

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Birth of a Nation

*"And there he became a nation." (Devarim 26:5)*

I have a friend who became religiously observant in New York City. He had been attending a synagogue on a fairly regular basis. One day he was leaving the shul after the morning service. He was returning the paper *yarmulke* to its place at the shul's entrance when he decided he wanted to "wear" his new-found religiosity more openly.

Leaving the shul, he turned, not toward his apartment but in the other direction. Within a few minutes he found himself at the door of a Jewish bookstore. At the end of the counter there was a carousel that carried the entire gamut of Orthodox Jewish headgear. Approaching the carousel, he began to turn it slowly.

He was amazed at the range of choices. There were white *kipot* and green *kipot*, black *kipot*, knitted *kipot*, leather *kipot*, velvet *kipot*, cloth *kipot* and *kipot* that looked like they had come off the head of an Afghan herdsman.

"Which one am I going to chose?" he thought to himself.

Without thinking too much about it, he picked a large black velvet *kipah* and plonked it on the top of his head. Making his way to the cashier, he paid for his new *yarmulke*, and walked outside, and stopped in his tracks.

Everything had changed.

He had changed. The world had changed.

He thought to himself, "I have become an ambassador. I have become an ambassador for the Jewish People. Everything I do now will be judged through the lens of my Jewishness. If I push in line, people won't say, 'Who is this guy pushing in line?' They will say, 'Who is this Jew pushing in line?' And if I give up my seat to an elderly person on the subway, I will have sanctified the Name of Heaven."

Little do we realize that the good name of the Jewish People, and, in a sense, along with them, the G-d of the Jewish People rests on small pieces of cloth that are perched precariously upon our heads.

This week's Torah portion marks the beginning of the birth of a nation.

*"And there he became a nation."*

The Haggadah of Passover quotes this verse and explains that the Jewish People were "outstanding" there in Egypt. They did not change their manner of dress, their names or their language. They were a very visible and very distinct minority.

As we were born, so we continue.

Every interaction a "uniformed" Jew has with the world-at-large has the potential to sanctify the Name

of Heaven. And it can be done in the smallest of ways.

I have seen this same friend go up to garbage collectors (even if he does not live in the area) and say "Thank you!"

The other day he was in an art shop. He was looking for a very, very, fine paintbrush. He found four no. 0000s. To save himself another trip to the art store, he took all of them. In line to pay, he noticed the cashier looking at him with an expression of mild distaste.

Handing the brushes to her, he remarked, "I took the last of these brushes. You may want to reorder them so you will have them in stock when the next person comes along."

The assistant looked up at him for a second, and smiled.

We are all ambassadors in the birth of our nation.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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**W**ith the death of Yosef, the Book of Bereishet (Genesis) comes to an end. The Book of Shemot (Exodus) chronicles the creation of the nation of Israel from the descendants of Yaakov. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Pharaoh, fearing the population explosion of Jews, enslaves them. However, when their birthrate increases, he orders the Jewish midwives to kill all newborn males.

Yocheved gives birth to Moshe and hides him in the reeds by the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter finds and adopts him, although she knows he is probably a Hebrew. Miriam, Moshe's sister, offers to find a nursemaid for Moshe and arranges for his mother Yocheved to be his nursemaid.

Years later, Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and Moshe kills the Egyptian. Realizing his life is in danger, Moshe flees to Midian where he rescues Tziporah, whose father Yitro approves

of their subsequent marriage. On Chorev (Mount Sinai), Moshe witnesses the burning bush where G-d commands him to lead the Jewish People from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael, the Land promised to their ancestors.

Moshe protests that the Jewish People will doubt his being G-d's agent, so G-d enables Moshe to perform three miraculous transformations to validate himself in the people's eyes: transforming his staff into a snake, his healthy hand into a leprous one, and water into blood. When Moshe declares that he is not a good public speaker, G-d tells him that his brother Aharon will be his spokesman. Aharon greets Moshe on his return to Egypt and they petition Pharaoh to release the Jews. Pharaoh responds with even harsher decrees, declaring that the Jews must produce the same quota of bricks as before but without being given supplies. The people become dispirited, but G-d assures Moshe that He will force Pharaoh to let the Jews go.

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## Questions

1. Why does the verse say "And Yosef was in Egypt"?
2. "...And they will go up out of the land." Who said this and what did he mean?
3. Why did Pharaoh specifically choose water as the means of killing the Jewish boys? (Two reasons.)
4. "She saw that he was good." What did she see "good" about Moshe that was unique?
5. Which Hebrew men were fighting each other?
6. Moshe was afraid that the Jewish People were not fit to be redeemed, because some among them committed a certain sin. What sin?
7. Why did the Midianites drive Yitro's daughters away from the well?
8. How did Yitro know that Moshe was Yaakov's descendant?
9. What lesson was Moshe to learn from the fact that the burning bush was not consumed?
10. What merit did the Jewish People have that warranted G-d's promise to redeem them?
11. Which expression of redemption would assure the people that Moshe was the true redeemer?
12. What did the staff turning into a snake symbolize?
13. Why didn't Moshe want to be the leader?
14. "And Hashem was angry with Moshe..." What did Moshe lose as a result of this anger?
15. What was special about Moshe's donkey?
16. About which plague was Pharaoh warned first?
17. Why didn't the elders accompany Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh? How were they punished?
18. Which tribe did not work as slaves?
19. Who were the: a) nogsim b) shotrim?
20. How were the shotrim rewarded for accepting the beatings on behalf of their fellow Jews?

## Answers

1. 1:5 - This verse adds that despite being in Egypt as a ruler, Yosef maintained his righteousness.
2. 1:10 - Pharaoh said it, meaning that the Egyptians would be forced to leave Egypt.
3. 1:10,22 - He hoped to escape Divine retribution, as G-d promised never to flood the entire world. Also, his astrologers saw that the Jewish redeemer's downfall would be through water.
4. 2:2 - When he was born, the house was filled with light.
5. 2:13 - Datan and Aviram.
6. 2:14 - Lashon hara (evil speech).
7. 2:17 - Because a ban had been placed on Yitro for abandoning idol worship.
8. 2:20 - The well water rose towards Moshe.
9. 3:12 - Just as the bush was not consumed, so too Moshe would be protected by G-d.
10. 3:12 - That they were destined to receive the Torah.
11. 3:16,18 - "I surely remembered (pakod pakadeti)."
12. 4:3 - It symbolized that Moshe spoke ill of the Jews by saying that they wouldn't listen to him, just as the original snake sinned through speech.
13. 4:10 - He didn't want to take a position above that of his older brother, Aharon.
14. 4:14 - Moshe lost the privilege of being a kohen.
15. 4:20 It was used by Avraham for akeidat Yitzchak and will be used in the future by Mashiach.
16. 4:23 - Death of the firstborn.
17. 5:1 - The elders were accompanying Moshe and Aharon, but they were afraid and one by one they slipped away. Hence, at the giving of the Torah, the elders weren't allowed to ascend with Moshe.
18. 5:5 - The tribe of Levi.
19. 5:6 - a) Egyptian taskmasters; b) Jewish officers.
20. 5:14 - They were chosen to be on the Sanhedrin.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

## Moses' Many Names

**A**n obscure passage in the Book of Chronicles discusses Caleb's children sired through his "Jewish" wife. She was said to have given birth to Yered, the father of Gedor; Chever, the father of Socho; and Yekutiel, the father of Zanoach (I Chron. 4:18, according to Radak). However, rabbinic tradition tells us that the entire Book of Chronicles is meant as fodder for exegesis and should not be read literally (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:3). In that spirit, the Midrash interprets all of the names listed above as references to none other than Moses (*Moshe*). This assertion is bolstered by the appearance of Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah at the end of the passage in question.

Drawing from the above verse in Chronicles, the Midrash asserts that Moses had six names:

1. *Yered* refers to Moses for one of three reasons: According to the first two explanations, this name is derived from the Hebrew verb *la'redet* ("to descend") and either refers to Moses bringing down the Torah from the Heavens above, or to his bringing G-d's Holy Presence down to Earth. The third explanation connects *Yered* to the Hebrew verb *l'rdot* ("to lord over"), and refers to Moses' role as the king/leader of the Jewish people (see *Zevachim* 102a). The Talmud (*Megillah* 13a) adds that Moses was called *Yered* because the manna "descended" from the heavens in his times (and, actually, in his merit, according to *Taanit* 9a).
2. "Father of Gedor," or *Avigdor*, is related to the Hebrew word *geder* ("fence," "boundary") and refers to the fact that although the Jewish People merited many

fence-makers – that is, important Sages who "built a fence around the Torah" (*Avot* 1:1) to distance people from sin – Moses was the "father" of all such leaders. The Talmud (*Megillah* 13a) clarifies that Moses rectified the Jews' breaches by establishing the "boundaries" of law.

3. *Chever* refers to Moses in one of two ways: First, the Midrash links this word to the Hebrew word *chibbur* ("connection," "bond"), explaining that Moses served as the impetus for connecting the Jewish People to G-d. The Vilna Gaon (to I Chron. 4:18) explains that Moses did this by presiding over putting up the Mishkan. Second, the Midrash links the name Chever to the Hebrew root AYIN-BET-REISH (presumably, by way of the interchangeability of CHET and AYIN), which means "to pass." The Midrash cryptically says that this refers to Moses causing punishments and retribution to be "passed over," which I think refers to his pleading with G-d to not punish the Jews for the Golden Calf.
4. "Father of Socho," or *Avi-Socho*, is understood by the Midrash as related to the Hebrew word *sochech* ("gazer," "seer"), which is a codeword for prophecy. The Midrash thus explains that Moses is called *Avi-Socho* because he was the "father of prophets" in the sense that he reached a level of prophecy unparalleled by all his future successors. The Talmud (*Megillah* 13a) adds that Moses was like a *succah* ("protective hut") for the Jewish People, because his merits were so plentiful (see *Targum Rav Yosef* to I Chron. 4:18). The Vilna Gaon (to I Chron. 4:18) clarifies that this refers to Moses protecting the Jewish

People from punishment after they complained at Taveira (see Num. 11:2).

5. *Yekutiel* is expounded by the Midrash as though it were derived from the Hebrew word *mikaveh/tikvah* (“waiting,” “hoping”), in reference to Moses’ role in establishing G-d’s place as the Great Hope of the Jewish People. The Vilna Gaon (to I Chron. 4:18) explains that Moses achieved this by serving as the reason for the manna to fall every morning, thereby giving the Jews a reason to look forward to G-d’s bounty daily.
6. “Father of Zanoach,” or *Avi-Zanoach*, is seen by the Midrash as related to the Hebrew root ZAYIN-NUN-CHET, which means “to forsake/reject/leave.” In this sense, Moses was the father of “the rejecters,” because under his leadership the Jewish People “rejected” idol worship. The Vilna Gaon (to I Chron. 4:18) asserts that this refers to Moses helping the Jews achieve Divine atonement after the sin of the Ten Spies.

After explaining these six names, the Midrash lists another four names that were given to Moses based on other sources:

1. *Toviah* (Tobias) – because when Moses was born, the Bible says (Ex. 2:1): “And she (Moses’ mother) saw him, that he was ‘good’ (*tov*).” Nowadays, most people pronounce this name as Tuviah even though in the Bible it is vowelized as Toviah. Dr. Alexander Beider notes in his *Dictionary of Ashkenazi Given Names* that scholars do not know what caused the vowel shift in this name. The name *Toviah* appears several other times in the Bible, seemingly in reference to other people, including the father of a family that returned to the Holy Land with Zerubabel (Ezra 2:60, Neh. 7:62), a *kohen* in the early Second Temple period (Zech. 6:10, 6:14), and an Ammonite slave who tried to thwart Nehemiah’s efforts in rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh. 2:10-19, 3:35, 4:1, 6-7, 13:4-7).
2. *Shemaiah* (see I Chron. 24:6) – because G-d “heard” (*shema*) Moses’ prayers. This name is understood as a reference to Moses

because the person in Chronicles who bears this name was said to have played a role in establishing the 24 Kohanic Shifts, which is an institute that dates back to Moses. This name also appears several other times in the Bible in reference to other people: a legitimate prophet in the time of Jeroboam (II Kings 12:22, II Chron. 12:5-15), a false prophet in the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 29:31-32), and various other Levites and Israelites.

3. *Ben Netanel* (see I Chron. 24:6) – because Moses “gave” (*natan*) over the Torah from G-d to the Jewish People.
4. *Levi* (see I Chron. 24:6) – because Moses was a grandson of Levi.

Based on these additional names, the Midrash asserts that, all in all, Moses had ten names. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:3 and *Shemot Rabbah* 1:26) concludes that of all the various names that Moses had, the Torah chose to refer to him as *Moshe*, the name which was given to him by Bithiah, as reward for the kindness that she bestowed upon him by adopting him and raising him. And even G-d called him *Moshe* and not any of his other names.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1979) explains that each of Moses’ ten names reflects a different facet of his personality and teaches us something different about his greatness. The name *Moshe*, in particular, teaches us that from a young age Moses was instilled with the concept of giving up one’s life to do kindness to others, just as his foster-mother Bithiah had risked her life by taking in a Jewish child simply in order to help the baby survive. We see this aspect of Moses’ personality when he later defended the Jewish People following the sin of the Golden Calf and even requested to be “erased from Your book” (Ex. 32:32) in pursuit of saving the Jews from punishment.

Either way, the Midrash’s conclusion implies that only the name *Moshe* was given to him by Bithiah, while Moses’ other names were given to him by

others. Indeed, the apocryphal Midrashic work *Divrei HaYamim Shel Moshe* (see Rabbi J. D. Eisenstein's *Otzar Midrashim*, page 358) explains that Moses received each of his names from a different person: Bithiah called him *Moshe*, Amram (Moses' father) called him *Chever* (because for Moses' sake he reunited/reconnected with his previously-divorced wife to sire this son), Yocheved (Moses' mother) called him *Yekutiel*, Miriam (Moses' sister) called him *Yered* (because she "went down" to the river to see his fate), Aaron (Moses' brother) called him *Avi-Zanoach* (because his father had initially "forsaken" his mother by divorcing her), Kohath (Moses' grandfather) called him *Avi-Gedor* (because through Moses' birth the decree to throw all Jewish boys into the river was repealed), Moses' wet-nurse called him *Socho* (*Zayit Raanan* notes that even though Moses' mother nursed him, she apparently hired a wet-nurse as well), and the Jewish people called him *Shemaiah ben Netanel*, and this tradition is also cited by *Sefer HaYashar* and *Yalkut Shimoni* to Exodus 166. However, see Ibn Ezra (to Ex. 2:22, 4:20) who dismisses *Divrei HaYamim Shel Moshe* from being a reliable source because it does not come from the prophets or Chazal.

The Talmud (*Bava Batra* 15a) claims that Heiman (found in Psalms) is also another name for Moses. That name literally means the "trustworthy one." The Talmudic identification of Heiman with Moses might be the basis for the Zoharic appellation *Raya Mehemna* ("the trustworthy shepherd") that is also applied to Moses.

Rabbi Gedaliah Ibn Yachya (1515-1587), in his work *Shalshelas HaKabbalah*, cites a tradition that claims that Moses' original name was Tamar/Tamur, which means "raising" (as in "raising" an adopted child) in Egypt. To the best of my knowledge, this name is not mentioned in any other source.

Interestingly, the poem *Yetziv Pitgam* (customarily read on the Second Day of Shavuot) refers to somebody named "the humble man Yehonatan." Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum (1759-1841) claims that Yehonatan is actually one of Moses' ten names, but his grandson-in-law Rabbi Chanoch Henoch Teitelbaum (Mayer) of Sassov (1884-1942) points out that there is no rabbinic source that claims Yehonatan as one of Moses' names.

I would note, however, that the name Yehonatan is essentially the same as the name *Netanel*, as both names are comprised of a cognate of *natan* ("give"), plus a theophoric element that refers to G-d. In *Yehonatan*, that theophoric reference is the prefix *yeho-* which represents the first three letters of the Tetragrammaton, while in the case of *Netanel* the theophoric element is the suffix *-el*, which also refers to G-d. What's fascinating is that the Bible (Judges 18:30) relates that the priest at Micah's idol was named Yehonatan, son of Gershon, son of Menashe, with the letter NUN in the name Menashe superscripted as though it were not part of the actual text. Based on this, the Rabbis (see *Bava Batra* 109b-110a) explain that the idolatrous priest Yehonatan was none other than a grandson of Moses (because *Menashe* sans the NUN spells out *Moshe*, and Moses had a son named Gershon). So even if Yehonatan is not explicitly mentioned as an alternate name for Moses, it is certainly the name of one of his grandsons who may have been named after his illustrious grandfather.

For more discussion of whether the name Moses is a Hebrew translation of the Egyptian names Monius or Mosh, see "Appendix B: Egyptian Names in the Bible" in my book *Lashon HaKodesh: History, Holiness, & Hebrew* (Mosaica Press).

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA (PART 13)

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched  
- they must be felt with the heart.”  
(Helen Keller)

**T**he third blessing continues: “True, You are the First and You are the Last, and other than You we have no king, redeemer or savior. You redeemed us from Egypt, our G-d, and from the house of slavery You liberated us.”

The final section of our blessing switches its focus from affirming everything that we declared in the Shema to the redemption from Egypt, which is a Torah obligation to remember each day. The word “true” is repeated several times in the blessing to emphasize the centrality of the Exodus.

By declaring that G-d is “the First” and “the Last” we are also affirming that G-d is also everything else in between. There is no moment when G-d is not present and watching over us, ensuring that we as the Jewish nation will endure forever. There have been many dark and tragic periods in Jewish history when G-d’s presence seemed to have been absent. But this mistaken perception could not be further from the truth. It is *not* the reality and *not* the truth. Rather, our ability to recognize His overt presence is missing. Even at the bleakest times, when it appears to us that G-d has abandoned us to our enemies and we will be enslaved in perpetuity, it is not true. G-d is our Redeemer and our Savior. And He always will be.

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918) was a famed Rabbi of Brisk in Belarus and one of the greatest scholars of his generation, renowned for

his exacting and rigorous approach to understanding and elucidating the Torah. He explains that there are two dimensions to slavery. The first one is that a slave is the property of his master. Even when he is not physically involved in working, he still belongs to his master who can do with him as he wishes. The second dimension to slavery is that the slave sees no fruit from his labors despite the fact that he is put to work. Everything he produces is owned by his master. This reality is the cause of enormous mental anguish. Accordingly, the phrase, “You redeemed us from Egypt, our G-d, and from the house of slavery You liberated us” is referring to these two different dimensions of slavery. “You redeemed us” refers to the physical slavery that ended and that we no longer have to be involved in backbreaking toil that produces nothing for us. On the other hand, the “liberation” refers to our being freed from the physical subjugation of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The Maharal points out that often when a person has been enslaved for a very long time, they remain in a mental state of servitude long after they have been physically released from bondage. After 210 years of enslavement, G-d needed to remove the mental chains of slavery that generations of Jews had lived under, just as He needed to physically remove us from Egypt.

When describing to Moshe Rabbeinu how He was going to free His chosen nation from slavery, G-d says (*Shemot* 6:7), “I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be a G-d to you, and you shall know that I am your G-d, Who takes you out from

under the burdens of Egypt.” The first Rebbe from Gur, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, points out that the word for “burden” in Hebrew is closely related to the word for “tolerance.” He explains that the root of the problem in Egypt was that the Jewish People had become so accustomed to slavery that they became tolerant of their enslaved state to the point that they no longer had any expectations of being liberated.

To live an existence that offers no hope for the future is possibly the most dismal reality of all. Even under the most appalling circumstances, a Jew must never abandon the anticipation that “G-d’s salvation can come at the blink of an eye” (*Midrash Lekach Tov* for Esther 4:17). Rabbi Yisrael Spira (1889-1989) was the saintly and revered Rebbe of Bluzhov, a great-grandson of the Bnei Yissachar and a Holocaust survivor who spent the war years in the Janowska and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. He would try to give emotional and spiritual support to his fellow inmates. He would tell them that the Hebrew word for slave is “*avadim*,” which is spelled ‘*ayin*’ ‘*bet*’ ‘*dalet*’ ‘*yud*’ ‘*mem*.’ These letters form the acronym

for the Hebrew phrase, “*David Ben Yishai Avdecha Meshicha* – Your slave David the son of Yishai is the chosen one (the Messiah).” Then he would tell them that even in their present impoverished spiritual state and subhuman physical conditions – even while deeply-mired in their reality of being “*avadim*” – we find allusions to the eventual freedom we await with the coming of the Messiah. G-d is together with us wherever we find ourselves.

The Rabbis offer an additional explanation as to why our blessing uses both the word redeemer and the word savior. The Hebrew words for redeemer and savior are “*goel*” and “*moshiah*.” According to the Rabbis, the difference between the two is quite significant. “*Goel*” means a redemption that is all-embracing, an absolute salvation, whereas “*moshiah*” is only a partial deliverance from the danger. Regardless of whether we are being redeemed entirely or only partially, the Source is the always the same.

*To be continued...*

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Megillah 2-8

### The Megillah and Talmud Torah

*“The Yeshiva of Rebbe (Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi) would interrupt (“mevatlin,” which literally means nullify) their Torah study in order to come to read the Megillah of Esther on Purim.”*

Our *sugya* explains the textual basis for their course of action (Esther 9:28). However, the commentaries seem puzzled by the words “*mevatlin Talmud Torah*.” Although the yeshiva students *paused* their own normal Torah study to read the Megillah, as per the mitzvah, their reading the Megillah was *also* a manner of Torah study and not a “nullification of Torah study”! After all, the Megillah of Esther is one of the twenty-four books of the Tanach! (*Rashash and many others*)

Numerous fascinating answers are offered by the commentaries and here is a brief presentation of a few approaches. The *gemara* in Mesechet Megillah 18a references some enigmatic words that appear in the Megillah. The identity of the “*achashtranim bnei haramachim*” (Esther 8:10) is vague, although from the context it is clear that it refers to couriers. Our Sages admit that we read about these *achashtranim* without a full grasp of their identity. However, we nevertheless fulfill the mitzvah of reading of the Megillah without complete understanding the exact translation of the text. But despite fulfilling the mitzvah of reading the Megillah, it can be said that there is an aspect of *bitul Torah* when reading these words – a failure to fulfill the mitzvah to learn Torah while reading those words – due to a lack of reading comprehension. (*Magen Avraham, Maharil Diskin and others offer a glimpse into further understanding the need to understand words of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah in order to fulfill the mitzvah of Talmud Torah*)

Some suggest that the *bitul Torah* of hearing the Megillah is not related to the actual reading or

hearing the Megillah being read. Rather, it refers to the time and effort required for the students to go out from the yeshiva to join with the rest of the people of the community, presumably in the central *shul* of their locale. This answer is alluded to in the words of the *gemara*, which says that the yeshiva students interrupted their Torah study “to come to read the Megillah.” They did not read the Megillah as individuals or even as a separate yeshiva. Rather, they interrupted their studies in order to publicize the miracle of Purim together with all of the people in their community. Fulfilling the mitzvah in this way is preferable since “in the multitude of the people, the King is glorified.” (Mishlei 14:28) Although travel from their yeshiva to the preferred destination where the Megillah would be read resulted in diminished time and ability for Torah study, it was the correct way to fulfill the mitzvah of reading the Megillah. In this manner they would express the greatness of Hashem and their gratitude for the miracle of Purim in the best possible way. (*Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 687:8*)

A third approach is that the concern for *bitul Torah* was not with regards to the amount or *quantity* of their Torah study but rather concerned the *quality* of their Torah study. Torah is the Divine wisdom that Hashem chose to share with us, to teach us how to follow His ways and grow as close to our Creator as possible. To do this, Hashem’s will is that we should study the moral teachings of the Torah to the maximum, each person according to his own personal ability. We are taught, for example, that one who is capable of *mishna* study should not confine his Torah study to the Tanach. And this is true for all of the various ways, levels and areas of Torah study: each person is instructed to pursue the study of the Torah in the most elevated and lofty way possible for him as an individual. A person who is capable of

delving into the depths of the “Sea of the Talmud” should emphasize *gemara* study more than the study of *mishna* and Tanach. Many or most of the students of the Rebbe’s yeshiva were pursuing relatively advanced levels of the Torah’s Oral Law, as is the case with the typical yeshiva in our own day. For them – and for many other Torah students like them – it would be considered to be *bitul Torah* to diminish the quality of their Torah study. Regarding the mitzvah of Talmud

Torah it would not be appropriate to halt the yeshiva’s *gemara shiur* and their individual efforts to pursue the depths of *Shas* in order to fulfill the mitzvah of reading the Megillah of Esther on the night and day of Purim. But halt their own study they must – in order to read the Megillah and fulfill this special mitzvah instituted by *Chazal*.

- *Megillah 3a*

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## PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

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by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

### THE SONG OF THE DAY

The day says: “Day by day expresses speech and night by night relates comprehension.” (Tehillim 19:3)

**I**n the earth’s daylight hours, Hashem’s creations and doings are visible to us and we constantly bless Him, each day anew. Nights serve to separate the days and give recesses for contemplation and absorption, important because an unending day would result in mental overload. Moreover, if not for the nights, the days would go unappreciated.

The Kabbalists teach that the world is created anew each day. Similarly, the soul is divided into sparks, and each day a different spark shines forth. It is for this reason that many mitzvahs apply on a daily basis. The Kabbalists further teach that each day is unique, and each prayer serves its own purpose in history. Hence, days are not repetitive, but cumulative. Day by day, our experiences and comprehension of Hashem increase, and so does our praise.

- Sources: *Tehillim* (68:2); *Pri Eitz Chaim* (*Tefillah* 7); *Machsof HaLavan* (*Kedoshim*); *Sefas Emes* (to *Tehillim* 19:3); *Ohr HaChaim* (*Ber.* 47:29)

*\*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib*

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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

## Foreign but Equal

**T**he first few verses of our Torah portion describe the descent of the Jews into Egyptian slavery and torture. The three distinct phases are apparent in the prophecy to Avraham: “*Your offspring will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs, and they (i.e. the natives) will enslave them and oppress them.*” (Ber. 15:13)

First, the Jews were subjected to a labor tax. As aliens of foreign origin they were made to pay a high price for the very air they breathed. But when these and similar burdensome laws directed at the foreigners did not achieve their objective, the Jews were declared to be slaves. Stripped of their rights, the entire Egyptian populace had authority over them. This soon morphed into an embittered torture in which they endured daily wanton abuse intended to crush their spirit. Thus, all three phases – *foreigners, enslavement, and oppression* – which were foretold to Avraham, were realized.

The beginning, the root, of the unspeakable abuse was *gerut* – treating a foreigner, a stranger, as if he has no rights. This mistreatment is emblazoned in our national memory and finds unusual emphasis in the Torah’s laws. No less than twenty-four times, whenever the Torah establishes rights concerning persons and things, the stranger is placed under the special protection of the law. We are cautioned multiple times to treat the stranger and the convert with very great respect and, in so doing, to remember our experience as foreigners in Egypt. (*Vayikra 19:34; Shemot 22:20*)

The degree of justice in a country, writes Rav Hirsch, is measured not by the rights accorded to the native-born, the rich, and the well-connected, but by the justice meted out to the unprotected stranger. A basic characteristic of Jewish Law is that the homeland does not grant human rights, but, rather, human rights grant the homeland. There is no distinction between citizen’s rights and human rights. Rather, anyone who has accepted upon himself the moral laws of humanity – the seven Noahide laws – could claim the right to live in the Land of Israel.

When setting forth this principle, the Torah reminds us: *Recall that you were once foreigners in Egypt.* We are to recall how that first injustice – disparate treatment of foreigners – quickly burgeoned into full blown slavery and cruel affliction, and to guard ourselves and our society against such dangerous missteps.

In Rav Hirsch’s view, this principle of the equal treatment of foreigners extended even to situations in which the foreigners were less than exemplary citizens. In the wake of the pogroms in Russia, hundreds of Polish and Russian refugees arrived in Frankfurt, some of whom became involved in questionable activities. The Kehilla board wanted to have them expelled from the city for fear that they would arouse antagonism against the Jewish community as a whole. Rav Hirsch would not hear of it. “First throw the wealthy criminals out of the city. Only afterwards can you do the same to the poor ones.”

- Sources: *Commentary, Shemot 1:14*