls sold into trafficking as our neighbours, for whom the Torah requires us to be urgently concerned.

To Rabbah bar Avuha our neighbour is the man on death row, those awaiting execution in cells across the globe. To the rabbis of the Talmud they should never have been allowed to get there in the first place, but, since it has come to this, they too must be regarded with dignity and their suffering minimised.

Thus the rabbinic imagination requires love that is compassion and respect, to be carried to the very depths and margins of our world.

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg is rabbi at NNLS and Senior Rabbi of the AMS

Torah Sparks

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

1. You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:32)
2. Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is attained by the way of righteousness. (Proverbs 16:31)
3. Do not cast me off in old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me! (Psalms 71:9)
4. Rabbi Yose the Galilean said: By old is meant a person who has acquired wisdom... What is showing deference? It means that one should not sit in the seat of the old or speak before he has spoken or contradict him. "You shall rise" A person might think that he could shut his eyes when he passes as if he had not seen him. This is a matter entrusted to the heart; that is why it says, "You shall fear your God." (Talmud Kiddushin 32b)
5. As regards scholars, the older they become the more wisdom they acquire... But as regards the ignorant, the older they become, the more foolish they become. (Talmud Shabbat 152a)
6. Show respect to an old man who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his own, for we have learned that the fragments of the old tablets [of the Ten Commandments which Moses shattered] were kept alongside the new tablets in the Ark of the Covenant. (Talmud Berakhot 8b)
7. A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture. (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 72)
8. Although the Jewish community has always laid great stress on the Jewish education of its young, Maimonides reminds us that old people need to fill their lives with learning. The Book of Job suggests that learning of the old might be of particular value: "With age comes wisdom, and length of days brings understanding." (Job 12:12) Job's notion that "with age comes wisdom" contrasts markedly with the worship of youth and beauty in contemporary society. Indeed, the biblical and Jewish approach is inherently more optimistic. In contemporary society, which places such emphasis on one's physical appearance, our value can only decrease with time, whereas the Jewish emphasis on wisdom and experience suggests that our value can continue to increase throughout life. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values*, p. 288).

Sparks for Discussion

The verses from Proverbs and Psalms remind us of the ideal and the reality of aging. Our commentators suggest that respect is due to the aged because of the wisdom they have acquired. Do you agree? What is the nature of the wisdom acquired with age? Do we owe this same respect to all the elderly? How exactly do you understand showing deference to the old? Is your community a place where gray hair is a crown or a curse? What more can be done to make the elderly feel included and valued?

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

CHOL HAMOED PESACH

19th Nisan 5771 ~ 23rd April 2011

Rabbi Daniella Kolodny

What do you do with an old photograph that used to represent happy times and now is just a distressing memory? Where do you store painful experiences, missed opportunities, the times that you'd like to forget?

During Shabbat of Chol HaMoed Pesach we read, Ex. 33:12-34:26, the giving of the Ten Commandments and Moses' destruction of stone tablets upon discovering the Israelites' construction of the Golden Calf. Following God's revelation at Sinai the Israelites believe that Moses has failed to return to the camp after ascending the mountain; to alleviate their anxieties the Israelites construct a Golden Calf with the intention of worshipping it instead of the One who had brought them out from Egypt. With the construction of the Golden Calf, the Israelites betray the covenant they had just made at Mt. Sinai. Whilst God punishes those who led the apostasy, God pardons the rest of the Israelites for their transgression. Chastened by the rupture, God does not forget but chooses to forgive the Israelites and forge a new covenant saying to Moses: "Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered." (Ex. 34:1)

Today when our Sifrei Torah, our Siddurim and our Tefillin are worn down and broken we bury them with honour as we do when our loved ones pass away, but what does one do with the remnants of a broken relationship? With the sin of the Golden Calf the relationship between the Israelites and God changes and matures. The first tablets represent the promise of an unknown and optimistic future. Though broken, the broken shards are still sacred, containing the promises and intentions of the first covenant between the Israelites and God. The Israelites could have left the first tablets of stone in the desert, left to erode with sands of time, destined to oblivion. A Midrash teaches that the Israelites gathered up the fragments of the first tablets and placed those broken tablets together with the complete second set in the in the Ark of the Covenant carrying the tablets through the desert in their journey towards the Promised Land. The Israelites retain the stone shards as a memory of their past recklessness.

Why would the Israelites want to retain the broken pieces? The broken tablets remind the Israelites and God of their initial dreams and expectations of each other. They represent the desire to live as people fully committed to God and the promises of Sinai, yet they also represent a time when the Israelites proved entirely incapable of doing so. The breakdown of the first tablets represents the bondage of the mind the Israelites experienced still

enslaved to the ways of their former masters. Memory of their past failure helps the Israelites to recognize their renewed gift of Torah.

The first set of tablets also represents a rupture of expectations for both God and the Israelites. The first tablets were carved by God alone, incised with divine expectations but they lacked insight into the frailty of the human condition. The Israelites, say the rabbis, were simply not up to the task of the divinely wrought expectations. The second set of tablets was created by Moses and God together and engraved with the knowledge of human imperfection. With God's instruction to Moses to carve two more tablets of stone like the first ones, God gives Israel a second chance. And as God gives Israel a second chance so must we when our loved ones fail us too.

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

A Question of Jewish Law

Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: A traditional Ketubah indicates the status of the bride – who is described either as a virgin, divorcee, convert or widow. What is the proper way to write the Ketubah of a couple who have lived together before their marriage? What is the proper wording of a Ketubah for a woman who had been previously married to a non-Jew, and is now entering her first Jewish marriage?

Answer: The traditional Ketubah went through many changes before it reached its present form. The Talmud [BT: Ketubot 82b] states: At first they used to give merely a written undertaking in respect of the Ketubah ... and consequently they grew old and could not take any wives. It was then ordained ... however, when the husband was angry with her he used to tell her, 'Go to your Ketubah'. It was ordained ... Still, whenever the husband had occasion to be angry with his wife he would say to her, 'Take your kethubah and go'. It was then that Simeon b. Shetah ordained that the husband must insert the pledging clause, 'All my property is mortgaged to your Ketubah'.

The traditional Ketubah states a sum of money the groom is obliged to pay his wife in the case of divorce. This was to guarantee that the wife did not leave the marriage empty-handed. As a young maiden had better prospects of marriage than other women, the prospective husband had to guarantee her higher compensation in the event of divorce. The traditional sum is 200 zuz in the case of a virgin and 100 zuz for any other bride. This is known as the basic Ketubah.

R. Moshe Isserlis [Poland, 16th Century] rules that the Ketubah must also state whether the bride was a divorcee so that it would be known that she was not permitted to marry a Kohen. Other poskim, for similar reasons, have added that the Ketubah should state whether the bride is a widow or convert.. In historical Ketubot there are several other categories that have been used.

The case of a non-virgin bride appears in traditional sources. Maimonides rules that the husband 'writes her Ketubah like all other young maidens.' [MT Na'ara Betulah 1:3] The widespread practice of couples openly living together was unknown in the pre-modern world. Basing himself on Maimonides, R DZ Hoffman [Germany, 19th Century] rules that one should not change the traditional wording of the Ketubah, so as not to cause

embarrassment. [Melamed Leho'il, EH:23] It follows that the term virgin in a modern Ketubah simply means 'previously unmarried'. Thus, in all cases where the bride has not been married before, the term 'Betulta' (virgin) is used.

However, where the wife is known in public as a married woman, referring to her as a virgin is inappropriate. In this case, the generic term ittata - literally 'woman' - is used. This is what is done in the case of a woman who has children or is a divorcee from a previous civil marriage.

Regarding the sum of the Ketubah, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein [USA, 20th Century] rules that whenever the term Betulta is used, the sum should be 200 zuz [Igrot Moshe EH Part 1, 101]. There is nothing that prevents the husband increasing the sum specified in the Ketubah to beyond that demanded by the strict letter of the law, and therefore the Ketubah for a first marriage should be 200 zuz, regardless of whether this is strictly required by law.

Based on DZ Hoffman, Melamed Leho'il, EH 23

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

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ACHAREI MOT

Shabbat Hagadol

12th Nisan 5771 ~ 16th April 2011

Yoav Guttman

The main theme of this week's sedra, Aharei Mot, is sin and atonement. We are commanded to 'afflict ourselves' on the tenth day of the seventh month, which is called Shabbat Shabbaton, but we all know as Yom Kippur. Then, the sedra includes a long list of sins that the people of Israel are not to commit when they enter Canaan because it is what the local inhabitants did, which caused the Land to literally 'vomit.' Here we find prohibitions on eating blood, incest, and bestiality. But most problematic for the modern reader is found in Chapter 18 verse 22, which reads 'You shall not lie down with a male, as with a woman: this is an abomination.' How are we to be open and accepting towards our homosexual brothers, sisters, friends, co-workers when our foundational text so clearly forbids it? What are we to do with such a problematic line?

I think this debate will go on until the end of time and there is not really a good answer. Often, people will try to justify the text and limit it, so that we are able to claim that this verse is not a universal ban on homosexuality. For example, one commentator suggests that it is only a limit to Jewish men in the Land of Israel. Another common suggestion is that this text does not say anything about female homosexuality, so that must not be prohibited. I've even heard the explanation that men cannot have exclusively sexual relations with other men, suggesting the

prohibition does not apply to people in loving relationships. To me, these are all just sorry justifications. Read the original text and it is clear. The Bible, at least in this verse, does not want homosexual men to have sex with each other.

When we learn in the Talmud of the 'Oven of Akhnai' which teaches us that the Torah is not in heaven but here on Earth for humans to read, interpret, and live, we learn that it is within our right to challenge the Law. This is the basis of our Masorti Judaism. We have yet to produce a text which addresses the discrepancy between what Verse 22 reads and fully acknowledges and accepts homosexuality into our Jewish communities. What do we do when we are unable to create such a document?

When I was a JTS undergraduate, a controversial decision passed which allowed openly gay rabbis to be accepted into Rabbinical School. This was a major milestone in the acceptance of gays into the Masorti community, an acknowledgement that there is a schism between this verse and the world in which we as modern Jews live. Addressing this verse, challenging it and asking questions can get us all back to the foundations of Masorti Judaism, namely that we wrestle between tradition and modernity. This Shabbat, when reading about sin, Yom Kippur, and atonement, think of your gay friend, brother, sister, son, daughter, whoever, and take a moment, be honest with yourself, and acknowledge that it is incumbent upon us to accept homosexuals not only in our community, but also find a way to do so theologically.

Yoav Guttman is the AMS Student Fieldworker

A Question of Jewish Law

Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: There is a widely observed custom to hide pieces of bread around the house on the eve of Passover, before searching for the hametz. What is the source of this custom? Is it a proper custom?

Answer: Searching for hametz on the eve of Passover is one of the legal requirements of the festival. The Mishnah at the beginning of tractate Pesachim states: On the evening of the fourteenth [of Nisan] a search is made for leaven by the light of a candle... [Mishnah, Pesachim 1:1] Originally, this search, in which all the hametz was removed from the house and burnt, was the way the house was prepared for Passover. No other cleaning was required. In time, houses became bigger, cleaning became more sophisticated and the lengthy cleaning process before Passover that we have today became the norm. The result was that by the time we come to search for the hametz on the 14th of Nisan, the house is already clean and there is (hopefully) no longer any hametz to be found.

This new situation gave rise to an interesting halachic problem: – Can one say a blessing for removing hametz when there is no hametz to remove? There were those who maintained that as there was no longer any hametz in the home, it was no longer possible to say the blessing. In order to remove any doubt as to the validity of the blessing, they instituted the custom of hiding some hametz to be 'found' during the search. Opposing them were those who said that the essence of the 'removing of the hametz' was the actual search. It didn't make any difference whether there was any hametz to be found or not. They strongly opposed the idea of scattering new hametz, which they felt was based on a misunderstanding of what the blessing was about. The Rabad of

Posquière [Provence, 12 th Century] wrote, “[Concerning] those who put hametz in the cracks and grooves at the time of searching for the hametz, [this] is the custom of women and has no root.”

Further arguments were brought both for and against scattering hametz before the search. The Pri Etz Hayyim 21:5: Chaim Vittal, [Safed, 16 th century] writes in the name of Isaac Luria, one of the fathers of the Kabbalah, that the custom has its roots in ancient Jewish mysticism. He also says that there is mystical significance in hiding 10 pieces of bread, a custom followed by many today.

On the other hand, R. Moshe HaCohen [Brit Kehuna 2:15b, Djerba, 20 th Century] writes that this custom undermines the original intention of the Mishnah. The fact that people ‘hide’ bread before searching for the hametz results in people searching only for the bread they have hidden rather than properly checking the house for hametz that has been missed. This does not count as a search at all!

Moses Isserlis [Poland, 16 th century] records the custom in his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch which is authoritative for Ashkenazi communities. Sephardi communities have adopted it because it is a Kabbalistic practice. Although there have been some Poskim who have challenged the custom, there is also the fear that should the custom of hiding bread be abolished, people might neglect the actual search which is a legal obligation, [Rabbi Matzliach Mazuz, the Ish Matzliach, Tunisia, 20 th century]. Therefore, the custom should be maintained and accepted practice as it is in all of Israel.

Based on Ovadiah Yosef, Yachve Da’at 5:31

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

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METZORA

5th Nisan 5771 ~ 9th April 2011

By Andrew Levy

In the finale of Mozart’s great opera Don Giovanni, just before the eponymous, lecherous anti-hero descends into hell, he throws a party and invites a band to strum the latest popular ditties. A series of well-known 18th century tunes are played and then it is Mozart who plays the joke. For many opera lovers, the joke is obvious as soon as they hear it. The new tune Mozart then introduces is “Non piu andrai”, perhaps the most loved aria from another great Mozart opera, the Marriage of Figaro; it concerns a wastrel who is told to stop chasing the girls – precisely Don Giovanni’s offence of course. Mozart is subtly making the link between the themes of one great opera and another.

What, you may ask, is the connection between great opera and this week's parsha? The answer is a term used in literary criticism called intertextuality. This is the idea that one text refers back to another text or texts because the writer wants to make a point by fashioning the link. The book of Leviticus, far from being a work about anachronistic sacrifices, is a work of analogy. Themes which start in one place can, as for Mozart, be used in another; moreover, it is fascinating to work out what the author's intention is when creating that link.

A perfect example occurs in a ritual in this week's parsha (see Leviticus Chapter 14:48-53). A house which has had plague and is replastered is declared clean; then the priest takes two birds, sacrifices one over fresh water and sends the other live bird out into the field. This is a clear and obvious parallel to the far better-known passage occurring a little later (in Leviticus Chapter 16) read on the morning of Yom Kippur when two goats are taken, one is sacrificed and one is sent out into the wilderness.

Yet there is a further, less obvious parallel - this time to the Torah readings on the two days of Rosh Hashanah, taken from the book of Genesis. Abraham has two sons; one (Ishmael) is sent out into the field and the other (Isaac) is almost sacrificed.

Therefore, the analogies which Leviticus makes are not only internal references within the book itself but also go much broader and further. The idea is: "if it works there, it will also work here". It is a clear attempt by the author to create meaning in sacred literature through structure and purpose in a world full of fear and disorder. In that sense, it parallels the purpose of the creation story in the book of Genesis itself where order is created out of chaos and timelessness. Leviticus does so by a vocabulary which time and again deliberately mimics the way structure is created at the beginning of the book of Genesis.

Linked by linking, Metzora and Mozart should really be compared more often. After all, in an analogous sort of way, Metzora and Mozart are far more than just anagrams of each other!

Andrew Levy is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection, the priest shall order two live pure birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop to be brought for him who is to be purified. (Leviticus 14:3-4).

1. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: There are seven things for which tzara'at comes – for lashon hara, for murder, for false oaths, for sexual immorality, for a haughty spirit, for theft, and for selfishness. (Arakhin 16a).
2. Why are the tallest of the tall and the lowest of the low – the cedar and the hyssop – used in the ritual cleansing of a leper? Because when a man exalted himself like a cedar, he was smitten with leprosy; and when he humbled himself like hyssop, he was healed with hyssop. (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3).

3. The cedar tree is the symbol of pride and might, while the hyssop is a lowly bush, symbol of modesty. The reason for bringing the two, says Rashi, is that one of the causes of tzara'at is haughtiness. Every commandment must be done deliberately, with the person knowing what he is doing and why. The only exception is modesty, because for a person to plan to be modest is in itself haughtiness. (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk, 1787-1859, Poland).
4. Every sin requires some type of action: a movement of the hand or of the leg, an opening of the mouth – except for the sin of haughtiness. A person can lie totally motionless and think to himself: “I am one of the great people in the world.” (Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, 1726-1791, Poland).
5. If the purpose of this ceremony of purification is to have the leper abandon arrogance, what is the function of the cedar wood, which symbolizes pride? To teach the leper the proper attitude. Humility and submission do not mean that the body must be bowed. They imply that inner spiritual humility or contriteness which can be present even while the body stands erect and unbowed... The cedar wood is used to teach the sinner that he need not think he is required to go about bent over and cringing in abject humility. He can stand erect as a cedar and still be as “bent” and humble in spirit as hyssop. (Avnei Ezel (Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman, 1897-1943, Poland)).
6. What exactly is humility? Does it mean speaking of ourselves as unaccomplished, even when this is not the case?... In truth, humility is not difficult to define (though it is hard to embody). It means not regarding ourselves as more important than other people, including those who have achieved less than we have. And it implies judging ourselves not in comparison to others, but in light of our capabilities, and the tasks we believe God has set for us on earth... [T]he very capabilities that can make a person most proud... are also those that should be most humbling. If we have greater wisdom, then we also have a greater responsibility to bring people to understanding and wisdom. If we have wealth, then we have a greater responsibility to help those in need... Thinking about how much we can do in comparison to what we have done also serves as a corrective against pride and arrogance. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, A Code of Jewish Ethics: Volume I, You Shall Be Holy, p. 212).

Sparks for Discussion

The rabbis understand tzara'at not as an ordinary disease but as punishment for sin. The Talmud lists seven sins that bring on tzara'at. While lashon hara (speaking negatively about others) is the best known, the list also includes haughtiness. What attitudes and characteristics define haughtiness? Which ones define humility? Avnei Ezel makes the point that humility does not mean cowering and cringing. How can we learn to avoid arrogance and to cultivate a healthy humility?

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

TAZRIA

Shabbat HaChodesh

27th Adar II 5771 ~ 2nd April 2011

By Adam Berkley

This week continues with the laws of purity and impurity. Gone are the days of grand stories that enthral generations. This parsha is not traditionally one for bedtime stories, nor are Disney likely to make a cartoon film telling the story of one afflicted with 'tzaraat'. A large section of this week deals with the affliction of 'tzaraat' – a disease that produces sores and flaky skin but can also affect clothing and even housing. It asks mostly how one goes about healing the affliction. Firstly though before we heal we have to learn what causes this affliction. Miriam becomes afflicted with 'tzaraat' later on (chapter 12 in Bemidbar) for “speaking against” Moses because of the ethnicity of his wife. Miriam is immediately afflicted with 'tzaraat'. The proximity of the two is such that the Torah leaves no doubt as to cause and effect. The rabbis later on expand out the causes of this to include all manner of selfish and slanderous acts. They bring into the category of serious offence things that are so everyday in our world that we often experience them without thought. Gossip, rumours and the like. We are taught they are categorically bad.

The second point, the one we read about this week is the way to cure 'tzaraat'. It is not the way I find interesting, it is the who. A Cohen must inspect the affected areas to make sure they are cured. Until such a point as they are clean they are quarantined. The Cohanim were the priests of the community, the leaders of the people. Even Aaron, the high priest was expected to be a part of this inspection team that checks the everyday man. Midrash recalls Moses' shock at this, wondering if such a task was befitting for the honour of Aaron. Evidently it is, as with the power of being high priest also comes certain expectations and obligations. He is expected to spend time with the people and help them to reintegrate back into Israelite society. What to take from this. For me two things. Firstly a point about leadership. A true leader cannot see themselves as above the people they lead. They are not better, not more deserving. If they don't have a relationship with the individual people they lead they risk becoming irrelevant and ineffectual. The second thing we learn is key to building relationships with people. We have to talk to them and not about them. Talking about them is gossip, unhelpful comments. To get to know someone, to fix a problem you may have with them or to get them to follow you, you need to talk to them. We are being taught these key components of leadership this week. All of us have the ability to be leaders. All it takes is talking to people and having the time to spend with them. It does not require voting or elections – although these have their place. It requires time and effort.

Adam Berkley is Mazkir of NOAM

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out “Impure! Impure!” (Leviticus 13:45)

1. Announcing that he is impure, so that people should withdraw from him. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. The person had to call out "Impure! Impure!" to make his plight known to the public so that they would seek mercy (pray) for him, and similarly anyone who experiences misfortune should publicize it so that people will seek mercy for him. (Talmud Sotah 32b)
3. This can be read as "Impure" an impure person says about others. That is, a person who finds fault with others is really projecting his own faults and imperfections onto others. As the sages have said (Kiddushin 70a), "One criticizes in others the fault that he himself possesses." (Shnei Lukhot HaBrit (Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz), 1556-1630, Europe and Israel)
4. When you see a fault in others, turn the thinking and analysis to yourself. If you don't have the entire fault, you probably have some of it. And even if the weakness never manifests itself in action, you have most likely pondered doing what you are criticizing. And even if you never pondered it, you almost certainly saw someone else doing it and were pleased. (Mikhtav M'Eliyahu (Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler), 1892-1953, Lithuania, England, and Israel)

***Rabbi Nathan said: Reproach not your neighbour for a blemish that is yours.
(Talmud Bava Metzia 59b)***

Sparks for Discussion

Do you agree that the faults we are most likely to see in others are the ones we ourselves possess? Why do you think that is? How can this insight help us? Should someone who is imperfect criticize that imperfection in others? Should parents tell their children, "Do as I say, not as I do?" How should parents who once used drugs, for example, talk to their children about this issue?

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

SHEMINI Shabbat Parah

20th Adar II 5771 ~ 26th March 2011

By Rabbi David Soetendorp

Nechamah Lebowitz quotes Psalm 24, verse 4: "One thing I desire of God: ...that I may dwell in God's House...", to offer us a vision of what the state of mind was of the assembled People of Israel anticipating God's coming to inhabit the just completed Tabernacle, his dwelling place in their midst on the trek to the Promised Land.

I have always felt that the moment of consecration of the Tabernacle, which commences Sedrah Sh'mini, is the most sublime moment in the collective consciousness of the Israelites.

They stand there in the Sinai wilderness, united in a overwhelming state of rapture, everyone of the Israelites from Moses to the youngest amongst them are about to be witnesses to God entering the Tabernacle and in this way Himself consecrating it.

The People stand united in the awareness that everything between them as a people and between them and God is in perfect balance as Aaron with his sons the priests, only just anointed into the office of priesthood, proceed with preparing the required sacrifices and rituals.

The folly of the worship of the Golden Calf is forgiven. They are not utterly condemned. The journey to a hopeful future in that Promised Land may yet proceed, because the B'rith, the covenant between God and Israel has been repaired.

And at that sublime moment tragedy strikes. In a state of euphoria Nadav and Abihu rush forward to bring "an Aish Zara", an offering which God did not require". A bolt of lightning, which kills them, strikes them.

The magic of that sublime moment of close connection between the People and God is destroyed. The happiness, which the Israelites had shared, is now replaced by trauma and sadness.

But the sacred service in the Tabernacle continues despite the tragic event in which Nadav and Abihu died.

Henceforth that ritual, reflecting the closeness of the Jew to God, was handed down to the future generations of Jews to come; from the Tabernacle to the Temple to the many shuls which Jews would build in the lands they came to live in following the exile from Eretz Yisrael.

What happened that fateful day of the consecration of the Tabernacle reflects the history of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

Throughout thousands of generations the Jewish people, living through dark times of exile in hostile lands built synagogues to the glory of God, in order that they might sense His nearness in the way that the Israelites did, in Sinai.

So many of those synagogues were destroyed in countless many pogroms.

But in the same way that the priests, deeply traumatized by the tragedy they just witnessed in Sinai, continued with presenting the rituals in the Tabernacle, so Jews in the aftermath of anti-Jewish violence, have found the courage to rebuilt destroyed synagogues.

The survival of Judaism was achieved by this strength of spirit; to continue rebuilding shuls and Jewish life, "Davkah"; "in the face of even the greatest opposition.

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

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is it permitted to ride on public transport on Shabbat, assuming that the transport workers are not Jewish and the trains are operating for the general public and not specifically for Jews?

Answer: The Mishnah rules that it is forbidden to ride on an animal on Shabbat. This is a rabbinic prohibition designed to prevent a person inadvertently cutting a branch from a tree in order to drive the animal forward. Furthermore, the Jerusalem Talmud states that the reason for not riding on animals on Shabbat is to enable animals to rest also. The Shulchan Aruch [OH 305:18] codifies this as law. Moses Isserlis [Poland, 17th century] adds that it is also forbidden to ride in a wagon on Shabbat, even if the driver is not Jewish. He says that the same considerations apply – i.e. that a person might cut a branch from a tree and that animals are also entitled to rest on Shabbat.

If the prohibition of riding in a wagon is specifically related to animals resting, it should be permitted to ride on public transport which is driven by electric or petrol motors. This is providing that the trains are not being operated by Jews and there are not any further Shabbat prohibitions related to this travel.

However, there are several other issues that should be taken into consideration. First, as we saw in my article on cycling on Shabbat, there is a general prohibition of engaging in ‘Weekday activities’ on Shabbat, known as Uvdin D’Hol. The Hatam Sofer [Hungary, 18th century] rules that all forms of public transport are forbidden on Shabbat [Responsa: 6:93]. This is because the experience of being in a crowded car being tossed back and forth by the movement of the train is not in the spirit of Shabbat. Rabbi BZ Uziel [Israel, 20th century] rejects this ruling, for if this was the case, the Rema (Moses Isserlis) would have included this amongst his reasons prohibiting riding in a wagon.

However, Rabbi Uziel adds that the prohibition of Uvdin D’Hol would apply if one was going on a long journey, particularly if this journey was in preparation for business the following day. Also, it is forbidden to pay for travel, to carry outside of an Eruv or to travel beyond the Shabbat boundaries (see my article on cycling on Shabbat).

Following this reasoning, it would be permitted to travel on public transport on Shabbat for short trips within a city if the journey does not involve carrying, paying for travel or going outside the city limits. This is on condition that the transport is running anyway, and does not involve Jews desecrating the Sabbath.

Based on B. Z. Uziel, Piskei Uziel 13.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

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TZAV Shabbat Zachor

13th Adar II 5771 ~ 19th March 2011

By Marc Shoffren

Despite the blood and guts, there seems little to get excited about in Parashat Tzav. Chapters six and seven consist of long, detailed description of the various sacrifices including the sin offering, the peace offering and the guilt offering.

In teaching writing I often ask children to imagine situations using the full range of their senses; sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and emotional feelings. Looking at Leviticus Chapter eight, the final third of parasha Tzav, it is possible to conjure up a vivid scene.

Imagine you are one of the Israelites, standing in the crush of the crowd, gathered together in front of the Mishkan. You are surrounded by everyone you know, your family, those you know and love, as well as all those you can't abide. You are part of a crowd of thousands sweltering under a hot desert sun, while in front of a you a distant figure is washed and dressed, while around you there is chatting, singing, chanting. The sun glints off the gold breastplate, and there is a moment of silence as everyone stares as everyone watches the altar stones being anointed with oil. Then the silence is shredded with the shrill screams of the young bullock being dragged out for the sin sacrifice. The young priests, with Aaron their father, lay their hands on it's head, the blade glints briefly in the sunlight and then a great howl goes up from the crowd. The people start to chant as Moses takes the blood and sprinkles it across the altar stones, before the innards are cut out and put on the altar to smoke. Now the smells begin to waft across to where you are, and still you stand and watch as the next sacrifice is brought out...

Of course it is difficult to really understand what it would have felt like to be witness to a communal sacrifice. Professor Arnold Eisen has written about the distance we often feel from our synagogues, and the powerful impact that communal engagement can have. It seems reasonable to assume that there must be some sort of similarity, at least on a superficial level, between the experiences of watching a bull fight, or for that matter even a boxing match, and the experience of watching animal sacrifice, but this is clearly something we don't get too often in Shul!

Tomorrow is Purim, and we will have one of the few Jewish communal opportunities to get to a sense of being part of a raucous crowd: parading, collectively jeering, and occasionally cheering. We no longer sacrifice animals, with all of the associated emotional and physical experiences that may have entailed, and I have no desire to return to a sacrificial cult, but perhaps it would do us good to invest our communal life some more of the elements that such events once held - or at the very least, to make the most of those celebrations we still have that contain those elements.

Marc Shoffren is a member of KNMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is it permitted to put a car in for servicing, or request any other service or repair, on a Friday afternoon, if it is known that a non-Jewish mechanic or craftsman will do the work on it on Shabbat?

Answer: The commandment to rest on Shabbat is one of the central commandments of the Torah. Not only is it forbidden to work – it is also forbidden to ask someone else, even a non-Jew, to do your work for you. The source of this prohibition is in the Talmud [Shabbat 150a] A person should not say to a Goy – go and hire me workers on Shabbat. This prohibition is called Amira LeGoy (instructing a non-Jew). Maimonides rules [Shabbat 6:1]: It is forbidden to instruct a Goy to do work on Shabbat, even though the Goy is not obligated to observe the Shabbat, even if he gives him the instruction before Shabbat commences, and even if he will only benefit from that labour after Shabbat is over. This is a Rabbinic prohibition, and its intention is to prevent a person from vicariously carrying out their normal work on Shabbat.

All of this applies to circumstances where one has specifically asked for the work to be carried out on Shabbat. But if one did not specify when the work is to be carried out, it is permitted to hand over the work on a Friday. This is the case even if the craftsman chose to carry out the work on Shabbat, for it was his own choice to work on Shabbat and a non-Jew is under no obligation to observe the Sabbath.

The Shulchan Aruch [OH 252:2,4] states: It is permitted to give his clothes to the laundry before Shabbat, or skins to a non-Jewish tanner if he set a fixed fee in advance and he did not specifically ask that the work be done on Shabbat. It is even permitted to wear the clothes on Shabbat itself, for anyone who works for a fixed fee chooses himself when to do the work. Moses Isserlis notes that one should not wear the clothes on that same Shabbat. In the case of a car repair all agree that it is permitted, for the mechanic could have chosen to repair the car on Friday afternoon or Saturday night or Sunday – and therefore it makes no difference to us if the mechanic chose to do the work on Shabbat.

The situation is more complicated if there is not sufficient time to do the work unless it is done on Shabbat. The Magen Avraham [OH 307:3] writes that if there was a Saturday market, it is forbidden to give a non-Jew money before Shabbat and ask him to buy things in the market. Since the market is only open on Shabbat, this is as if he had been instructed to make the purchases on Shabbat. Even if he had not specifically been asked to do the work on Shabbat, the non-Jew has no choice but to do it then, and it counts as if he had been asked to do so. However, Joseph Karo in the Shulchan Aruch does not adopt this ruling. He maintains that as long as there was not a specific instruction to do the work on Shabbat, any work carried out by non-Jews is permitted.

In this case the custom of Ashkenazi Jews is to follow the Magen Avraham and therefore only give work to a non-Jew before Shabbat if there is sufficient time for it to be done without working on Shabbat. Sephardi Jews follow the rulings of Joseph Karo, and therefore permit any work to be given to a non-Jew before Shabbat, as long as there was not a specific request to do the work on Shabbat itself.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

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VAYIKRA

6th Adar II 5771 ~ 12th March 2011

By Jessica Kendler Yarkin

In Parshat Vayikra, we learn that ‘if a soul commits a trespass and sins unintentionally, they must bring a guilt offering and shall be forgiven.’ (Lev 5:15) How can one be held liable for doing something unintentional? Isn’t the principle of Ignorantia juris non excusat (ignorance of the law does not excuse) unreasonably harsh?

Ramban notes that the passage uses the word nefesh (‘soul’), rather than ‘person’, observing that: ‘since the process of thinking is centered in the soul, scripture mentions here ‘soul’... All sins (even if committed unwittingly) produce a particular stain upon the soul and constitute a blemish, and the soul is only worthy to be received by the creator when it is pure of all sin.’ Commentator Baruch Levine explains that for ancient cultic belief systems, ‘guilt exists regardless of the perpetrator’s awareness of having committed a sin. Guilt has a life of its own and only an act of expiation can wipe it away.’ It would dignify our soul if, at times when we were genuinely ignorant of the law being broken, we could acknowledge that there was something wrong in the fact that we did not think to enquire about the law.

Is there even such a thing as an ‘unintentional’ act? Rabbi Professor, Lord Jonathan Sacks [Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth] once wrote in response to parsha vayikra that, as noted by Freud: ‘Acts that seem unintentional often betray unconscious desires or motives... Inadvertent sins suggest something amiss in the soul of the sinner. It is this fault, which may lie beneath the threshold of consciousness, which is atoned for.’ Something in our internal moral system was lacking, for when we acted, we did not consider the deed to be a transgression, or, worse, we were not considering consequences at all. On Yom Kippur we treat the inadvertent sins almost as seriously as the deliberate transgressions when we chant al chet shechatanu lifanecha b’zadon uvishgagag (‘for the sin we have committed against you consciously or unconsciously’) coupling them in the same stanza: confessing to both, so that we not repeat either again.

The process of amending ‘inadvertent’ sins requires more than just uttering an apology. One must offer a korban (‘sacrifice’) for ‘only by doing an overt act to atone for his sin... will he impress upon his soul the extent of sin and take measures to avoid it in the future’ (Sefer Hachimnuch). This rather dramatic act prescribed in the parsha is not for the priest’s benefit, but for the sake of the sinner, to promote worthier behaviour. In cases where a crime was accidental, the wronged party will usually empathize and forgive. God certainly doesn’t need a dead animal from us, and is abundantly merciful. Giving a gift often leaves you spiritually richer than if you had received a gift. Thus, an honest admittance combined with the surrendering of a physical ‘offering’ facilitates self growth; the weight of guilt is lifted, and insights into the uncanny workings of the mind are gained.

Jessica Kendler Yarkin is a student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in California

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When a person sins and commits a trespass against the Lord by dealing deceitfully with his fellow in the matter of a deposit or a pledge, or through robbery, or by defrauding his fellow, or by finding something lost and lying about it; if he swears falsely regarding any one of the various things that one may do and sin thereby – (Leviticus 5:21-22)

1. Said Rabbi Akiva: What does the Torah mean by saying: “Commit a trespass against the Lord?” When the creditor and debtor or two parties to any transaction conduct their business through contracts and witnesses, a repudiation of obligation constitutes a repudiation of the witnesses and the contract. But he who deposits something with his neighbour does not want a soul to know about it other than the Third Party between them. When he repudiates his obligation, he repudiates the Third Party (i.e., God) between them. (Sifra)
2. These verses treat the offering to be brought by a man who has denied on oath a justified claim for reparation and later admits that his oath was false... Every transgression committed by a man against his neighbor is tantamount to rebellion and trespass against the Almighty... He, as it were, is the Third Party, the unseen witness to all human transactions and the guarantor that they will be conducted in an honest fashion. Since here the defrauder called on the name of the guarantor during his denial – that is, he swore falsely by the name of God – this is not just false dealing. The Jew attests to the honesty of his conduct by his priestly role of nearness to his God. Since his calling on the name of God was purely an empty and vain deception, the term fitting it best is trespass against God. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)
3. We have sinned against You by wronging others...We have sinned against You by deriding parents and teachers, and we have sinned against You by using violence... We have sinned against You by dishonesty in business, and we have sinned against You by taking usurious interest. (Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, The Rabbinical Assembly, p. 46)

Sparks for Discussion

As Rabbi Hirsch points out, the pshat – the contextual meaning of “trespass against the Lord” in these verses – refers to a person who owes money or property to someone else and then swears a false oath, in the name of God, denying that obligation. But Rabbi Hirsch also implies that any sin committed by one person against another, even when no oath is involved, is also a sin against God. Do you agree?

On Yom Kippur, when we recite AlChet we declare that we have sinned against God not only by violating ritual commandments (kashrut, Shabbat, etc.), but also by hurting others. In what way are dishonesty and violence sins against God? Do you think that understanding acts that hurt others as sins against God makes it harder to perform them?

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

PEKUDEI Shabbat Shekalim

29th Adar I 5771 ~ 5th March 2011

By Avigail Shapira

In this Parasha, we learn about the blueprints for building the Mishkan – the tabernacle, God's dwelling place within the Israelites' camps throughout their journeys through the desert towards the Land of Israel. In our Haftarah, we read about King Solomon putting Aron HaBrit – the Ark of the Covenant, which was God's dwelling place within the Land of Israel – into Kodesh HaKodashim, the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

The Israelite's need to have physical proof that God is with them is understandable. Most religions – especially the universal religions such as Islam and Christianity, but also some ethnic or indigenous religions – have a physical place which they consider sacred, a place where their deities are felt the strongest or can manifest themselves. It is human nature to want to feel like someone listens when you talk, especially when talking to God. If talking to God in a certain place strengthens that feeling, it's natural to want to go there; because of that, many times these places also become pilgrimage sites. Religious sites like the Western Wall and graves of important rabbis, such as the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on Mt. Meiron, attract millions of visitors each year.

But does having a pilgrimage site require there to be a religion associated with it? Religions also have special days, rituals and traditions – but are having these enough to call something a religion?

With the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, many changes came about to the Zionist Jewish people. New rituals were created: a day of commemoration for the great event – Israel's Independence Day, with its national ceremony; Yom HaShoa and Yom Hazikaron – Holocaust Memorial Day and National Memorial Day – each to commemorate those who fell for Judaism and a Jewish State, with their two minutes of standing silently to the sound of sirens. New pilgrimage sites were formed, the most notable one being Mt. Herzl, where Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl's bones were brought and buried, and near which a military burial ground was established. The Jewish religion was very quickly being replaced – or added to – by an Israeli one, with Holidays like Chanukah losing their

Jewish meaning and getting a Zionist one, one of "in every generation a hero will rise to save the People" The new "Israeli religion", like every religion, has those who oppose it – such as many Israeli Arabs who were devastated by the creation of Israel, and many Ultra-Orthodox, who stuck to the "old Judaism", which was considered ghetto-like by those following the new "religion". This is when the first Religious-Zionists created a mixture of the old and new – Jewish religion and Israeli religion. They saw the founding of the State of Israel as an important Jewish event.

Israel is the centre of many worldwide religions, and many religions have holy sites within it. But there are those who add another religion to that list – one that might be smaller and more local, but could be considered a religion non-the-less – the "Israeli religion". Through it one can see that human nature has not changed much these thousands of years since the Israelites wandered the desert. If in the past the Jews wanted a place through which they can connect to God, many of today's secular Jews are creating places of connection to the Israeli narrative, as opposed to the Jewish one.

Avigail Shapira is the JAFI Shlichah to AMS

The Special Shabbatot

By Michael Gluckman

Today is Shabbat Shekalim. It is the first of four special Shabbatot, which occur during the six weeks preceding Pesach. Each are distinguished by having a special Maftir and selection from Prophets for the Haftarah.

1. Shabbat Shekalim

This falls on the Shabbat before the first of Adar or on the first of Adar if Rosh Chodesh Adar falls on Shabbat. According to the Torah every male Israelite aged 20 years or more had to donate annually a half shekel for the upkeep of the Sanctuary. This had to be paid on the first of Nisan. Thus on the Shabbat immediately preceding the first of Adar the Maftir would include the passage describing the giving of the half shekel as a reminder! As with each of these Shabbatot, we read the Sidrah of the week and have an additional Sefer Torah for the Maftir which for Shabbat Shekalim is Exodus 30:11-16. The Haftarah

selected is II Kings 12:1-17 which describes the gifts given for the repair of the Temple during the reign of King Jehoash, mirroring the image of the peoples' contribution to the upkeep of a religious centre. If it is a leap year then Shabbat Shekalim occurs on the Shabbat before Adar Sheni or on Rosh Chodesh Adar Sheni.

2. **Shabbat Zachor**

The Shabbat before Purim is called Shabbat Zachor For the Maftir Deuteronomy 25:17-19 is read which commands us to remember the Children of Israel's battle with Amalek. The special Maftir for the day commences with the word Zachor hence the name of the Shabbat. The Haftarah, I Samuel 15:2-34, describes King Saul's battle with the Amalekites and sparing Agag, King of Amalek, allowing him to produce a descendant. This is relevant because Haman is, according to Jewish tradition, a descendant of Agag.

3. **Shabbat Parah**

This always occurs on the Shabbat before Shabbat Ha'Chodesh which occurs on the Shabbat before the first of Nisan or the first of Nisan if Rosh Chodesh Nisan falls on Shabbat. Thus Shabbat Parah can fall on the last Shabbat in Adar or the penultimate Shabbat in Adar. The special Maftir is Numbers 19:1-22 dealing with the Parah Adumah, the red heifer. The ritual of purification described links with the Haftarah of Ezekiel 36:16-38 foretelling a time of spiritual purification for the Jewish People. The Israelites had to be ritually pure to be able to offer the Pesach offering in Jerusalem hence the connection with this time of year.

4. **Shabbat Ha'Chodesh**

As already stated this falls on the Shabbat before the first of Nisan or the first of Nisan if Rosh Chodesh Nisan falls on Shabbat. The special Maftir is Exodus 12:1-20 containing the description of the original Pesach sacrifice and using the blood to mark the doorposts of the houses of the Children of Israel and is

obviously connected with the imminent festival of Pesach. The Haftarah, Ezekiel 45:16-46:16, describes Pesach in Temple times.

When Shabbat Shekalim and Shabbat Ha'Chodesh coincide with Rosh Chodesh three Sifrei Torah are used. To the first we call six people to the reading of the Sidrah of the week; from the second we read the selection for Rosh Chodesh (Numbers 28:9-15) and from the third we read the special Maftir.

The other Shabbatot that are distinguished by a special Maftir are when Shabbat coincides with Rosh Chodesh, during Chol Hamoed [intermediate days of] Pesach and Sukkot and on Shabbat Chanukah.

Michael Gluckman is Executive Director of the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues

VAYAKAHEL

22nd Adar I 5771 ~ 26th February 2011

By Rabbi Joel Levy

Most of this week's parasha focuses on describing the construction of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, in the desert. However, the parasha starts with a call to rest on Shabbat and only then launches into the precise details of the construction:

2. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you a holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord; whoever does work in it shall be put to death.

3. You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day.

4. And Moses spoke to all the congregation of the people of Israel, saying, this is the thing which the Lord has commanded, saying,

5. Take you from among you an offering to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord; gold, and silver, and bronze,

6. And blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats' hair,

Exodus 35:2-6

The fifteenth century Portuguese commentator Abarbanel explains this juxtaposition of a call to build the Tabernacle with a call to rest by setting up what the rabbis refer to as a “hava amina” – literally an “I would/might have said...” Abarbanel explains that if the Torah had not mentioned Shabbat here before mentioning the building of the Tabernacle we might have come to a false conclusion. He writes:

Since the Tabernacle and its appurtenances whose making God had commanded symbolised communion with Him and the resting of His Presence on the nation, we might have thought that this activity outweighed in importance all the other Biblical prescriptions, and most certainly the Shabbat rest. For perfection lies in action, and performance is more perfect than non-performance and rest. This is especially true when such a sacred and sublime performance as that of building a Tabernacle is involved. On account of this the Israelites might have thought that the work of the Tabernacle overrode the Sabbath. In addition, actual work is a more eloquent witness of faith than cessation from work, since action is positive and inaction negation. Something existent is a more eloquent witness than the lack of it. It might well have been argued that the work of the Tabernacle would have sufficed to draw attention and testify to the existence of the Divine Presence in our midst, to His omnipotence as Creator of the world and all the creatures therein. The desistence from work would therefore not be required, in this instance, to testify to these principles.

According to Abarbanel, in the absence of the verses regarding Shabbat, we might reasonably have thought that the process of construction of the Mishkan would outweigh the need to keep a day of rest. Moreover the very existence of a potent place for experiencing God's presence could reasonably be thought of as negating the need for Shabbat observance altogether, even once the building work was over. If God really dwelt in the midst of the

Israelite camp why would they need an abstract symbolic act of associating themselves with God's rest on the seventh day?

Abarbanel articulates the "hava amina", what I might mistakenly have thought, very powerfully. Without these verses on keeping Shabbat the very notion of the Sabbath might have been quietly dropped.

So why is the "hava amina" wrong? Is it not true that "actual work is a more eloquent witness of faith than cessation from work"? If you get a powerful experience of the Divine by attending synagogue why do you need to keep Shabbat? Why is Shabbat observance so important?

Rabbi Joel Levy is rabbi at KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joseph Prouser

"See, the Lord has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. He has endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft." (Exodus 35:30-31)

Derash: Study

1. Anyone who has special talents, such as Bezalel's artistry, has to realize that God gave him these talents only to use them to do His will. If he fails to do what is expected of him, heaven forbid, eventually he will be called to account for misusing his talents, be they in the realm of wisdom, strength, riches, or possessions. (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein)
2. Bezalel was endowed with wisdom and understanding because of the spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice shown by his ancestors. His grandfather Hur had allowed himself to be put to death rather than help the children of Israel set up the Golden Calf, and the tribe of Judah, of which he was a member, had been the first to dash into the waves of the Red Sea at the Lord's command." Meshech Chochmah "The right hand

of the artist withers when he forgets the sovereignty of God. (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel)

3. The artist must penetrate into the world, feel the fate of human beings, of peoples, with real love. There is no art for art's sake. One must be interested. One must be interested in the entire real of life. (Marc Chagall)
4. If there were no other proof of the infinite patience of God with men, a very good one could be found in His toleration of the pictures that are painted of Him and of the noise that proceeds from musical instruments under the pretext of being in His 'honour.' (Thomas Merton)
5. "Religion is the everlasting dialogue between humanity and God. Art is its soliloquy." (Hans Werfel)

Questions for Discussion:

Is human giftedness purely a matter of God-given grace, unearned and undeserved, as Rabbi Feinstein implied, or is it the product of generations of family history, priorities, hard work, and genetics? An old New England proverb tells us that "A child's education begins several generations before its birth." How does this apply or relate to the commentary of the Meshech Chochmah?

What personal traits do we attribute directly to God's benevolence? To nature? To nurture? To our families and other significant influences? If we, like the tribe of Judah, are able to pass on gifts of the spirit to our future descendants, what are they likely to be? What would we want them to be?

Of what real danger is Heschel warning artists? To what other skills and areas of human endeavour does his admonition apply? To what do we as individuals and as communities owe the "sovereignty of God"? How does Rabbi Heschel's statement differ from (and relate to) Rabbi Feinstein's comment?

The visual arts have a history of limited scope in a Jewish religious context. Has this had a constructive impact, or are we aesthetically disadvantaged by a theological bias against graphic representations? How has the Jewish community collectively compensated for this historic pattern?

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

KI TISSA

15th Adar I 5771 ~ 19th February 2011

By Daniel Oppenheimer

The parashah certainly seems to provide ammunition for those who wish to see the Torah as the story of the “vengeful and jealous God of the Old Testament” – it features Moses killing six thousand people for worshipping the Golden Calf and God threatening to destroy the people altogether.

In fact, the text is a much more nuanced story of leadership by Moses. First, because this is not a story of different religions living together in a modern liberal society, where the right thing to do is for the calf-worshippers and the God-worshippers to rub along nicely, please. Mob violence is just under the surface of this story. The language of verse 32:1 is clearly threatening. The people gather “against” (literally, “al” –on) Aaron (one can imagine the ring of angry faces surrounding him). Their first word is “Kum” – “Get up! Do something!” They talk aggressively of “that man Moses”. When Moses arrives back down from the mountain, a wild drunken party is in full swing. In those circumstances, many a ruler of a premodern society would recognise Moses’ resort to (carefully deployed) violence. Even a modern leader would, le-havdil, recognise the need for shock tactics to signal change. Moreover, while the Golden Calf is usually seen as a sin of ingratitude and infidelity, there is

another problem to which God refers on several occasions – the fact that the people are “k’shei oref”, literally “with hard necks”. A number of commentators understand this expression specifically as an unwillingness to listen to either reproof or instruction – in other words, an unwillingness to change. This is potentially a much bigger problem than ingratitude. If the people cannot change and develop from their Egyptian ideas of what religion means, they cannot fulfil God’s mission for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, because they are certainly not priestly or holy yet.

To tackle this problem, punishment and harshness is not the answer. And the story makes clear that Moses realises that. He knows that having shocked the people out of the mob mentality of the Golden Calf episode, he now has to rebuild the relationship. When he returns from the mountain with the second set of tablets, his face glows with divine power, and the people are afraid to come near him. But Moses does not let them remain distant. “Moses called to them”, says the text, and in response they come near again – first the leaders, and then the people as a whole. Furthermore, Moses “speaks to them” and “instructs them”. Communication is key to rebuilding the relationship, not vengefulness.

Daniel Oppenheimer is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken to Him. (Exodus 34:29)

1. Coming out of the fiery top of the mountain, and back from his once-in-human-history encounter with God, Moses is transformed in some way. (Richard Elliot Friedman, Commentary on the Torah)

2. The verb karan is related to the word keren, "horn," for the light radiated from his face in hornlike rays. And where did Moses get these rays of majesty? Our sages say he got them from the cave when the Holy Blessed One put His hand over his face, as it is said, "I will . . . shield you with My hand" (Shemot 33:22). (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
3. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The Torah given to Moses was written with black fire upon white fire, sealed with fire, and swathed with bands of fire. While writing it, Moses wiped off the reed on his hair – thus he received the radiance that was to emanate from his countenance. (Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1)
4. A widespread medieval image of the Jew was based upon a misinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Moses was often depicted with two horns on his head as a result of the Latin misrendering of the verb "sent forth beams" (karan) in Exodus 34:35 as "grew horns." (A horn is a keren.) This image, which was widely portrayed in art of the Middle Ages by artists including Michelangelo and Donatello in Italy, led to the widespread notion that all Jews had devilish horns. (Ophir Yarden, "Anti-Semitic Perceptions of the Jewish Body," MyJewishLearning.com)

Sparks for Discussion

Moses' encounter with God produced a physical transformation. Many more people have been transformed spiritually by encounters with God. Have you experienced such a transformation? What has spurred and sustained your Jewish journey?

A bad translation led to the depiction of Moses with horns. From there it was a small step to the claim of anti-Semites that all Jews were somehow in league with the devil. However, not all negative stereotypes are the work of anti-Semites. How often do you hear fellow Jews talking about goyim; guilt-wielding Jewish mothers; nebbishy, physically inept Jewish men, or the fanatics and/or heretics who belong other shuls and movements? Are such

conversations harmless as long as we keep them among ourselves? How can we learn to stop tearing each other down?

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

TETZAVEH

8th Adar I 5771 ~ 12th February 2011

By Rina Wolfson

In this week's parsha Aaron and his sons are appointed as priests, and specific instructions are given regarding the design of their priestly clothing. Their uniform was extraordinarily elaborate, and the text is clear that this was intended to afford the office of high-priest pomp and splendour – l'chavod ul'tifaret.

The concept of a hereditary priesthood, with its ornate robes, is a rather uncomfortable one for the modern reader. As advocates of democracy, where we enjoy the right to elect and reject our leaders, a family lineage of religious leadership is troubling.

It's possible that the early Rabbis shared this sense of unease. They too were concerned that spiritual leadership could reside within a hereditary line, be it the priestly line of Aaron or the royal line of David. In Pirkei Avot, for example, Shimon the Righteous suggests, "There are three crowns: the crown of Torah and the crown of priesthood and the crown of kingship, but the crown of a good name rises above them all."

Perhaps, however, it is possible to find glimpses within the parsha of a more meritocratic understanding of leadership? It's worth noting that Tetzaveh is the only parsha that doesn't mention Moses by name, from the moment of his birth in Shemot until the beginning of Devarim. A number of explanations for this phenomenon have been offered. Some argue that this was a punishment for his rash demand that God forgive the people for the sin of the Golden Calf 'or remove me from the book you have written'. Another explanation is that this parsha is always read around the 7th of Adar, (which this year fell yesterday), and which is traditionally believed to be the anniversary of Moses' death. His name is absent from the parsha, to highlight the fact that his final resting place is unknown.

I suggest that there is another possible understanding for Moses' absence. At the beginning of the parsha, we find the words 've'atah tetzaveh', usually translated 'and you shall command'. The form of Hebrew used is particularly emphatic, and is rarely used. A more apt translation would be 'and as for you, you must command'. These words, addressed by God, are directed to Moses. But he isn't mentioned by name. It is as though Moses has

allowed the instruction to bypass himself, and to fall on our shoulders. It is you, says Moses, who must command your leaders. You must direct them and guide them.

The office of the priesthood was hereditary. But by wording the instruction so emphatically in the second person, the text highlights the role of the nation in guiding its leaders. And if we look again at those intricate instructions for the priests clothing we notice the central role of the people. The names of the tribes were delicately embroidered on the priest's shoulder straps, six tribes resting on each shoulder. Unlike today, where it is the voting public who wear badges bearing the names of their chosen candidate, it was the priests who carried the name of the people for whom they were responsible into their holy office.

Rina Wolfson is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Slaughter the ram, and take some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear and on the ridges of his sons' right ears, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet; and dash the rest of the blood against every side of the altar round about. (Exodus 29:20)

1. Why was this necessary? Our masters said: The ear that heard at Mount Sinai: "I" and "You shall have no other gods besides Me" and after 40 days listened to the voice of the people when they said: "Come, make us a god" requires atonement. The feet that ascended Mount Sinai and after 40 days ran to make the calf require atonement. (Midrash Ha-Bi'ur)
2. This was after the same manner as the making of the covenant in Exodus 24:6-8. The ears represent "we shall hear" and the hands and feet "we shall do." (Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, 1288-1344, Provence)
3. The ear was touched with the blood, that it might be consecrated to hear the word of God; the hand, to perform the duties connected with the priesthood; and the foot, to walk the path of righteousness. In a "kingdom of priests," the consecration of ear, hand, and foot should be extended to every member of that kingdom. (Hertz Chumash)
4. These three, the ear, the hand, and the foot, are what the kohen and every leader must have: an ear to hear the cries of the Jews, to know and understand their needs and requirements; hands, not only to accept the offering due the priests, but also to bestow a blessing on whoever needs it; and feet that hasten to run and help whoever is in need. (Itturei Torah (Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg), 1900-1963, Poland and Israel)
5. When Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik, one of the twentieth century's greatest Talmud scholars, was asked what a rabbi's function is, he replied: "To redress the grievances

of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor." (Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, cited in Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Wisdom, p. 371)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators offer several explanations for why the ordination of the priests included marking their ears, hands, and feet. Can you think of others? Do you think the qualities described are necessary for modern Jewish religious leadership? Are they sufficient? Imagine you were a member of your shul's search committee for a rabbi, cantor or other religious leader. What qualities do you consider essential in today's spiritual leadership? How would you define a religious leader's principal functions?

YITRO

17th Shevat 5771 ~ 22nd January 2011

By Rabbi Dr. Jeremy Collick

If ever there should have been a Holy site, a place of pilgrimage and prayer, it should have been Mount Sinai. After all this was the place of Matan Torah, the Giving of Torah, the place where man and God met and out of that meeting the *raison d'etre* of the Jewish people was born and the whole world was changed.

Every Shabbat we sing *Ki Mitzion Taytze Torah* and yet all there is to show for it is a Monastery and a very long schlep up a lot of stairs to what is, admittedly, a spectacular view. And nobody is really sure that the Mount Sinai I climbed many years ago is the actual site anyway. No synagogue stands there - ancient or modern - no Lubavitch Rabbi waits to spring on unsuspecting tourists with Tefillin at the ready - just some monks, some goats and the occasional empty coca cola bottle.

For our tradition once the revelation had taken place the holiness departed from the mountain leaving no residue. In contrast the Temple Mount remains Holy even after the destruction of the Temple. For many the Kotel and surrounding areas and the Temple Mount itself, even though it now houses two mosques, are the holiest places on earth. We visit them, revere them and they still play a major part in Jewish life - and rightly so.

So why does the holiness still remain on the Temple Mount whilst the holiness of Mount Sinai has disappeared? There was a major ingredient that the Temple had that Sinai did not. While it is true that the presence of God was clearer at Sinai than in Jerusalem, throughout the entire Sinai experience the Jewish people were passive. God wanted to enter into a dialogue with us at Sinai but we were so awed by the experience that we didn't play an

active role. God had a monologue at Sinai - a spectacular sound and light show but nobody answered. So when it was all over God left, the people left and the holiness left too.

But the holiness of the Temple was created in partnership. It was the Jewish people who built it and who rebuilt it, who sacrificed and prayed there. It was the place where mourners were comforted, brides and grooms congratulated and where people inter-acted with each other and with God. But the ingredient that guaranteed its eternal holiness - apparent even 2000 years after it was destroyed was not necessarily the presence of God but rather the people's willingness to be actively involved in the process.

And that is why our Synagogues are compared not to Mt.Sinai but to the Temple and to the partnership that made it holy. Sinai has great views and a stately past but stands silent and alone. Our buildings are ok but not as majestic as Sinai - instead they are filled with the noise of Jews at prayer and study, food and wine, arguments, joy and consolation.

I know which mountain I prefer!

Rabbi Dr. Jeremy Collick is rabbi of EMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." (Exodus 18:17-18)

1. What is this thing you are doing to the people? (18:13) This was a hard thing he did to them, for their cases would wait all day, and sometimes they never did come before Moses because they were so many others. You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. This refers to exhaustion. You cannot carry the burden and these people cannot endure it, for they stand all day waiting for their judgment. And some explain that you will surely wear yourself out refers to confusion, for you and they will become confused since each one shouts to you "hear me, my lord!" And this one shouts and you don't know to whom you should respond, and they don't know to whom they should speak. (Bechor Shor [Rabbi Yosef of Orleans, 1140-1190, France])
2. The people stood about Moses (18:13) to wait until he could turn to them after dealing with the princes and the leaders of the generation. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. When there are many judges, a party to a dispute can come to the judge whenever he wants and he will have the opportunity to be heard. (When Moses sat alone) a person could not approach him in a timely fashion because there were cases involving large sums of money or important people taking precedence. Therefore,

many of them would tolerate the injustices that were done to them because they didn't want to abandon their work and business affairs to wait for an opportunity to approach Moses. This would then provide an opening for robbers to commit crimes and exploiters to provoke disputes. (Ramban [Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain])

Sparks for Discussion

Jethro saw right away that Moses' approach to leadership was not working well. At the simplest level, Bechor Shor sees the problem as people being kept waiting all day in the hot sun, leading to frustration and confusion. Sforno and many others add the notion that the rich and important went to the head of the line, leaving the ordinary people to wait.

Ramban points out that this is not only unfair, but dangerous. When people believe "the system is broken" or that it doesn't have a place for people like them, they turn their backs on the system. Do you think our society suffers from "broken systems"? Where and how? Can you think of remedies that might make these systems work better or convince people to give them a chance? Does the Jewish community also suffer from broken systems? What can we do to fix them?

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

BESHALLACH

Shabbat Shira

10th Shevat 5771 ~ 15th January 2011

By Rabbi Amanda Golby

I approach Shabbat Beshallah, and particularly Shirat Hayam, the Song of the Sea, the song of triumph following the parting of the Sea of Reeds, with a mixture of emotions. At one level, I look forward to it, and, particularly, to standing to hear it chanted in the special trop, which belongs to this Shabbat, and to the seventh day of Pesach, and yet I have many questions. (The Shirah actually belongs to the Pesukei d'Zimra, 'the verses of song' section of the Shachrit service, every day, both weekdays and Shabbat.)

In chapter 14, the Israelites, freed from slavery, and having reached the edge of the wilderness, are ordered by God to change course, a tactic designed to confuse the Egyptians, and culminate in the final defeat of Pharaoh. Yet they are fearful, and angrily accuse Moses of leading them to death. Moses tried to reassure them, and God tells him to 'lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so the Israelites may march

into the sea on dry ground'. This then happens, followed by the drowning of the Egyptians. 'And when Israel saw the wondrous power which Eternal had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Eternal; they had faith in the Eternal and Moses....' And then, in chapter 15, we have the Shirah, one of the two oldest extended poems in the Tanach, the other being our Haftarah, the Song of Deborah.

I 'enjoy' it, and yet am uncomfortable with some of the words, particularly the military images. Do I really want to see God as 'ish milchamah', a 'man of war.? Moreover I know that this discomfort, both at the images, and the rejoicing at the fall of our enemies, has troubled many commentators over time. Yet at the same time, I am deeply moved by the affirmation of faith: 'The Almighty is my strength and song and has become my salvation. This is my God whom I will praise, my ancestor's God, whom I will exalt'.

At one level a distant victory song, albeit commemorating something so very crucial to Judaism, it is also a text to which each of us can relate more personally. We recall the Midrash that the sea would not divide until the Israelites showed enough faith to march into the waters. They were reluctant to do, waiting for God's miracle. Finally, Nachshon ben Amminadav was bold enough, and, according to some sources, only when he had waded, right in, so that all but his face was covered, did the waters part. That is a lesson for each one of us when faced with a difficult challenge. We will be helped, but we also need to help ourselves, by demonstrating our courage and commitment. Yes, there may be misgivings, but I hope that we can truly stand for the Shirah, and affirm our faith, past, present and future, and also be aware of the ways in which every generation has struggled with the text.

Rabbi Amanda Golby is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

And the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion – that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not." (Exodus 16:4)

The disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai asked him: Why did the manna not come down for Israel just once a year? He replied: Let me answer you with the parable of a mortal king who had a son. When the king provided him with his sustenance once a year, the son visited his father only once a year. When the father began to provide him with his sustenance daily, the son had to call on his father every day. So it was with Israel – if an Israelite had, say, four or five children, he would worry, saying: Perhaps the manna will not come down tomorrow, and all my children will die of hunger. And so [because the manna was coming down daily], the Israelites were compelled to direct their hearts to their Father in heaven [every day]. Another reason: They were able to eat it while it was still warm. Still

another reason: To lighten the burdens that had to be carried during the journey. (Talmud Yoma 76a)

“Each day that day’s portion.” He who created the day creates the sustenance for it. From this verse Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin infers: He who has enough to eat today but wonders, “What will I eat tomorrow?” is lacking in faith. (Mekhilta Shirata 3)

My [God’s] decision to provide the people with manna just fits in with saving you and justifying you. For bearers of My Torah 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 fulfillment of His laws against infringement out of supposed or actual concerns about material necessities. He who has not learned to trust God for the next day will ultimately be led away from God and His law, by his provident care for next year. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)

Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nassi, taught: The study of Torah is commendable when combined with a gainful occupation, for when a person toils in both, sin is drive out of mind. Study alone without an occupation leads to idleness, and ultimately to sin. (Pirkei Avot 2:2)

Sparks for Discussion

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai asks an interesting question – why did the manna fall every day (except Shabbat)? What do you think of his answers? Rabbi Eleazar of Modiin says that a person who has enough food (or money) for today but worries about tomorrow lacks faith. Most of us would consider this position irresponsible. What does Rabbi Hirsch add to our understanding? Do you think that there is necessarily a conflict between living a religious life and earning a living? Are there circumstances in which worrying about the future not only shows a lack of faith but is detrimental? What other reasons might there be for the need to gather manna daily?

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

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3rd Shevat 5771 ~ 8th January 2011

By Michael Wegier

This week's Parsha tells of the final three plagues that afflict the Egyptians before God and Moses redeem them from Egypt. The three plagues are linked thematically by darkness. The locusts created a "thick mass" which blocked everything else and made the land "darkened". The plague of darkness itself was so thick that it could be 'touched'. Finally the slaying of the first born sons occurred at night in darkness thus enhancing the sense of terror that the Egyptians must have experienced.

But out of this darkness - both literally and metaphorically - the family that went down to Egypt, are born as a nation of about 2 million people, as they leave the land of slavery and head towards Sinai to be given the Torah before making the journey to Canaan.

A good deal of this story is told annually during Pesach as part of the Haggadah but it raises a fascinating question regarding how do we now 'relate' to these events. I learnt from Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz in Jerusalem many years ago that there are broadly two categories of approach to this question that can each then be further broken down in multiple ways. The trouble is that these two categories do not rest easily with each other.

The first category sees these events in mythical, cultural, historic or national terms. In this way, the exodus from Egypt is a foundational story which explains to us (and the world) who we are and where we came from. Whether or not we believe in the 'historicity' of the Exodus, we believe in the story as having value over and above the events themselves. The exodus story gives our lives meaning and helps us develop a sense of who we are in this world.

The second category is much less concerned with the story as a foundational symbol of our becoming a people, and much more interested in how we utilise this story as a manner of serving God and Halachah. The Pesach Seder and the whole week of Pesach only have meaning in as much as Jews observe the Mitzvot of removing Chametz etc in fulfillment of the Halachah. To seek meaning in Pesach to fulfill our personal or communal goals is a sentimental exercise that in Leibowitz's quite radical perspective is an act of idolatry.

I find myself both challenged and troubled by Leibowitz. He is surely right that the Halachic framework enables us build meaning into the exodus in an authentic and relevant manner. To allow the narrative to push us in any direction can lead either to a very 'thin' nostalgia which cannot be maintained through the generations or else the reduction of Judaism to extreme nationalism or liberation theology with little grounding in Jewish tradition.

However, obsessive Halachah can also be a form of idolatry. When the vision of a moral life is subsumed by the minutia of detail, it too runs the risk of glorifying Halachah for its own sake and not that of God. The difficult challenge for us as Masorti Jews is to connect with both the symbolism of the story and the framework of the Halachah while not allowing either to overrule the other. A difficult but worthy challenge.

Michael Wegier is a director of Melitz and was formerly a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead – in order that the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt. (Exodus 13:9)

1. The exodus from Egypt shall be to you “a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead,” that you shall write down these paragraphs and bind them upon the head and upon the arm. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. Two approaches are possible – one figurative, in the sense of “Bind them about your throat, write them on the tablet of your heart” (Proverbs 3:3.) The second explanation is to take it literally that the actual making of tefillin is involved. Since the latter is the way it is understood by rabbinic tradition, the first must be disregarded, since it is not authenticated by tradition like the second. (Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1092-1167, Spain)
3. Our rabbis taught: Beloved are Israel, for the Holy Blessed One surrounded them with mitzvot: tefillin on their heads, tefillin on their arms, tzitzit on their garments, and mezuzot on their doorposts. ... Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob said: Whoever has the tefillin on his head, the tefillin on his arm, the tzitzit on his garment, and the mezuzah on his doorpost is absolutely secure against sinning, for it is written, “A threefold cord [the three mitzvot of tefillin, tzitzit, and mezuzah] is not readily broken” (Kohelet 4:12) and it is also written, “The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear Him and rescues them.” (Psalm 34:8) (Talmud Menahot 43b)
4. Profound is the spiritual impact of tefillin. So long as he continues to wear them on his forehead and forearm he remains meek and God-fearing and is not given to frivolity and gossip, nor is he preoccupied with evil thoughts but channels his mind to paths of truth and justice. (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin u-Mezuzah 4:25 (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon)1135-1209, Spain and Egypt)

Sparks for Discussion

Why do we wear tefillin? As Ibn Ezra points out, it is possible to read this commandment as symbolic – keep this in mind as if it were bound on your head and hand. Why do you think the rabbis chose to interpret it as a command to bind these words on our bodies literally? How does wearing tefillin make you feel? How do you feel when you see other people wear tefillin? Today some women have assumed this traditionally male-only mitzvah. What significance do you see in this?

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

VAERA

25th Tevet 5771 ~ 1st January 2011

Shabbat begins in London at 15.46 and ends at 16.56

By Norman Bar

God reveals God's self to Moses, promises redemption for the enslaved Israelites, persuades the reluctant Moses to go, with Aaron, to Pharaoh, who is adamant in his refusal to let the Israelites go. We read of the first seven plagues.

In Chapter 7:6-7 Moses and Aaron agree to see Pharaoh and we learn that Moses is 80 and Aaron 83 when they speak to him. For me not enough seems to be made of this. Rashi uses their ages when calculating that the 400 years slavery included periods that were not actual physical slavery in Egypt and started with Isaac's birth and treatment as a foreigner in Canaan, a de facto exile. Cohen quotes [1] ibn Ezra's view that "of all the prophets (Moses and Aaron) were distinguished in that God revealed Himself only to them in their old age" and (more tellingly) [2] Sforino (15th -16th century Italian) as saying the ages are "intentionally state(d) to point out that in spite of their advanced years, they undertook the difficult mission." Plaut thinks "The Torah is not bothered by Moses' high age."

Maybe, maybe not. However, we often derive from Torah texts what touches, moves or has relevance for or speaks to us, with all our individual baggage. And what I notice is that one excuse that Moses does not raise as an objection to the daunting life-changing course proposed by God is his age. Much else but not that – thus, he is unworthy, how will he describe God when the people ask him who God is, they won't believe him, they won't listen, he stammers, and he's no great shakes as a speaker. And, after the first disheartening Pharaohnic encounter, more of the same.

But not his age: Not " But I have such aches and pains, I use a stick, I can't be schlepping all that way, please find a younger person, I appreciate the honour but it's too much for a guy of my age. I just haven't the koyach any more, no offence meant."

He was clearly a modest and humble man, despite having been brought up in great wealth, the adopted grandson of the leader of the world's super power. He was 80, even then I assume quite an age. Even older than Avram when God commanded him to leave Ur and set off to he knew not where with his family and possessions, lock, stock and barrel. Like Avram no grumbling, and like Avram no complaints about being asked to turn his life topsy turvey yet again. After all, he'd gone from prince of Egypt to shepherd, fugitive from his adoptive grandfather, the mighty Pharaoh – and at a time when he might have expected the biblical equivalent of a glass tea, a lump sugar, a biscuit, carpet slippers and a schluff.

The Weltanschauung of my late mother []

included the saying, "You're never too old". That might have been one of Moses' phrases. Inspirational. And relevant. "You're never too old."

Norman Bar is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Now the flax and barley were ruined, for the barley was on the ear and the flax was in bud; but the wheat and the emmer were not hurt, for they ripen late. (Exodus 9:31-32)

1. [The barley] had already ripened and stood on its [hardened] stalks, and they were broken and fell; and similarly the flax was already grown and stood hard in its buds... [The wheat and emmer] ripen late and they were still flexible. (Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France])
2. At all times let a person be supple as the reed and not rigid as the cedar (Talmud Ta'anit 20b). A reed, when all the winds come and blow upon it, bends with them; when the winds are still, the reed is again upright in its place. And the end of this reed? Its good fortune is to be used as the pen that writes the Torah scroll. The cedar, however, does not remain standing in its place; for as soon as the south wind blows, it uproots it and tears it down. And the end of the cedar? Loggers come upon it and chop it up and use it to cover the housetops – and what remains, they cast to the flames. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 41)
3. If your wife is short, bend down and hear her whisper. (Talmud Bava Metzia 59a)
4. Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean said: It is forbidden to compromise [in a dispute before the court], and he who compromises commits a sin. The law must prevail, even if it involves cutting through a mountain, for it is said, "Judgment is God's" (Deuteronomy 1:17). ... Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah said: Settlement by compromise is a meritorious act, for it is written, "Execute the judgment of truth and of peace in your gates" (Zechariah 8:16). But is it not true that where there is [strict] justice there is no peace, and where there is peace there is no [strict] justice? However, what is the kind of justice with which peace can abide? You must admit, it is justice through compromise. (Talmud Sanhedrin 6b)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators praise flexibility and the willingness to compromise, pointing out that rigidity leads to disaster. Do you agree? When should a person be willing to bend? Are there ideals and principles that a person should refuse to compromise, even at the risk of breaking? What is the impact on life if everything is subject to compromise? How do you decide when to say "No!"?

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