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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

A Taste of Honey

“...and he will provide kingly delicacies” (49:20)

The world in which we live is a very round place.

A chicken's egg, the human eye, the spawn of tadpoles, an oyster, a grain of sand, the stem of a flower, the suction pad of a squid, the rings of a tree trunk, the moon and the sun. And, of course, the world itself.

There are few squares in creation. There's something called a cross sea: A cross sea (also referred to as a squared sea or square waves) is a sea state of wind-generated ocean waves that form nonparallel wave systems. Cross seas have a large amount of directional spreading. This may occur when water waves from one weather system continue despite a shift in wind. Waves generated by the new wind run at an angle to the old. Iron pyrite crystals come close to being perfectly cubic. But Most of the natural world is built on endless permutations of the circle.

Why? Why is the circle the ideal form of creation? When Hashem created the world, He brought into existence a single point, an infinitesimal dot, and from there He drew forth the entire Universe. (Talmud Bavli, Yoma 54b)

If you take a dot and expand it equally in all directions, you get a circle. The circle is the ideal natural form because it expresses creation itself.

The square, on the other hand, the rectangle, and the other rectilinear shapes are the hallmarks of man.

The easiest way for man to build is with straight lines. Anything curved is more demanding technically, and more expensive.

Why is it more difficult for man to build a circular object than a square one? If the natural world is patterned on the circle, surely the circle should be the natural shape of man's works as well, and the circle should be his paradigm and not the square.

The Talmud (Menachot 29b) tells us that Hashem created this world with the letter *Heh*:



If you look at the letter *Heh*, you will see that it is, in fact, a combination of two other letters, *Dalet*...



and an inverted *Yod*.



The *Dalet* consists of two lines at right angles to each other, which point to the four cardinal directions of the compass:



The numerical value of *Dalet* is four. The lines of the *Dalet* represent expansion away from that primeval point of existence.

The *Dalet* is an archetypal rectilinear shape. Man's creations are based on the straight line because they flow from the *Dalet* that is their source.

However, this world was not created with the *Dalet* alone. It was created with the *Yod* as well, and the *Yod* had another role in creation. With the *Yud*, Hashem created the future world.

The *Yod* is really no more than the tiniest dot. The ideal dot has no direction and occupies no space. In order for us to write a *Yod*, we have to give it some dimension. Otherwise, it would be invisible. However, the ideal dot cannot be drawn in this world. A point that occupies no space is something that can only exist in a world that is above space – the future world. When this world focuses on the world beyond, it fulfills its purpose. When the *Dalet* focuses on the *Yud* – when rectilinear dimension focuses on a point that has no dimension – this world reaches its perfection.

When man sublimates his creations to that higher plane, when the dimensionality of the *Dalet* aspires to the transcendence of the *Yod*, earth touches heaven.

Then the letter *Heh* is complete.

Although the preeminent shape of nature is the circle, there exists a natural phenomenon that seems to defy this axiom.

Throughout recorded history, observers have marveled at the hexagonal pattern of the honeybee's elaborate storage system. More than 2,000 years ago, Greek scholars commented on how bees apparently possess “a certain geometrical forethought” in achieving just the right type of enclosure to hold honey efficiently. In the 19th century, Charles Darwin described the honeycomb as a masterpiece of engineering that is “absolutely

perfect in economizing labor and wax.” The honeycomb is a hexagon, a six-sided circle, if you like. Why does the honeycomb seem to depart from the natural roundness of the creation and lean towards the linearity of man? Why is the honeycomb a synthesis of the circle and the square?

The answer is that the hexagon represents an ideal synthesis of form and function.

If the honeycomb were round there would be a lot of wasted space between the cells and the entire structure would be less strong.

Were the honeycomb octagonal, which would be even closer to the ideal circle, the modules would not interlock; there would still be some space in between each cell in the honeycomb.

Thus, the hexagon is the perfect blend of the circle and the square, the ideal synthesis of function and form, of this world and the world beyond this world.

Why was it, though, that Hashem chose the honeybee of all creatures to express this synthesis?

The bee is a unique creature. It itself is not a kosher creature, but its produce – honey – is. The honeybee represents the transformation of that which *assur*, prohibited, into that which is *mutar*, permitted. In fact, *assur* is better translated as “bound.” What makes something prohibited is our inability to reach the inner spark of holiness that gives it existence in this world. It is bound up, tied, and inaccessible. We cannot connect to it, and it connects only to itself. It is trapped, bound, *assur*.

Hashem has given the Jewish People the job of connecting this world to the one beyond it. Left to himself, man degenerates into an obsession with physicality. He constructs monoliths to scrape the skies, vaunting geometry.

That which connects only to itself is inherently *tameh*, ritually impure.

Tumah results from the failed potential for connection: For example, *Lashon Hara*, speech that divides people, is inherently *tameh*, and in Biblical times caused visible lesions on the skin. The monthly cycle of the human reproductive capacity causes *tumah* when it does not lead to the beginning of new life. It expresses a failure to connect to what is beyond it. Therefore, with the breakdown of the lining of the womb, a woman must immerse in a mikveh. The word Mikveh is from the language of *tikveh* – hope – which is all about the future. The future world.

The honeybee symbolizes the elevation of the potential into the actual, the sublimation of *tumah* into *taharah*.

The honeybee takes the square and makes it into a six-sided circle.

Q & A

Questions

1. Why is kindness towards the dead called "chesed shel emet" – kindness of truth?
2. Give three reasons Yaakov didn't want to be buried in Egypt.
3. How do you treat a "fox in his time" (i.e., a commoner who rules)?
4. "When I was coming from Padan, Rachel died on me... I buried her there on the way to Efrat..." Why did Yaakov say all this to Yosef?
5. Initially, why was Yaakov unable to bless Ephraim and Menashe?
6. What does *pillalti* mean?
7. What does "Shechem" mean as used in this week's parsha? (two answers)
8. Which individual is called "the Emori"? Why? Give two reasons.
9. What did Yaakov want to tell his sons but was unable to?
10. What privileges did Reuven lose due to his rash actions?
11. What congregation from Yaakov's offspring did Yaakov not want to be associated with?
12. What did Yehuda do after he heard Yaakov rebuke Reuven, Shimon and Levi? Why?
13. What does milk do to teeth?
14. Why is Yissachar like a "strong-boned donkey"?
15. With what resource did both Yaakov and Moshe bless Asher?
16. In Yosef's blessing, Yaakov said, "They embittered him..." Who are "they"?
17. Which descendants of Binyamin "will divide the spoils in the evening"?
18. From whom did Yaakov buy his burial place?
19. What oath did Yosef make to Pharaoh?
20. Which two sons of Yaakov did not carry his coffin? Why not?

Answers

1. 47:29 - Because the giver expects no reward from the recipient.
2. 47:29 - a) Egypt's ground was to be plagued with lice; b) At the time of the resurrection, those buried outside Israel will suffer; c) So the Egyptians wouldn't make him into an idol.
3. 47:31 - Bow to him.
4. 48:7 - Yaakov thought Yosef harbored resentment since Yaakov had not buried Yosef's mother, Rachel, in the Ma'arat HaMachpela.
5. 48:8 - The Shechina departed from him.
6. 48:11 - "I thought."
7. 48:22 - a) The actual city of Shechem; b) A portion.
8. 48:22 - Esav. a) He acted like an Emorite; b) He trapped his father with words (*imrei pi*).
9. 49:1 - When Mashiach will come.
10. 49:3 - Priesthood and Kingship.
11. 49:6 - Korach and his congregation.
12. 49:8 - He drew back. He was afraid that Yaakov would rebuke him for the incident with Tamar.
13. 49:12 - It makes them white.
14. 49:14 - Just as a donkey bears a heavy burden, so the tribe of Yissachar bears the yoke of Torah.
15. 49:20 - Oil-rich land.
16. 49:23 - Yosef's brothers, Potifar and his wife.
17. 49:27 - Mordechai and Esther.
18. 50:5 - From Esav.
19. 50:6 - Yosef swore not to reveal Pharaoh's ignorance of Hebrew.
20. 50:13 - Levi, because he would carry the aron (holy ark). Yosef, because he was a king.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Them Bones and Themselves

As Joseph neared the end of his life, he demanded of his brothers that after he passes away, they should take his atzamot (“bones”) out of Egypt and bury him in the Holy Land (Gen. 50:25). Indeed, when the Jews later exited Egypt, the Torah states that Moses took Joseph’s atzamot with him (Ex. 13:19). The Targumim typically use the Aramaic term garmeī to translate the Hebrew etzem (“bone”). That Aramaic word also appears in the Bible (Dan. 6:25), and is a cognate of the Biblical Hebrew word gerem, which also means “bone.” Because of the interplay of cantillation and vowelization, gerem is usually pronounced as garem (see Prov. 17:22, 25:15). In this essay we explore the apparently-synonymous words etzem and gerem to seek out their exact meanings and how they relate to each other.

The same trilateral root AYIN-TZADI-MEM that gives us the word etzem also gives us the pronouns atzmi (“myself”), atzmo (“himself”) and atzmecha (“yourself”). This works because the exact definition of personhood or selfhood is notoriously difficult to pin down. What makes up a person? Is it his physical skeleton? His inner consciousness? His soul? In this sense, Biblical Hebrew has several different terms to refer to oneself: nafshi (“myself,” but literally “my soul”), galmi (“myself,” but literally “my matter”), gufi (“myself,” but literally “my body”), and atzmi (“myself,” but literally “my bones”). So it makes sense that the same root that gives us “bone,” gives us “self.”

In Machberet Menachem, Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970) writes that the trilateral root AYIN-TZADI-MEM actually has five different meanings: “bone” (per the above), “color/visible hue” (Ex. 24:10, Lam. 4:7, Ps. 139:15), “strength/power” (Gen. 26:16, Ex. 1:7, 1:9, Isa. 40:29, 41:21, Ps. 38:20), “closing [the eye]” (Isa. 29:10, 33:15), “the thing itself” (Gen. 7:13, Ex. 12:41).

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) writes that the word etzem (“bone”) is related to the Hebrew words atzum (“strong”) and eitz (“tree”), because it denotes the hard part of the body that is akin to a tree in its strength and durability. The tree too is characterized by its hard/strong trunk, as opposed to other, flimsy forms of flora (like grass). Indeed, Nachmanides (to Lev. 23:28) makes the point that something’s etzem refers to its most powerful point. (See “The Strong Ones” (Sep. 2020) for further discussion of the AYIN-TZADI root.)

When Jacob was on the cusp of death, he gathered his twelve sons and blessed each one of them. In doing so, he compared some of his sons to various animals: Judah to a lion cub (Gen. 49:9), Dan to a snake (Gen. 49:17), Naftali to a gazelle (Gen. 49:21), and Benjamin to a wolf (Gen. 49:27). When it comes to Issachar, Jacob says: “Isaachar is a garem donkey” (Gen. 49:14). What is the meaning of garem in this context?

Rashi explains that garem here means “strong-boned” (using the Hebrew word etzem to convey this idea). In the overall context of Jacob’s blessing to Issachar, it means that Jacob blessed his son Issachar that he ought to be likened to a strong donkey (i.e., one comprised of hard “bones”). By that, Jacob meant that Issachar and his descendants should be known for being able to take on heavy burdens, as indeed the Tribe of Issachar was known for producing Torah Scholars, who likewise bear heavy responsibilities in accepting upon themselves the yoke of Torah study (see also Rabbeinu Bachaya to Gen. 49:14).

Gersonides (also known as Ralbag) explains in an opposite manner: garem means “boney.” The way he explains it, Jacob compared Issachar to a weak donkey, that is, a donkey so malnourished that its bones jut out and are plainly visible. This explanation also recalls that the Tribe of Issachar’s was renowned for Torah scholarship,

for just like a weak donkey cannot go outside, so do the Torah scholars of Issachar remain in their locale and do not venture outwards. This blessing to Issachar stands in stark contrast to the blessing granted to his brother Zebulun, whose descendants are comprised of merchants who travel overseas.

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

After 17 years in Egypt, Yaakov senses his days drawing to a close and summons Yosef. He has Yosef swear to bury him in the Machpela Cave, the burial place of Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka.

Yaakov falls ill and Yosef brings to him his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe. Yaakov elevates Ephraim and Menashe to the status of his own sons, thus giving Yosef a double portion that removes the status of firstborn from Reuven. As Yaakov is blind from old age, Yosef leads his sons close to their grandfather. Yaakov kisses and hugs them. He had not thought to see his son Yosef again, let alone Yosef's children. Yaakov begins to bless them, giving precedence to Ephraim, the younger, but Yosef interrupts him and indicates that Menashe is the elder. Yaakov explains that he intends to bless Ephraim with his strong hand because Yehoshua will descend from him, and Yehoshua will be both the conqueror of *Eretz Yisrael* and the teacher of Torah to the Jewish People.

Yaakov summons the rest of his sons in order to bless them as well. Yaakov's blessing reflects the unique character and ability of each tribe, directing each one in its unique mission in serving G-d. Yaakov passes from this world at age 147. A tremendous procession accompanies his funeral cortege up from Egypt to his resting place in the Cave of Machpela in Chevron.

After Yaakov's passing, the brothers are concerned that Yosef will now take revenge on them. Yosef reassures them, even promising to support them and their families. Yosef lives out the rest of his years in Egypt, seeing Ephraim's great-grandchildren. Before his death, Yosef foretells to his brothers that G-d will redeem them from Egypt. He makes them swear to bring his bones out of Egypt with them at that time. Yosef passes away at the age of 110 and is embalmed. Thus ends Sefer Bereishet, the first of the five Books of the Torah. *Chazak*

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

The Amidah (Part 32) – The Final Paragraph: Personally Speaking

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

“My Hashem, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent, and let my soul be like dust to everyone. Open my heart to Your Torah, then my soul will pursue Your commandments. As for all those who design evil against me, speedily nullify their counsel and disrupt their design. Act for Your Name’s sake, act for Your right hand’s sake, act for Your sanctity’s sake, act for Your Torah’s sake. That Your beloved may be given rest, let Your right hand save and respond to me. May the expressions of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, Hashem, my Rock and my Redeemer. He Who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace upon us and upon all Israel. And let us say: Amen.”

It is only once our hearts are open to Hashem’s Torah, only once we have committed ourselves to living Hashem’s Torah, that our souls will be able to pursue His commandments. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (4:2) begins with a statement by Ben Azai that exhorts us to “Run to perform a ‘minor’ mitzvah.” In Ruach Chaim, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin explains that due to the fact we are physical beings, we are not naturally drawn towards keeping the commandments. In their essence, the commandments are spiritual, and our physicality serves as a barrier to the spiritual realms. This is why we need to run after them, in effect to pursue them. Otherwise, they will always remain distant from us. But, catching them up is not enough. Once we have caught up with a mitzvah, we must endeavor to perform it with enthusiasm and excitement.

Rabbi Yehuda Zev Segal (1910-1983) was renowned for his brilliance and his righteousness. His insightful understanding of human nature made him widely sought after by people from all over the world. He was the head of the Yeshiva in Manchester, England, and introduced the concept of daily study of two halachot pertaining to proper speech. His closest disciples describe Rabbi Segal’s almost child-like delight when performing mitzvahs. Despite the fact that he was one of the spiritual mentors of his generation and looked up to by tens of thousands of admirers, he had no inhibitions about running to perform mitzvahs. Even in his last years of life in this world, he could be found urging others to be immaculate in mitzvah observance, while he continued to fulfill mitzvahs with an enormous smile on his face

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PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

The Song of Sea Giants

The Sea Giants say:

“Praise Hashem from the earth, sea giants and all of the depths!” (Tehillim 148:7)

Hashem created the universe to reveal His glory, and to this end He fashioned whales and other sea giants. The awe-inspiring sight of an enormous whale breaching the ocean’s surface and spouting seawater towards the sky instills within a person awe of the One Who created such giants. This causes people to speak of the Creator’s greatness. Accordingly, a sea giant is called a “tanin,” which means “speech” (see Shoftim 5:11). If such creatures would live on land, they would destroy it in their hunger and then die out themselves with nothing to eat. He therefore placed them in humungous oceans filled with fish that continue to replenish their numbers.

As great as they are, sea giants are actually more dependent upon the hand of the Creator for survival than any other bring since they require the most food. The largest whales feed on innumerable microscopic beings every day. With their very existence, they sing of the phenomenon called “the food chain,” in which an unfathomable number of beings ranging in size from blue whales to microscopic organisms are sustained by an invisible Creator, Whose praise is likewise unfathomable.

The song of the sea giants is an extract from the Psalm in which King David calls for all beings on earth also sing to Hashem, and to thank Him for the great kindnesses He lavishes upon each of us every single day

Sources: Midrash Lekach Tov (Ber. 21), cited in Perek B'Shir; Midrash Shocher Tov

*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib

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halachic authority for ruling.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Nedarim 58-64

Picking the Word

Until the ‘kayitz’ – this is until the people begin putting the figs in their baskets.”

Our Mishna teaches that if a person makes a neder not to drink wine “until the kayitz” or “until the kayitz arrives”, he is forbidden to drink wine only until it’s the time when people begin to pick figs. Why specifically figs, and not grapes?

In Hebrew, each word has a specific meaning, and “kayitz” means picking the fruit with one’s hand, the manner in which figs are picked, whereas “chaticha” is the correct Hebrew word for describing the way of picking grapes, which is by cutting them from the vine with a knife. (Rabbeinu Nissim)

An aside: “Kayitz” is the modern Hebrew word for “summer,” and indeed this is the time of year for picking and harvesting many soft fruits (in Israel and in the northern hemisphere). The root of this word appears to be the same root as that which means picking fruits with one’s hand, “katziza.”

Nedarim 61b

Kohen First

“And you will sanctify him (a kohen) for all matters of holiness – to open first, to bless first, and to take the first portion.”

This teaching of the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Yishmael explains in practical terms how we are to fulfill the command to sanctify a kohen, as stated in the Torah: “v’kidashto”(Vayikra 21:8) – “and you will sanctify him.”

A kohen must be allowed to recite the first blessing for the public Torah reading, be given the honor to lead the birkat hamazon blessing after a meal, and he must be offered first-choice of his portion when dividing an object with another person who is not a kohen. (Rabbeinu Nissim) Another explanation of receiving the honor to “open first” is that the kohen should be the first speaker at a public gathering. (Rabbeinu Asher)

Regarding leading birkat hamazon, the halacha requires to honor him with leading only if each person provided his own food. However, if there is a host who provides the food for everyone who eats together, it is the host’s option to decide who will lead and he does not need to choose a kohen. He does not even need to ask the kohen for permission for someone who is not a kohen to lead, although the custom nowadays is that the leader mentions that he is doing so with the permission of the kohanim (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 201).

Nedarim 62 a&b

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Landholdings

As Yaakov approaches the end of his days, he calls to Yosef, expressing his last wish: *Please...deal with me with chesed [lovingkindness] and truth; please to not bury me in Egypt!*

What is meant by *chesed and truth*? *Chesed* is phonetically related to the word for overflow, and means to devote oneself entirely, to literally spill over one's goodness. *Emet*, truth, qualifies and contains *chesed*, and in turn, preserves the true character of *chesed*.

Boundless love is a powerful force – powerful enough to break rules. *Chesed with emet* is a love that does not, out of intensity of devotion, lose sight of what is essential.

The same language is used to describe Eliezer's mission to find a wife for Yitzchak, which includes a cautionary directive to ensure that Yitzchak does not relocate to Aram. Lest Eliezer be carried away by a *chesed*-driven desire to find a match for Yitzchak, he is anchored by the *emet* of ensuring her spiritual suitability and the suitability of Yitzchak's environs. Here, Yaakov asks Yosef to act with *chesed* bound by *emet*. Yaakov knows well that Yosef will bury his father with pomp and splendor, but he tells him: *For all your chesed, do not lose sight of emet. I would rather not be buried at all than be buried in Egypt.*

Why was it so important for Yaakov *not* to be buried in Egypt?

The first burial plot mentioned in the Torah is the one that Avraham purchased for Sarah: he requests an *achuzat kever*. The word *achuzah* stems from the verb *to hold*. But *achuzah* does not imply that the owner *holds* the property – in fact the term refers to *landed* property and not to *movable* property. It is not that the owner *holds* the property – in fact, *land cannot* be held – but the *land* holds the owner. In a technical sense, *land* physically holds and supports its inhabitant. It also holds the owner in an economic sense, as it can serve as a guarantor of debt. And *land* also has a powerful spiritual hold over its owner. Avraham, in searching for a permanent, everlasting burial site for Sarah, wanted that place to be in the Land of Israel. And so he purchased an *achuzah*, a “landholding” there.

Two verses before Yaakov instructs Yosef regarding his burial, we are told that the children of Yaakov settled in Egypt, *and v'ye'achazu bah* – “they acquired land there.” Literally, these words mean “and they allowed the land to take hold of them.” They became bound to the land, in the sense that Avraham intended Sarah to be bound eternally to the Land of Israel. Yaakov surely saw this and noted the powerful influence the land of Egypt had and would continue to have on his descendants. This motivated his entreaty that they not bury him in Egypt, but instead carry him to his homeland. In doing so, he sought to weaken the bond his children had established with Egypt and establish for himself an eternal bond with the Land of Israel. This was the *emet* of which he spoke when he gave Yosef burial instructions. No matter the pomp and circumstance which would characterize his burial in Egypt – he insisted that the *chesed* of giving him honor be informed by his *emet* of attachment to the Land of Israel.

- Sources: Commentary, Genesis 47:29; 23:4