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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

An Artist's Impression

“May my soul die the death of the upright....” (23:10)

In June 2012, the Israeli government expedited its “Tama 38” (National Outline Plan) mandate, which calls for the reinforcing of buildings against earthquakes. The incentive for builders is that they can build and sell an extra floor, and for apartment owners, that they receive an extra room that doubles as a rocket shelter.

I live in Ramat Eshkol in Jerusalem, an area where every second building seems to be in some stage of the “Tama.” The signage outside these buildings always depicts an idyllic scene of a super-modern façade with nary a stroller to crowd the entrance, or an errant air-conditioner hanging from a window, or a porch covered over to make another much-needed bedroom.

Often in life, our aspiration fades in proportion to our perspiration. We start with high ideals, but

sometimes things get very difficult. However, if we never had that “artist's impression” of our future, we would never have an ideal to aim for.

“May my soul die the death of the upright...”

Bilaam wanted to die the death of the upright – he just wasn't prepared to live the life of the upright.

Bilaam saw evil as the easy way to success. With all his gifts as a prophet, he never made the effort to get out of his spiritual armchair.

It is likely that most of us will never achieve our spiritual goals, but if we never had that “artist's impression” in our heads, we would never have even left our armchairs – let alone built an entire floor on the edifice of our spiritual lives.

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TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Balak: Yoma 65-71

The “Great Knesset”

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explained why they were given the title of “Great”: “They restored the crown (of Torah Judaism) to its former glory.”

Anyone who has opened a Siddur is familiar with the blessing that begins, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our ancestors; G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak and G-d of Yaakov; the *great*, *mighty* and *awesome* G-d...” This blessing is the first blessing of the foremost formalized prayer, which is known as the *Shmoneh Esrei* – the standing, silent prayer.

It was composed by the “*Anshei Knesset Hagedola*” – “The Men of the *Great* Assembly.” This special group of 120 great Torah scholars and Prophets led the Jewish People at the onset of the era of the Second Beit Hamikdash. Our *gemara* addresses why they were given the title of “Great,” explaining that they restored the crown to its former glory by “restoring” the original description of Hashem’s traits, matching the words used by Moshe Rabbeinu.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi expounds on this in our *sugya* by citing four verses with very specific words which describe Hashem’s traits.

Moshe Rabbeinu referred to Hashem as “great, mighty and awesome.” (Devarim 10:17) Later, the Prophet Yirmiyahu described Hashem as “great and mighty” (Yirmiyahu 32:18), but intentionally omitted the word “awesome.” Then, even later, Daniel in his prayer referred to Hashem as “the great and awesome G-d” (Daniel 9:4), without mentioning “mighty.”

And then came the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* and “restored” both of these words in praise of Hashem: “mighty” and “awesome.” They referred to Hashem as “great, mighty and awesome.” (Nechemia 9:32)

This important change returned and restored the description of Hashem’s traits to the original description that Moshe Rabbeinu used in Sefer Devarim.

The obvious question is: Why did Yirmiyahu and Daniel find it to be correct to alter the descriptive words for Hashem’s nature? What did they find “wrong” with the original words established by Moshe? Why did each one delete a word from the original, until the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* “restored the crown to its former glory”?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains in our *gemara* how these traits – mighty and awesome – were not truly perceived correctly by others throughout history. Allow me to try to explain.

When the Prophet Yirmiyahu saw the idolatrous Babylonians treat the First Beit Hamikdash with utter disdain and disgrace, he wondered: “Where is Hashem’s awesomeness?” They acted in the “House of Hashem” without awe or fear of Hashem. Seeing no trait of awesomeness, Yirmiyahu deleted the word “awesome” when praising Hashem.

Later, in the seventy years of exile following the destruction of the First Beit Hamikdash, Daniel saw the Jewish People utterly subdued and suppressed by the Babylonians and Persians. He wondered: “Where is Hashem’s might?” Therefore, Daniel deleted “mighty” from his praise of Hashem.

But the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* came and provided a novel and powerful insight into understanding Hashem’s ways. They did not see a lack of Hashem’s *might* in failing to prevent the pagan oppression of the Jewish People, as Daniel understood. And they

did not see a lack of Hashem's *awesomeness* in allowing the Babylonians to make merry in their disgusting and heathen ways when gallivanting around in the ruins and ashes of the First Beit Hamikdash.

Rather, said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* correctly perceived what happened as meaning exactly the opposite! That which others had understood as a "lacking" on Hashem's part in showing His mightiness and awesomeness, was, in reality, an intentional and successful display of those very traits!

They reasoned: "Hashem's restraint in allowing the heathens to suppress and oppress the Jewish People was not due to lacking mightiness, but, rather, a *sign of His mightiness*." (Note, the Hebrew word for might is *gibor* or *gevura*, which, in human terms, means to conquer one's "negative" impulses and instincts.) In fact, Hashem acted with "might" – *gevura* – in showing restraint in not saving the Jewish People from oppression throughout the years (the seventy years of exile – Rashi). Hashem did this so that the Jewish People would hopefully feel humbled and choose to do *teshuva*.

Likewise, explained the Sage, Hashem actually displayed the trait of awe – *norah* – in allowing the heathens to destroy the First Beit Hamikdash and frivolously revel in its ruins. The *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah* understood that Hashem's awesomeness

is manifest in the survival of the Jewish People: "If not for the awe of Hashem and the fear of Hashem, how could it be possible for one lone nation to continue to survive in the face of the nations of the world who constantly seek its destruction?" The Midrash explains this concept with a dialogue between a Roman ruler and a great Rabbi. Adrianus said that Jewish survival is a result of a Jew's tenacity: "How great is the lamb that survives against seventy wolves!" Rabbi Yehoshua corrected him, explaining that the praise is really due to Hashem: "How great is the Shepherd Who saves them!"

This is the explanation given by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi for the decision made by the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* to recognize and praise Hashem's traits of might and awe. Based on this explanation, we can understand why this group of Sages and Prophets who led the Jewish People following the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash was called the *Anshei Knesset HaGedola* – The Men of the *Great Assembly*. They exhibited extraordinarily great understanding of Hashem's traits, thereby returning "the crown" – i.e. the recognition Hashem's greatness, mightiness and awesomeness – to the manner in which it was originally written in the Torah. (See the Maharsha in his *Chiddushei Aggadot* for a fascinating treatment of the disagreement of the praises taught in our *sugya*. He begins by pointing out that each person praised Hashem according to what he witnessed in his own time.)

- *Yoma 69b*

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Questions – Balak

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel."
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the *Avot*. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do *mitzvot*.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "*Shatum ha'ayin*." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means "the open eye", which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Balaam's Numa

The Hebrew word *ne'um* ("word") appears 373 times in the Bible, of which 362 times it refers to "the word" of G-d. The only other people whose "words" are characterized as *ne'um* are King David (II Shmuel 23:1), King Solomon (Prov. 30:1), and Balaam (Num. 24:3, 24:4, 24:15, 24:16). When the true prophet Yirmiyahu criticized false prophets for speaking through a *ne'um* (Yir. 23:31), the Bible uses a verb form of the word *vayinamu*, which appears nowhere else in the entire Bible! What is so special about the word *ne'um* that it is overwhelmingly used to denote the Word of G-d? What is this word's etymology, and how does it differ from other words for "speech," such as *amirah*, *dibbur*, and *sichah*? These questions and more will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

Although Menachem, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace the word *ne'um* to the three-letter root NUN-ALEPH-MEM, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) offers a more thorough approach. In *Yeriot Shlomo* he contends that *ne'um* is a poetic word used to underscore the veracity of a given statement. It serves to emphasize that whatever is being said is not merely a collection of "random" words haphazardly spewed out, but reflects deliberate and accurate declarations. Rabbi Pappenheim thus explains that the biliteral root of *ne'um* is ALEPH-MEM, whose core meaning is "if." Other words derived from that root include *emet* ("truth") and *amen/ne'eman* ("true," "trustworthy"). When one preaches with the *ne'um* style, one speaks in absolute terms, as if everything he utters is completely true. When Yirmiyahu criticized the false prophets for speaking a *ne'um*, his critique focused on their pretending to tell the truth, even though he knew they clearly were not. (Radak's *Sefer HaShorashim*, in entries ALEPH-MEM-NUN and NUM-ALEPH-MEM, also connects *ne'um* with "truth.")

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English word *word* in Ebonics and hip-hop slang expresses affirmation or agreement, such that when one exclaims "Word!" it is as if he has said, "That's the truth!" or "There's no denying it!" This usage of the word likely stems from the influence of Christian preachers who read from the Bible and translated *ne'um* as "word."

Although one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q339) contains a list of false prophets, with Bilaam on the list, rabbinic tradition maintains that Bilaam was not a *false* prophet, per se, but an *evil* prophet. He tried to use his jaundiced outlook to have G-d convey to him a malevolent prophecy against the Jews, but in the end, quite the opposite happened.

When all is said and done, Bilaam's prophetic declarations and utterances were "true" in the same way that the Word of G-d elsewhere in the Bible is true. In that spirit, *Peirush HaRokeach* and Rabbienu Efrayim explain that the word *ne'um* represents speech that relays the content of an irrevocable decree/oath – even when it comes to Bilaam's use of the word *ne'um*. Additionally, it seems that King David and King Solomon also used the word *ne'um* to describe their own words because, as Divinely chosen kings, they were able to speak assertively and decisively in a way that whatever they said was/became true.

In his work *Cheshek Shlomo*, Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *ne'um* to the biliteral root ALEPH-MEM ("if," "on condition"), explaining that *ne'um* focuses on the severity of the situation that spurs the speaker into making his address. Thus, the term *ne'um* stresses the serious situation/conditions that make for the backdrop of the speaker's *ne'um*.

While the verb form of *ne'um* appears only once in the Bible, it is much more common in later post-Biblical Hebrew. For example, the Mishna (*Yevamot* 16:7) uses the word *numati/nimati* to mean "I said" when relating Rabbi Akiva's report about what he said to a Sage in Babylonian about a complex halachic issue. Another form of this word found in the Mishna is *numeinu* ("we said"), used in *Gittin* 6:7 (see also *Tosefta*, *Sanhedrin* 2:1, *Nazir* 4:7).

Halachic Midrashim like *Mechilta* (to Ex. 12:6, 12:21, 12:43) and *Sifrei* (*Beha'alotcha* 65, *Shlach* 110, *Pinchas* 142) sometimes use the non-standard phrase *nam lo* ("he said to him") instead of the more common expression *amar lo*, which means the same thing. But, fascinatingly, those works use this verbiage only when discussing disputes between Rabbi Yonatan and Rabbi Yoshiyah, but not when relating debates between other rabbis!

The *Sefer HaAruch* lists the root of these Rabbinic Hebrew words as NUN-MEM and does not explicitly link them to the Biblical Hebrew *ne'um*. However, Rabbi Gershon Shaul Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654) contends that these words are cognates of *ne'um*, even though they are spelled without an ALEPH, because the letter ALEPH often disappears from different morphological inflections of a given word. In his responsa *Noda B'Yehudah*, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (1713-1793) points out that the common Talmudic term *neimah* ("let's say") is also a cognate of the Hebrew word *ne'um* and Aramaic *nam*. As both Rabbi Landau and Rabbi Binyamin Mussafia note, a cognate of *ne'um* without the middle ALEPH is already found as early as in Biblical Aramaic (*Ezra* 4:8, 5:4, 5:9, 6:13). (See Ibn Ezra to *Isa.* 1:24, who seems to explain that spelling the Rabbinic Hebrew *nam* without an ALEPH is a mistake, despite that deficient spelling being the standard form of the word in rabbinic sources.)

In one particular poem customarily recited on Yom Kippur Mussaf, we pray to G-d: "Remember, O You who said (*namta*) 'testimony shall not be forgotten from the mouth of his descendants.'" Abudraham explains that the word *namta* in this poem serves as a cognate of the Hebrew word *ne'um*. In discussing this particular *piyyut*, Rabbi Pappenheim argues that the word cannot possibly be read as *namta*, as that would mean "you who slumbered," with the word in question being a verb cognate of the Hebrew noun

tenumah ("sleep"). Instead, Rabbi Pappenheim suggests that the proper rendering of the word in question should be *ne'umta* (if the poet meant to follow a Biblical Hebrew style), or *numita* (if following Rabbinic Hebrew style). Rabbi Pappenheim also mentions an alternate version that registers the word as *sachta*, a cognate of the word *sichah*, and endorses that version. This alternate version is also found in the *Mazchor* edited by Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt (1895-1972). Nevertheless, Rabbi Landau ultimately concludes that *namta* as "You said" is also correct.

Dr. Shlomo Mandelkorn (1846-1902), in his concordance of Biblical Hebrew *Heichal HaKodesh* (page 710), notes that an Arabic cognate of the Hebrew *ne'um* means "to whisper." I am not sure what to make of that.

There are three more Hebrew words that refer to the act of "speech" or "speaking," which I would like to discuss in this essay: *yichaveh*, *yabia*, and *sach*.

Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace the words *yichaveh* (*Ps.* 19:3), *achaveh* (*Iyov* 13:7, 32:10, 32:17), and the like to the trilateral root CHET-VAV-HEY. Similarly, Menachem Ibn Saruk traces those words to the biliteral root CHET-VAV. However, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the root CHET-VAV itself derives from the roots CHET-YOD ("life") and/or ALEPH-CHET ("brotherhood", "unity"), both of which ultimately derive from the monoliteral root CHET. As Rabbi Pappenheim explains, speech in the sense of *yichaveh/achaveh* gives "life" to an idea by expressing it verbally instead of leaving it hidden away in one's thoughts. In accounting for the interchangeability of VAV and YOD in this instance, Rabbi Pappenheim adduces the case of the VAV in the name *Chava* (Eve), which is said by the Bible to be related to the word *chai* (*Gen.* 3:20), spelled with a YOD. Alternatively, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *yichaveh/achaveh* relates to the word *ach* ("brother"), because speech creates connection and comradery by linking the speaker with the listener.

Interestingly, *Peirush HaRokeach* explains that *yichaveh/achaveh* refers to "speech" for the purpose of explaining the reasoning behind something, but he does not offer an etymological account of how this can be better understood.

Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *yabia* (*Ps.* 19:3) and *abiah* (*Ps.* 78:2) in the sense of "speaking" are derived

from the two-letter root BET-AYIN, which refers to “revealing from beneath the surface.” In its crudest sense, this root yields the word *mabua/novea* (Prov. 18:4, Ecc. 12:6, Isa. 35:7) – i.e. a “wellspring” whose waters spring forth from a hidden, underground source. In a similar way, *yabia/abiah* refers to “speech” as an expression that flows from the depths of one’s heart and reveals itself in an attention-grabbing way. A similar point has already been made by Ibn Janach and Radak in their respective *Sifrei HaShorashim*. *Siddur HaRokeach* and *Peirush HaRokeach* likewise explain that *yabia/abiah* entails speaking continuously, non-stop, like an ever-flowing “wellspring.”

The words *yasiach* (Ps. 119:23), *asichah* (Ps. 55:18, 77:4-13, 119:15, 145:5, Iyov 7:11) and the infinitive

la’suach (Gen. 24:63) are related to the word *siach/sichah* (“speech”). Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, and Radak trace this word to the trilateral SIN-VAV-CHET, while Menachem traces it to the biliteral SIN-CHET. Rabbi Pappenheim, on the other hand, sees SIN-CHET as a derivative of SAMECH-CHET (“uprooting,” “removing,” “transferring”), explaining that it refers to the type of speech that involves a stream of consciousness and/or wandering of the mind intended to help the speaker forget about (i.e., “uproot”) his sorrows. Similarly, *Peirush HaRokeach* writes that *sichah* refers to “speaking” about various topics/examples in one speech/conversation, which can be looked at as somebody “transferring” the discussion from one subject to another.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, King of Moav, is in morbid fear of the *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go.

While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say about the Jewish People.

When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse, and three times blessings are issued instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

The *Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This act brings an end to the plague – but not before 24,000 people died.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

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

Freedom of Speech

The nation of Moav was terrified of the Jewish People after their conquest of the Emorites. Israel had shown itself to be an overwhelmingly powerful people, and was great in number. The Moabite king, Balak, sought out Bilaam, the prophet to the nations, to employ his power to curse the Jews.

Bilaam was a monotheist and a prophet, but was morally inferior to the monotheists like Malki Tzadek and Iyov who came before him. His spiritual aptitude to draw near to G-d is stunted by his egoism. He places himself at the service of earthly powers and potentates and their base desires. He thinks nothing of uprooting an entire nation without cause. This entire portion of Bilaam is written to reveal how G-d removed a spirit of holiness from the nations of the world because of the misuse of such spiritual gifts.

G-d instructs Bilaam not to go with Balak's emissaries, warning him that he will not be able to accomplish his mission. *You will not curse the (Jewish) people, for they are blessed! The element which makes this people a people is precisely the purpose which I have determined to promote with My sovereignty...Even the nations of the world conceive of this people as destined to be blessed!*

If Bilaam had been a true prophet, he would have conveyed the same to Balak's emissaries, and Moav and Midian, instead of fearing Israel's conquering might, would have recognized the moral element which is the object of G-d's blessing, and would have befriended Israel. Instead, Bilaam hints that G-d refuses to allow him to travel with the plebeians like them, instead of true princes. When Balak responds with a more impressive delegation, Bilaam hints again to this insatiable desire for money and honor.

When Bilaam's greed and base desires so confused him, he lost his gift of intelligence and eloquence.

Instead, G-d showed favor to his donkey's intelligence, by granting it the gift of human speech. In doing so, He prepared Bilaam for what was to come. The human speech of Bilaam's mouth would no longer be a product of his own will. The mouth that abused the gift would be placed in the service of Divine speech – against his will – to herald the Divine truth which he could not bear to utter at the expense of his greed. He Who gives speech to an animal can also put His Word in the mouth of Bilaam.

In his first attempt to curse Israel, Bilam proclaims: *Can I curse what G-d has not cursed?! ...Who would count the earthly element of Yaakov? Who would count the births among Israel as one would count the animal young?* Here, he communicates to Balak that while the fortune of other nations may depend on their number of bodies, no so Israel. Balak was frightened by their numbers, but Bilaam adds insult to his injury. It is not their earthly element that determines their significance, and it is not their material conditions which lead to their success – even should you diminish their numbers, they will still prevail. To this, Bilaam adds a personal coda: *I would like to die as they do – the death of the straight ones.* Their death is more blessed than my own life, proclaims Bilaam, because they are straight. They measure up to the purpose for which humans were created. In his first blessing of the people he sought to curse, he recognizes at once that his misuse of Divine gifts of speech and intelligence resulted in his inability to use those gifts freely, and that the eternal blessing of the Jewish People stems from the exalted use of those Divine gifts, in moral freedom.

- Sources: Commentary, Bamidbar 22:28; 23:10

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

TO BELIEVE IS TO BEHAVE (PART 10)

(LAILAH GIFTY AKITA)

“These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world, but whose principal remains intact in the World to Come. They are: honoring one’s parents; acts of kindness; early arrival at the study hall in the morning and the evening; hosting guests; visiting the sick; providing the wherewithal for a bride to marry; escorting the dead; praying with concentration; making peace between two people; and Torah study is the equivalent of them all.” (Tractate Shabbat 127a)

The tenth and final mitzvah listed here is studying Torah. “And Torah study is the equivalent of them all.” When I was a teenager, I was greatly troubled by this statement each time I recited it. To my adolescent mind, it seemed incomprehensible that our Sages – who were imbued with an otherworldly grasp of the human psyche – could possibly teach that the worth of learning Torah is equal to the sum totality of all of the other mitzvahs! How is it possible that a genuinely good person, who “just so happens” to be not yet religious, who sincerely cares about all those around them and can be relied upon at all times, is considered to be on the same level as someone who is a phenomenal Torah scholar but who “just so happens” to be short-tempered, nasty and difficult to tolerate. In my youthful indignation there was no question about which kind of person I would prefer to spend time with – and it was not the scholar! At some point, I was so vexed that I went to speak with my Rabbi. His insightful answer, laced with his customary sagacity, has remained with me ever since.

As with so many of their disarmingly simple lessons, our Sages are actually teaching us here a fundamental understanding about ourselves. In my experience, it seems that, generally, we have been created in such a way that we are intrinsically selfish. The first person we worry about is ourselves, and, after that, those in our immediate circle. Only afterwards, if we have the time and patience, will we begin to interest ourselves in the wellbeing of anyone else. But, as we have learned previously, the Torah demands of us to behave in a G-d-like manner to *everyone* and not to be self-absorbed. This mindset, however, entails going against our natural instincts, which is a very difficult thing to do.

Question: Where do we learn the techniques and acquire the ability to be able to ignore our innate predisposition to selfishness, so we can tend to the individual and communal needs of others?

Answer: In the Torah.

Every single component required to bring us to the understanding that we must think of others and assist them is found in the Torah. When we learn Torah, we are exposing ourselves to Hashem's blueprint for a successful sojourn in this world. Of course, just as with all blueprints, the plans must be transformed from the theoretical into the practical in order for them to make – and leave – an impression in this world. Otherwise, they remain as mere unfulfilled potential. They are exciting plans that never came to fruition. And this is, perhaps, the saddest prospect of all.

It is the Torah which guides us, and it is the Torah which instructs us how to allow ourselves to open our hearts to the needs of others. And it also teaches us how to then act on that awareness in order to fulfill G-d's

Will. Without learning Torah, the vast majority of us would not even have an inkling that we are *obligated* to interact with kindness to all those around us. Granted, there are certain individuals who are blessed with an innate goodness that makes it an absolute pleasure to be in their presence. But for the rest of us, we need the Torah to teach us that we, too, must be sympathetic and solicitous. To reach the point where we *want* to help others whenever we can.

In the timeless teachings of Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Yishmael states, “One who studies Torah in order to practice is given the means to study *and* to teach *and* to observe *and* to practice.” Rabbi Ovadiah from Bartenura (1445-1515) authored a magnificent commentary on the Mishna, one that is considered to be foundational for accurately understanding the Mishna. He explains that the phrase “in order to practice” means to perform acts of kindness. The true route to connecting to G-d in the fullest possible way is through learning His Torah and acting with thoughtfulness and sensitivity to all those around us.

And this is why our Sages teach us that learning Torah is the equivalent of all the other mitzvahs. The more Torah we learn, the greater is our *awareness* of our obligation to think of others. And the more Torah we learn, the greater is our *ability* to act with kindness to everyone. The *raison d'etre* of learning Torah is not simply to acquire huge amounts of knowledge. It is not to be able to dazzle everyone with our erudition. Rather, it is to make ourselves into better people than we were before. To become more thoughtful and gentler. To be empathetic and caring. To become better attuned to the needs of others, and try to attend to them as best we can. By doing so, we are emulating G-d. And this is what we are commanded to do.

However, one who learns Torah is not guaranteed to automatically become a paragon of beautiful character traits. Improvement requires both self-awareness and a great desire to want to become better. In addition, continuing hard “work” is necessary to make it happen. Unfortunately, it is possible for someone to become an extremely accomplished scholar, to be intimately familiar with the vastness of the Torah, and yet still be uncaring and oblivious to the needs of others. My Rabbi ended his reply with a stark pronouncement that has remained embedded in my consciousness: “Anyone who studies Torah and does not become a better person – *every single word of Torah that they learned is flawed.*”

The need to constantly fine-tune our character traits is so incredibly fundamental, which is why Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher points out that the greatest personalities in the Torah are not praised in the Torah for their wisdom or intelligence. Rather, they are praised by the Torah’s portrayal of their outstanding characteristics. The primary aspect of wisdom is to improve ourselves.

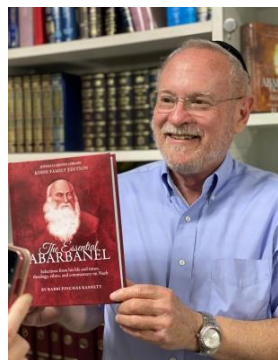
In closing, there is a charming passage in the Talmud (Yoma 86a) that reveals a profound dimension to everything we have just learned. The Torah states in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love Hashem, your G-d.” The Sage Abaye teaches that this verse can be understood as telling us that the Name of G-d becomes beloved through our behavior. Abaye continues by saying that a person should learn Torah and serve Torah scholars. And that all of his business transactions should be performed faithfully, and his dealings with other people should be conducted in a pleasant manner. What do people say about someone like this? “Fortunate is this person who learned Torah. Fortunate are his parents (see Rabbeinu Chananel) who taught him Torah. Fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah. This person who learned Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how refined are his deeds. Regarding him, the Torah says in Isaiah 49:3: ‘He (G-d) said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, through whom I am glorified.’”

When we are exposed to such exceptional role models, we understand that their exemplary character traits are founded in the Torah. They serve as an incentive to us to learn yet more Torah in order to try emulating them to better ourselves. Such a person sanctifies G-d’s Name on a continual basis. And there really is no greater aspiration in this world than to enhance G-d’s Glory and Majesty, and to show all those around us – through our actions and our interactions – that we, too, reflect the Divine.

The students, alumni, staff and events of Ohr Somayach

by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett
Born: Washington, DC
Raised: Pittsburgh, PA and Washington, DC
Wesleyan University
Pomona College, BA
Claremont Graduate School
Ohr Somayach
Director of JLE Program
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Author



I came to Ohr Somayach in 1986. At that time the Yeshiva was fourteen years old. As I got to know the staff members, I was amazed at the longevity of their tenures and also at the number of former students who had become staff. This spoke volumes about the institution. I had come from the US where about 25% of the working population was changing jobs every year. Job security and loyalty to one's employer were more or less non-existent. After 35 years at our Jerusalem campus, I think I've discovered Ohr Somayach's secret recipe for success – it's the mutual loyalty and love that students and staff have for each other. The result is "The Ohr Somayach Family". You don't divorce your family members and you don't abandon them. That's why today many of our staff members have been with us for their entire working lives.

Pinchas Kasnett is one of them. Pinchas was born a few years after WWII in Washington, D.C., his father's hometown. When his father was offered a better job, the family moved to Pittsburgh. Pinchas was one year

old. The family was, like most Jewish families at that time, not observant, but it had a strong Jewish identity. When Pinchas reached school age, his parents enrolled him in a conservative Hebrew afternoon school. When he was 10, his father changed jobs again and they moved back to Washington.

In Washington, because of the fortuitous involvement of his paternal grandfather in an Orthodox *shul*, *Beis Shalom*, the grandfather's whole family was given life membership. They were regular attendees for the High Holidays. Pinchas and his three first cousins had private Hebrew lessons on Sundays before his *bar mitzvah*. The only thing he remembers learning was how to read Hebrew and how to *daven*.

His main connection to Judaism after *bar mitzvah* and during his high school years in Silver Spring, Maryland was through his Jewish friends and his attendance at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. Pinchas was not otherwise interested in the religion.

He attended Wesleyan University, an elite institution in Connecticut, where, he estimates, about a third of the student population was Jewish, but there were no Jewish activities on campus. Not that he would have been interested in attending even if there were.

After a year-and-a-half at Wesleyan, he felt the need for a change in atmosphere. He chose to go West, to Pomona College in Pomona, California. There he found people who were just as smart and academic, but much more down-to-earth. In his junior year he had an American dream girl for a girlfriend: blonde hair, blue eyes, very pretty and not Jewish. Since travel between LA and Washington was expensive, he decided to spend his winter vacation at the school. His girlfriend invited him to Seattle to stay with her family for a traditional Xmas holiday. There was no reason for him not to go. It was one of the best decisions he made in his life.

On Xmas eve, the scene was evocative of Woody Allen's "Anne Hall." The large dining room table was laden with all the traditional Xmas foods – none of them remotely kosher. And as they sat around the Xmas tree singing Xmas carols, Pinchas recalls, "For the first time in my life I felt a wave of existential nausea. I was a traitor to my G-d and to my people. I just wanted to get out of there."

During the first semester of his last year of college, he was an exchange student in a small town in France. He lived with a quite assimilated Jewish family, but the *shul* in town was Orthodox and he saw his first *sukkah* in the *shul's* courtyard. His *neshama* was awakening. At the end of the semester, his parents sent him money for a ticket to Israel, where his first cousin Nesanel lived. He spent Xmas eve in Bethlehem and visited a small Arab town where his cousin had some Arab friends.

Back in Pomona for his last semester, he went to a lecture by Alan Watts, a famous British lecturer on Zen Buddhism. Before launching into his speech about the subject, he asked the audience:

"Are there any Catholics here?" A goodly number of students raised their hands. Then he proceeded to ask them questions about Catholic theology. No one knew the answers.

"Are there any Protestants here?" A larger number of students raised their hands.

"How about Presbyterians? Congregationalists? Episcopalians? He asked them similar questions about their respective theologies and the differences between each sect. No one knew the answers.

Lastly, he asked: "Are there any Jews in the audience?" Pinchas and a few others raised their hands. None among them could answer any of the questions that Watts posed. He then told them that before they learn about Zen Buddhism, they should first learn about their own religion. That made a deep impression on Pinchas.

In the early 1970s, his cousins Nesanel and Binyamin Kasnett started learning Torah with Rav Noach Weinberg in Yerushalayim. Binyamin returned to the States and entered *Shaar Yashuv Yeshiva* in Far Rockaway, and Nesanel went to Borough Park, where he studied in yeshiva, went to law school and married his religious second cousin. He also began learning with Pinchas. Upon his recommendation, Pinchas read Herman Wouk's "This is my G-d". The book was pivotal in changing the direction of Pinchas' life. He decided that he wanted to go to Israel and join a religious kibbutz.

In June of 1972, Pinchas was ready to move to Israel. He applied to a kibbutz and they invited him to become a volunteer. Binyamin was now studying in Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, located somewhere on Shmuel Hanavi Street in Jerusalem.

Pinchas made arrangements with his cousin to meet him at the airport and take him to his destination. Pinchas arrived on Thursday the 17th of Tammuz, but his cousin was not at the airport. This was B.C. (before cell phones). Pinchas made his way to Yerushalayim from the airport to find Binyamin. He trudged down a hot Shmuel Hanavi Street, with his heavy backpack, looking for him. When he asked in Dushinsky's Yeshiva where he might find an American *baal teshuva*, one of the yeshiva students there walked with him across the street to the Navardok Yeshiva, where the fledgling program of Ohr Somayach was then housed. It was there that he found his cousin. Binyamin claimed that he had mixed up the date of the arrival, and was very sorry. But, since he was there, and it was Thursday afternoon: Why not stay for Shabbos, and on Sunday he would drive him up to the kibbutz? Pinchas agreed. And, suggested his cousin, since Pinchas was staying in the yeshiva, it wouldn't hurt to hear a *shiur*. And for Shabbos they would go to Reb Noach's home for the Friday night meal.

That *shiur*, on the Prophets, was nothing like he had ever heard in his life. Rav Nachman Kahana was more animated and excited about the topic than any professor he had heard in college. And the excitement was contagious. Pinchas wanted to hear more.

One Friday night, Reb Noach asked: “I hear you are planning to go to a kibbutz. You will probably be picking oranges and grapefruits, right?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” answered Pinchas.

“If I could get a monkey to pick the oranges, would you stay and learn here in the Yeshiva?”

Pinchas heard the logic and stayed.

Rav Mendel Weinbach, *zatzal*, taught *Gemara* in the afternoons at the Yeshiva. Pinchas instantly bonded with him and his family. He saw both Rav Mendel and his wife as role models for parents of a Jewish family and was a frequent guest at their home.

By 1973 he had made a commitment to be *shomer Shabbos* and *shomer mitzvahs* and was committed to Ohr Somayach. He had also begun to do some work for the Yeshiva, including designing a new application form. After Pesach of that year he was learning in Rabbi Aharon Feldman’s *shiur*.

After his marriage in 1974, he and his wife settled in Givat Ada, on the Mediterranean coast, north of Hadera and close to Zichron Yaakov, where Ohr Somayach had opened a branch. He learned in their *kollel*. After three years, they moved to another branch of Ohr Somayach, located in Zichron Yaakov. When Ohr Somayach opened a *tefillin* factory in Givat Ada, they asked Pinchas to be the general manager.

In 1980, after years of living in the hinterlands, the family decided to relocate to Yerushalayim, where Pinchas became the dorm manager for the Yeshiva.

As the family grew and the pressure to support them increased, Pinchas began a job search in the States. He was offered jobs as a *rebbe* in day schools in Cleveland and Baltimore, but, upon the advice of Rav Aharon Feldman, he stayed in Israel and received *smicha* (rabbinical ordination). The Yeshiva then offered him a position teaching in the Beginners’ Program (today called “Mechina”).

In 1983, the JLE Program needed a director in the New York office, and Pinchas answered the call, moving his family to Monsey. The job included travel to campuses across the country, recruitment of JLE participants and follow-up of attendees. Pinchas was very successful. At the same time, he saw the need to educate not just college-age students, but older singles and families as well. Ohr Somayach had recently begun running a weekend retreat on national holidays at a resort in the Catskills, and Pinchas extended the program to include Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He instituted services for beginners, and, along with other rabbis, he taught the fundamentals of Judaism to an ever-increasing number of attendees.

Eventually, he turned over the JLE directorship to a fellow Cohen and Wesleyan alumnus, Rabbi Zalman Corlin, and Pinchas accepted the new and challenging position of teaching Torah to businessmen and professionals in the New York area, and fundraising from them.

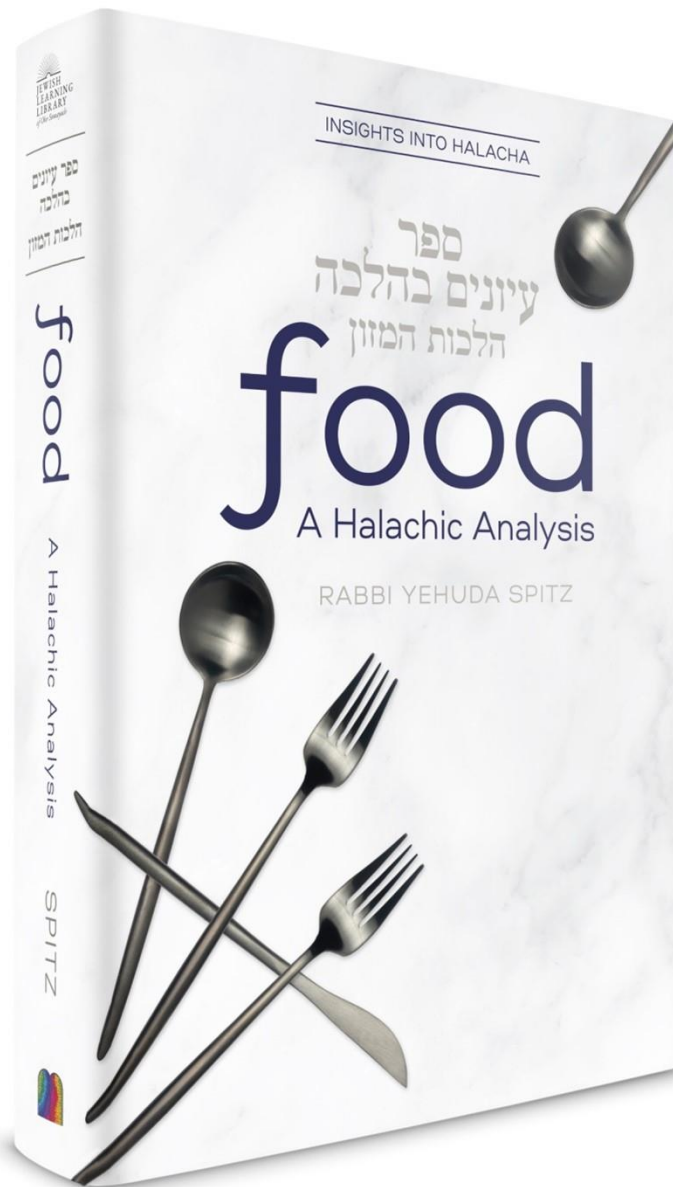
In 2010, he contacted Rabbi Moshe Newman, the editor for Ohr Somayach’s weekly Torah publication – Ohrnet Magazine – and asked if the Yeshiva would be interested in publishing a weekly column reflecting Abarbanel’s commentary on the *Chumash*. The answer was positive, and that began a new chapter in Pinchas’ life – that of an author. Since then, he has published “Abarbanel on the Torah” (Menucha Publishers 2017) and “The Essential Abarbanel” (Menucha Publishers 2021). He and his wife moved to Israel in the summer of 2019 and are living in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

May his contributions to the Yeshiva continue, *iy’H*, for many more years to come.

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