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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### You're a Star!

*"Hashem, your G-d has multiplied you and behold! – you are like the stars of the heaven in abundance." (1:4)*

**W**hen the Jewish People fulfill Hashem's will, they are like the stars. There is no competition or envy among the stars. No star was ever heard to complain that the light of another was brighter than his. Similarly a righteous person is happy with the light that Hashem has bestowed on him, for he knows it is not his own light anyway.

Sometimes the light of a star is not immediately apparent. A cloud of cosmic gas or some other obstruction may mask that light. So too are there are untold numbers of holy people amongst our nation who deliberately hide their light "under a bushel."

And just as the stars will live forever, so is the Jewish People an eternal nation who will radiate the light of Hashem forever.

▪ Source: Based on the Sifri in Parshat Ekev

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# TISHA B'AV SPECIAL FEATURE

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## Feeling the Loss

by Rabbi Chaviv Danesh

In this generation it is very hard to even relate to the concept of the Beit Hamikdash on a simple level, let alone to mourn its loss. Many see the three-week mourning period as a time to get through, and are often counting down the days before they can take haircuts and eat meat. Why is this so?

The book of Ezra says that upon the rebuilding of the Second Beit Hamikdash the old were mourning while the young were rejoicing (Ezra 3:10-13). The elders who had seen and experienced the superior spiritual nature of the First Beit Hamikdash cried when they saw the decline in the spiritual level of the Second Beit Hamikdash. But the young who had never seen the First Beit Hamikdash were rejoicing, not knowing the great spiritual decline of the new Beit Hamikdash. Our feeling toward the loss of the Beit Hamikdash today is in a way comparable to the feeling expressed by the young at the time of the rebuilding of the Second Beit Hamikdash. Just as the young didn't mourn because they didn't know what they were missing from the First Beit Hamikdash, so too it is very hard for us to mourn for the Beit Hamikdash that we never knew. Since one reason for the inability to mourn the loss of the Beit Hamikdash is that we do not know what it is that we are missing, it is fitting for us to begin by intellectually understanding one basic function of the Beit Hamikdash, and use that as a stepping-stone to help us emotionally feel and mourn its loss.

The commentaries explain that even though Hashem fills the entire world, nevertheless there are times and places that enable us to experience Hashem's providence more directly (Kad Hakemach "avel"). It was at Mount Sinai, during the Giving of the Torah, that Hashem's presence was most intensely felt. All doubt disappeared once

the Jewish People heard Hashem speak directly to them. This was indeed a truly awesome experience. The Ramban explains that the Mishkan (and later on the Beit Hamikdash) was meant to be a structure that held within it the revelation at Mount Sinai (Ramban on Shemot 25:1). Like Mount Sinai, the Beit Hamikdash was a place that enabled a glimpse into the spiritual world. It was a meeting place between the physical and spiritual. Therefore, anyone who visited the Beit Hamikdash was able to see first-hand that there is more to the physical world than meets the eye. From the ten miracles that constantly took place in the Beit Hamikdash, to the spiritual high that filled the air, a casual visit to the Beit Hamikdash was a rejuvenation of *emuna* (faith).

The Beit Hamikdash though didn't only reveal spirituality in its structure. Rather, it took that spirituality and spread it out to the rest of the world as well. This is what the verse means when it says: "You shall build for me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in them." The Alshich points out that the verse does not say "I will dwell in it" but rather "I will dwell in them" to teach us that through the Mishkan (and later on the Beit Hamikdash) Hashem would dwell in the hearts of *Klal Yisrael* (Alshich on Shemot 25:8; Nefesh Hachaim 1:4 *hagaha*). In this sense, the Beit Hamikdash not only revealed the Providence of Hashem in its structure, but was also a conduit through which the existence of Hashem could be felt more directly in every place in the world.

We can now begin to at least touch the surface of one of many things that we lost with the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Without the Beit Hamikdash, which connected the spiritual and physical worlds, it is so hard to see beyond what meets the eye. It is hard to see the bond between the physical and spiritual. This is one of

the reasons why the world today is so detached from spirituality while being deeply rooted in the physical. As the Gemara says: *From the day the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, a wall of iron separates between the Jewish People and their Father in the Heavens*” (Berachot 32b). Chazal tell us that in every generation that the Beit Hamikdash is not

rebuilt, it is as if it was destroyed in that generation (Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1). By reflecting on the fact that it is our transgressions that yearly destroy this most holy place, we can perhaps begin to mourn on some level the huge loss of the Beit Hamikdash, and, through that, merit doing real *teshuva* and see the day of its rebuilding through the coming of the Mashiach speedily in our days.

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## PEREK SHIRA

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by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

### THE SONG OF THE CRANE

The Crane says: “Thank Hashem with a harp, make music for Him with a ten-stringed lyre.” (*Tehillim* 33:2)

The beautiful crane is the tallest and one of the highest flying of all birds, and its calls can be heard kilometers away. It is highly vocal and capable of emitting a wide variety of sounds, sometimes as part of an intricate group dance. It sings to laud Hashem with every aspect of His praise, like a multiple stringed harp and lyre. The harp is a relatively straightforward instrument to play, symbolizing the masses who praise Him on a basic level. On the other hand, the complex ten-stringed lyre is the tool of individuals, who rise above their brethren in their song to the Creator. The ten strings represent a Jewish congregation, which is comprised of a minimum of ten Jewish men. Hashem’s Presence descends to each Jewish prayer hall to hear their expressions of praise.

Hashem created the entire universe for His glory, and He desires the praise of His beloved nation above all. When we enjoy His kindnesses, we thank Him. When we experience His wonders, we laud Him. Suffering leads to submission. Neediness calls for prayer. Victory over our base inclinations is a declaration of Hashem’s kingship

Recognition of failure of such, arouses repentance. All are forms of Hashem’s praise. Jewish life is filled with a rich variety of meaning. We experience vibrancy and enjoyment in all we do, soaring and singing like the crane.

*Note:* This is the song of the *agur*, a bird of uncertain identity. We have translated as “crane,” following the commentary of Rashi (*Kiddushin* 44a) and Mahari Kara (*Yirmiyahu* 8:7). (Compare “*agur*” with “*gru/grua*” – “crane” in Spanish/Italian, and similarly in Greek.) Another significant opinion translates it as “swallow” (Targum to *Yirmiyahu* 8:7, Aruch, and others). Although the swallow is mentioned later in Perek Shira (the *senunis*), there are apparently two different types of swallow, each with its own song (*Yaavetz*). It would seem that the *agur* swallow omits a wide range of sweet harp-like sounds, and hence its song: “*Thank Hashem with a harp, with a ten-stringed lyre make music for Him.*” Another possible translation of *agur* is “parrot” (as in *Radak* to *Yirmiyahu*).

- *Additional sources: Beis Elokim; Yirmiyah 43:7 and 21; Wikipedia*

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

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# Q & A – Devarim

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## Questions –

1. How do we see from the beginning of *Parshat Devarim* that Moshe was concerned for the Jewish People's honor?
2. How much time elapsed between leaving Mt. Sinai and sending the spies?
3. Moshe rebuked the Jewish People shortly before his death. From whom did he learn this?
4. Why did Moshe wait until he had smitten the Amorite kings before rebuking the Jewish People?
5. What were some of the achievements that resulted from the Jewish People "dwelling" at Mt. Sinai?
6. Why does the Torah single out the names of the *avot* in connection with the giving of the Land?
7. What did Moshe convey to the Jewish People by saying: "You today are like the stars of the Heavens"?
8. "*Apikorsim*" (those who denigrate Talmud scholars) observed Moshe's every move in order to accuse him. What did they observe, and what did they accuse him of?
9. Moshe was looking for several qualities in the judges he chose. Which quality couldn't he find?
10. Moshe told the judges, "The case that is too hard for you, bring it to me." How was he punished for this statement?
11. Why did Moshe describe the desert as great and frightful?
12. Which tribe was not represented among the spies?
13. Which city did Calev inherit?
14. How many kingdoms was Avraham promised? How many were conquered by Yehoshua?
15. Why were the Jewish People forbidden to provoke Ammon?
16. Why were the Jewish People not permitted to conquer the Philistines?
17. How did Hashem instill the dread of the Jewish People into the nations of the world?
18. Why did Moshe fear Og?
19. Who was instrumental in destroying the Refaim?
20. What was the advantage of Reuven and Gad leading the way into battle?

## Answers

1. 1:1 Moshe mentions only the names of the places where the Jewish People sinned, but does not mention the sins themselves.
2. 1:2 - 40 days.
3. 1:3 - From Yaakov, who rebuked his sons shortly before his death.
4. 1:4 So that no one could say, "What right has he to rebuke us; has he brought us into any part of the Land as he promised?"
5. 1:6 - They received the Torah, built *themishkan* and all its vessels, appointed a Sanhedrin, and appointed officers.
6. 1:8 - Each of the *avot* possessed sufficient merit for the Jewish People to inherit the Land.
7. 1:10 - They are an eternal people, just as the sun, moon and stars are eternal.
8. 1:13 They observed the time he left home in the morning. If Moshe left early, they accused him of having family problems (which drove him from his home). If he left late, they accused him of staying home in order to plot evil against them.
9. 1:15 - Men of understanding.
10. 1:17 - When the daughters of Tzelofchad asked him a *halachic* question, the law was concealed from him.
11. 1:19 - Because the Jewish People saw huge, frightening snakes and scorpions in the desert.
12. 1:23 - Levi.
13. 1:36 - Hebron.
14. 2:5 - Avraham was promised the land of ten kingdoms. Yehoshua conquered seven. The lands of Moav, Ammon and Esav will be received in the time of the *mashiach*.
15. 2:9 - This was a reward for Lot's younger daughter, the mother of Ammon, for concealing her father's improper conduct.
16. 2:23 - Because Avraham had made a peace treaty with Avimelech, King of the Philistines.
17. 2:25 - During the battle against Og, the sun stood still for the sake of the Jewish People, and the whole world saw this.
18. 3:2 - Og possessed merit for having once helped Avraham.
19. 3:11 - Amrafel.
20. 3:18 - They were mighty men, and the enemy would succumb to them.

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## Q & A – Va'etchanan

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### Questions

1. "And I prayed to Hashem at that time." Why "at that time"?
2. What characteristic trait is represented by Hashem's "strong hand"?
3. What is *ha'levanon*?
4. What did Hashem tell Yehoshua after the battle of Ai?
5. What will happen if the Jewish People fail to keep the *mitzvot* properly?
6. How did the decree that Moshe not enter the Land affect him even in death?
7. What is hinted by the word *v'noshantem*?
8. Why were the Jewish People exiled two years earlier than indicated by Moshe's prophecy?
9. "You'll serve man-made gods." Is this literal?
10. Why is east called *mizrach*?
11. "Keep the Shabbat day as I have commanded you." When had Hashem previously commanded us to keep Shabbat?
12. Where did the Jewish People first receive the command to honor parents?
13. What is meant by "Hashem, our G-d, Hashem is One"?
14. What are two meanings of loving Hashem "with all your might"?
15. How well-versed must one be in Torah?
16. Where does the word *totafot* come from?
17. Who is fit to swear in Hashem's name?
18. What does it mean that the Jews are the "smallest nation"?
19. When someone serves Hashem with love, how many generations receive reward?
20. Why are evil-doers rewarded in this world?

### Answers

1. 3:23 - Defeating Sichon and Og, whose lands were part of *Eretz Canaan*, Moshe thought perhaps Hashem had annulled the vow against his entering the Land.
2. 3:24 - His willingness to forgive.
3. 3:25 - *Ha'levanon* means the *Beit Hamikdash*, which makes "white" (*lavan*), i.e., atones for the Jewish People.
4. 3:28 - Yehoshua must lead the army into battle.
5. 4:9 - The non-Jewish world will regard them as foolish.
6. 4:22 - Even his remains weren't buried in the Land.
7. 4:25 - The *gematria* of *v'noshantem*, 852, hints at the number of years until the first exile.
8. 4:25 - So that the rest of the prophecy "that you shall utterly perish" would not be fulfilled.
9. 4:28 - No. It means that you will serve others who serve idols.
10. 4:41 - It is the direction from which the sun shines (*mizrach* means shining).
11. 5:13 - Before *Matan Torah*, at Marah. (*Shmot 15:25*)
12. 5:16 - At Marah. (*Shmot 15:25*).
13. 6:4 - Hashem, who is now our G-d, but not [accepted as] G-d of the other nations, will eventually be [accepted as] the one and only G-d.
14. 6:5 - 1) With everything you own. 2) Whether Hashem treats you with kindness or harshness.
15. 6:7 - If asked a Torah question, one should be able to reply quickly and clearly.
16. 6:8 - *Tot* means two in Caspi. *Fot* means two in Afriki. Together they allude to the four sections of tefillin.
17. 6:13 - One who serves Hashem and reveres His name.
18. 7:7 - *B'nei Yisrael* are the humblest nation.
19. 7:9 - 2,000.
20. 7:10 - So that they get no reward in the next world.

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# Q & A – Ekev

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## Questions

1. What must the Jewish People do to ensure that Hashem will fulfill His promise to do good for us?
2. What were the:
  - a) wonders
  - b) strong hand
  - c) outstretched arm that the Jewish People saw in Egypt?
3. When a group performs a *mitzvah*, whose name is attached to the *mitzvah*?
4. How did the Jewish People do their laundry in the *midbar*?
5. How did the Jewish People obtain clothing for their growing children in the *midbar*?
6. How many days did Moshe spend on Mount Sinai altogether?
7. On what day did Moshe come down from Mount Sinai having received complete forgiveness for the Jewish People?
8. How was Aharon punished for his role in the golden calf?
9. Who made the ark in which Moshe placed the second set of tablets? What special function did it later serve?
10. Which sin of the Jewish People was prompted by the death of Aharon?
11. Why were the *levi'im* chosen by Hashem?
12. Why do the *levi'im* have no portion in the Land?
13. All aspects of man's life are in Hashem's "hands" except one. What is this?
14. What is the "added benefit" of observing the *mitzvot*?
15. What is meant by circumcising one's heart?
16. What are the sources of water for the fields of Egypt and *Eretz Yisrael*?
17. What path does the Torah prescribe for gaining new knowledge?
18. Which activity is "serving Hashem with the heart"?
19. When the Jewish People sin, why are they considered worse than the generation of the flood?
20. How does one "cleave to Hashem"?

## Answers

1. 7:12 - Guard even the "light" commandments.
2. 7:19 -
  - a) Plagues;
  - b) Pestilence;
  - c) Slaying of the firstborn.
3. 8:1 - The person who finishes it.
4. 8:4 - The *ananei kavod* (clouds of glory) cleaned and bleached their clothes.
5. 8:4 - As their children grew, their clothing grew with them.
6. 9:18 - 120 days.
7. 9:18 - The tenth of Tishrei, Yom Kippur.
8. 9:20 - His two sons died.
9. 10:1 - Moshe. This ark would accompany the Jewish People into battle.
10. 10:6-7 - When Aharon died the *ananei kavod* departed causing many Jews to fear war with the King of Arad and to retreat toward Egypt.
11. 10:8 - Because they did not participate in the sin of the golden calf.
12. 10:9 - Since they served in the Temple, they were not free to work the land.
13. 10:12 - Fear of Heaven, which is dependent upon the person.
14. 10:13 - There is reward.
15. 10:16 - To remove those things that block the words of Torah from entering.
16. 11:10 - Egypt is irrigated by manually carrying water up from the Nile. *Eretz Yisrael* is supplied by rainwater requiring no work on the part of its inhabitants.
17. 11:13 - By repeatedly reviewing what one knows, one more easily acquires new knowledge.
18. 11:13 - Prayer.
19. 11:17 - Because the generation of the flood had no one from whom to learn.
20. 11:22 - Attaching oneself to Torah scholars.

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# Q & A – Re'eh

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## Questions

1. What were the sites designated for the "blessings and the curses" to be pronounced by the people?
2. On what condition will Bnei Yisrael receive the blessings from Hashem?
3. Why does the Torah use idolatry as an example when describing one who strays from the path that Hashem commanded?
4. What was to be the sign for the Jewish People that they would inherit the Land?
5. During the 14 years of the conquest and division of the Land, what types of offerings were permitted on private altars?
6. What must one do with consecrated animals that develop a blemish?
7. In what ways does a consecrated animal that develops a blemish retain a degree of kedusha (holiness) even after it has been redeemed?
8. Why was the tribe of Yehuda not permitted to conquer Jerusalem?
9. In consecutive verses, the Torah repeats the prohibition against eating blood. What two types of blood are referred to?
10. Why were the Jewish People allowed to see the extermination of the Canaanites?
11. What forms of idol worship are punishable by death?
12. If a person performs miracles in the name of Hashem and then says that the laws of the Torah have been revised, what is done to this person?
13. The Torah says, "To Him (Hashem) you shall cleave." How does one fulfill this command?
14. The trial of a person accused of encouraging others to worship idols differs from the trial of other capital cases. How?
15. Who has the primary responsibility of inflicting the punishment on one who tried to entice others to worship idols?
16. What is the "source" of the Jewish People being an *am kadosh* (holy nation)?
17. How should the Jewish People maintain themselves as an *am kadosh*?
18. What is the order of priority regarding to whom one should give charity?
19. What mitzvah recalls the Exodus from Egypt?
20. Which four individuals are under Hashem's "special protection"?

## Answers

1. 11:26 - Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval, respectively.
2. 11:27 - On condition that they listen to Hashem's commandments.
3. 11:28 - Because those who worship idols are considered as if they have strayed from the entire Torah.
4. 11:31 - The miracles that would occur while crossing the Jordan River.
5. 12:8 - Vow offerings or free-will offerings.
6. 12:15 - They must be redeemed and may then be eaten.
7. 12:15 - Eating it is permitted, but use of its milk or fleece is forbidden.
8. 12:17 - When Avraham bought ma'arat hamachpelah, he made a covenant of peace with the Hittites who sold it. His descendants honored this pact regarding the Hittite descendants in Jerusalem.
9. 12:24-25 - Blood that seeps slowly from the incision as soon as the cut is made and again after it no longer gushes. Blood absorbed into the limbs of the animal.
10. 12:30 - To learn not to follow in their depraved ways.
11. 12:30 - Slaughtering or burning a sacrifice on an altar, pouring libations, prostrating oneself, and any normal manner of worshipping that idol.
12. 13:2-6 - He is put to death.
13. 13:5 - One should emulate Hashem's actions by performing good deeds, assisting in burying the dead and visiting the sick.
14. 13:10 - If he was acquitted and new information of a condemning nature arises, he is retried. If he was judged guilty, he is not returned to court to plead in his favor.
15. 13:10 - The person whom the guilty one attempted to entice.
16. 14:2 - The kedusha is inherited from the avot.
17. 14:21 - By avoiding excesses even in permitted matters.
18. 15:7 - The most needy, a brother from one's father, a brother from one's mother, the poor of one's city, the poor of another city.
19. 16:3 - Eating the korban pesach and the matzah on the night of Pesach.
20. 16:10 - A levi, convert, orphan and widow.

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# Q & A – Shoftim

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## Questions

1. What is the role of shoftim? What is the role of shotrim?
2. What qualifications should one look for when appointing a judge?
3. May a judge accept a bribe if only for the purpose of judging fairly?
4. What is the source for the concept "seek out a good beit din"?
5. Although the avot built matzevot, the Torah later forbade doing so. Why?
6. "You will come to...the judge who will be in those days." It's impossible to visit a judge living at a different time, so why must the Torah add these apparently extra words?
7. What does Hashem promise a king who doesn't amass much gold, doesn't raise many horses and doesn't marry many wives?
8. How many Torah scrolls must the king have?
9. How was King Shaul punished for disobeying a minor command of the Prophet Shmuel?
10. Certain kosher animals are not included in the law of "chazeh, shok and keiva." Which ones?
11. Families of kohanim served in the Beit Hamikdash on a rotational basis. When was this rotation system established?
12. Which three categories of false prophets are executed?
13. What does it mean to "prepare the way" to the cities of refuge?
14. How many witnesses are meant when the Torah writes the word eid (witness)?
15. "Through the mouth of two witnesses...." What types of testimony does this verse invalidate?
16. If witnesses in a capital case are proven to be *zomemim* (false-conspirators) before their intended victim is executed, how are they punished?
17. Why does the section about going to war follow the laws governing witnesses?
18. The Jewish army is warned of four "scare-tactics" the enemy might employ. What are they?
19. When a murder victim is found in a field, who determines which city is closest?
20. What happens if the murderer is found after the calf's neck was broken?

## Answers

1. 16:18 - Shoftim are judges who pronounce judgment. Shotrim are officers who enforce it.
2. 16:18 - That he is expert in the law and that he is righteous.
3. 16:19 - No, because it will sway his judgment.
4. 16:20 - "Tzedek tzedek tirdof...."
5. 16:22 - Because the Canaanites used them for idolatry.
6. 17:9 - To teach that although a judge may not be as eminent as judges of previous generations, we must obey him nevertheless.
7. 17:18 - That his kingdom will endure.
8. 17:18 - Two. One stays in his treasury and one he keeps with him.
9. 17:20 - He lost his kingship.
10. 18:3 - Chayot (non-domestic-type animals).
11. 18:8 - During the time of David and Shmuel.
12. 18:20 - One who prophesies something he didn't hear, something told to another prophet, or prophesies in the name of an idol.
13. 19:3 - To post direction signs saying "refuge" at the crossroads.
14. 19:15 - Two, unless otherwise specified.
15. 19:15 - Written testimony and testimony translated from a language which the judges don't understand.
16. 19:19 - They are put to death.
17. 20:1 - To teach that if the Jewish People execute fair judgment they will be victorious in war.
18. 20:3 -
  - a) Changing their shields
  - b) Making their horses stomp and whinny
  - c) Shouting
  - d) Blowing horns.
19. 21:2 - The Sanhedrin.
20. 21:9 - He is tried and, if found guilty, executed.



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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## THE AMIDAH (PART 20) – BLESSING FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF OUR PRAYERS

*“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 Avrohom Chaim Feuer)

The sixteenth blessing reads: “Hear our voice, our Hashem, pity and be compassionate to us, and accept with compassion and favor our prayer, for You are Hashem, Who hears prayers and supplications. From before Yourself, our King, do not turn us away empty handed, for You hear the prayer of Your people Israel with compassion. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who hears prayers.”

The intent of our blessing somewhat differs from the preceding blessings. Up until now, each blessing has been for a specific need, but our blessing is less defined. Interestingly, despite its more general structure, it is considered to be an extremely potent blessing. The Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 119:1) writes that in the blessing of “*Shema Koleinu*” one can ask for anything. As Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz writes about our blessing (*Ya’arot Devash*), nothing is too inconsequential to ask for. The only condition is that the person must ask with sincerity. He then continues, “If a person prays sincerely, Hashem will listen and the person will benefit. That is not the case if the words are said by rote.”

Our blessing opens with the plea, “Hear our voice.” Rabbi Reuven Melamed (1912-1985) was a member of the faculty of the illustrious Ponevezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak for younger students from its inception. He was considered one of the closest disciples of the legendary *Mashgiach* Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein. Among his scholarly works, all of which were published after his passing, is one entitled *Tefillat Chana*, with his insights on the prayers. He writes that, after having asked Hashem for so many different things – wisdom, health,

wealth, atonement and redemption – we now ask Hashem to *hear* our prayers. We have *said* the words and now we must beseech Hashem to *listen* to our requests. Rabbi Avraham Kramer (1722-1804) was the brother of the Vilna Gaon and an extraordinary Torah scholar in his own right. In his commentary on the prayers, he explains that the phrase “Hear our voice – *Shema koleinu*” refers to the words that come out of our mouths. It does not refer to the depth and meaning of the words we say. When we ask Hashem to “hear our voice,” we are asking Him to do so even if we are lacking in merits, and even if the words we recite are missing in intent. And even if we are completely undeserving and there are no expectations that Hashem is obligated to listen to our prayers, we nevertheless beg Him that to show us compassion and listen to us anyway.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab has the most beautiful explanation for the phrase, “From before Yourself, our King, do not turn us away empty handed.” There are many occasions when we pray, and yet Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, chooses not to grant our requests. Therefore, we entreat Hashem that even if His answer is no we will not be sent away “empty handed,” feeling as if we have been rejected by Him. Rather, we should feel uplifted and inspired that we merited being able to communicate with our Father in Heaven *and* that He listened to our prayers even though He did not fulfill our wishes.

In his commentary on the Torah (*Parshat Shoftim*), the *Chatam Sofer* introduces an innovative concept. He writes that when a person manages to pray the *Amidah* with the correct concentration and intent,

not only does his *Amidah* soar up to the Heavens, but all his previous prayers that were not recited properly join together with his *Amidah* to make their way up to the Spiritual Realms. The *Chatam Sofer* then explains how it is possible that prayers that have been previously rejected due to their lack of intent are now able to gain access to the highest levels. Praying with concentration and intent is such a sublime experience that it fills the person with the most enormous sense of delight. This feeling is so satisfying that the person is overcome with remorse for all the times he prayed without focusing on what he was saying. Those feelings of regret, of having neglected the many opportunities in the past to pray with such sweetness, are his repentance. It is a repentance that emanates from an overwhelming love for Hashem, and which, as the Rabbis teach, has the power to turn a person's sins into mitzvahs. The *Chatam Sofer* concludes with the words, "It is now clear, that after reciting one prayer properly, the previous prayers that were recited without the correct intent can rise up to the Holy One and be accepted!"

It is evident that prayers recited sincerely, with concentration and intent, have the most enormous impact in the Spiritual Realms. Therefore, our

Rabbis teach that heartfelt prayers are never turned away. This concept was underlined during an especially poignant dialogue that took place between Yehuda Wachsman and a secular Israeli journalist. In October 1994, Nachshon Wachsman spent a Shabbat at home, on leave from the Israeli army. After Shabbat, on his way back to his base, he was kidnapped by terrorists affiliated to the Hamas movement. The entire country – both religious and not-yet-religious – was galvanized into reciting Tehillim for Nachshon's wellbeing. He was held hostage for six days until an elite unit of the IDF tried unsuccessfully to rescue him. Caught in a murderous crossfire, Nachshon was killed in the attempt to free him. The soldiers who had been a part of the rescue operation told Nachshon's father, Yehuda, that, according to all the odds, not one of them should have survived. At the *Shivah*, the journalist spoke with Yehuda Wachsman. One of the questions he asked the mourning father was how it was possible that the thousands upon thousands of Tehillim that were said, with such incredible intensity, could have all been for naught. Nachshon's father answered that every single one of those prayers recited, with the utmost purity, were said to save a Jewish child. And that they *were* answered. It was just that the child was not his son.

*To be continued...*

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## WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### Of Thorns and Thistles

**B**elieve it or not, Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino (a 16th century Italian scholar and student of Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenuro) writes in *Ohel Moed* (his lexicon of Hebrew synonyms) that there are *seventeen* different words for "thorns / thistles" in Biblical Hebrew. He goes on to list these seventeen words and cites the various Biblical verses wherein each of these words appears. Obviously, he makes a generalization about the different sorts of thorny flora without differentiating between the various species and genera, but ultimately he sees all these different terms as somewhat synonymous. In this

essay we will follow Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino's list of words and comment on them. We will especially consider alternate meanings for some of these words and explore the various roots from which these words are derived.

1. *Kotz* – This word appears twelve times in the Bible in the sense of "thorn," and at least one more time as the name of a person (I Chron. 4:8). The classical trilateralist lexicographers (like Ibn Janach and Radak) trace the word *kotz* to the trilateral root KUF-VAV-TZADI. However, Menachem Ibn Saruk, being the

biliteralist that he was, traces *kotz* to the biliteral root KUF-TZADI. Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim, another biliteralist, explains that the core meaning of the root KUF-TZADI is "the end/conclusion of something." Based on this, he sees the following words are derivatives of that root: *miketz/keitz* ("end" of a period of time), *ketzeh/ketzot* ("end" or "edge" of an object"), *katz* ("being disgusted," because when one is disgusted with something, one feels like it will cause one to die and bring about the *end* of his life), *ketzitzah* ("cutting off the edge of something"), *kayitz* ("summer," i.e., the *end* of the year, as it is the last season before Rosh HaShanah), *yekitzah* ("waking up," because it is the *end* of the sleep cycle), *katzin* ("military officer," who is positioned at the *end* of a military formation), and more. In line with this, he understands the word *kotz* ("thorn/thistle") to likewise derive from KUF-TZADI on account of the fact that it has multiple sharp ends/edges.

2. *Cho'ach* – In Song of Songs, the Jewish People are famously compared to "a rose among thorns (*chochim*)" (Song of Songs 2:2). Lexicographers like Radak and Rabbi Pappenheim see the word *cho'ach* as related to the word *chach*, with both terms derived from the biliteral root CHET-CHET (or possibly even the monoliteral root CHET). The word *chach* refers to a sort of jewelry that was affixed by use of a pin, so it makes sense that the sharp edge of the pin would somehow be reminiscent of the sharp edge of the "thorn."
3. *Salon/Silon*– When Hashem tells Ezekiel that the Jewish People will not heed his warnings to repent, He calls the Jewish People "*saravim* and *salonim*" (Ezek. 2:6). The commentators (like Rashi and Mahari Kara) explain that *salonim* are "thorns," and Radak clarifies that Hashem meant to tell Ezekiel that even though the Jewish People are thorn-like, he should not fear them nor their jabs. Said commentators also compare the word *salonim* to the word *silon* (Ezek. 28:24), which they likewise interpret as "thorn." Interestingly, though, Rabbi Pappenheim actually differentiates between *silon* and *salon*. He traces both words to the biliteral root

SAMECH-LAMMED, whose core meaning he defines as "repeated action." When it comes the term *salonim* applied to the Jewish People, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that this refers to people who *repeatedly* bother and trigger others; while when it comes to *silon*, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that this refers to a thistle/thorn with its many prickly spikes, such that one who holds a *silon* will be *repeatedly* stabbed by its multiple sharp points.

4. *Sneh* – The famous Burning Bush where Hashem introduced Himself to Moses was called a *sneh*, and that word appears a total of six times in the Bible (Ex. 3:2-4, Deut. 33:16). Rashi (to *Sukkah* 13a and *Bava Kamma* 119b) uses the word *sneh* to define Aramaic terms that he elsewhere explains as "thorns" (see Rashi to *Avodah Zarah* 47b and *Eruvin* 34b), thus demonstrating his view that *sneh* refers to a "thorn bush." This understanding of *sneh* is also explicitly found in Rabbi Saadia Gaon's *Tafsir* (to Ex. 3:2) and is cited by Ibn Ezra's long commentary (there). Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *sneh* to the biliteral root SAMECH-NUN, which he explains primarily means "chaos/disorder." Consequently, he explains that *sneh* refers to a messy and disordered bush in which all sorts of thorns grow. Another word he explains as derived from this root is *ason* ("accident/failure"), which results from things not being placed in proper order. Rabbi David Chaim Chelouche (1920–2016), the late Chief Rabbi of Netanya, sees SAMECH-NUN as related to SHIN-NUN ("tooth"), because the various thorns on a branch look like sharp teeth.
5. *Tzinim/tzinim* – The Torah famously warns that if the Canaanites were allowed to remain in the Holy Land after the Jews conquered the land, they will be "like... and *tzinim* ("thorns") in your side" (Num. 33:55). *Ohalei Yehuda* sees this term as related to the word *sneh*, most likely based on the interchangeability of the letters TZADI and SAMECH. Rabbi Hirsch (to Ps. 91:4) argues that TZADI-NUN-(NUN) is related to SHIN-NUN-(NUN) (via the interchangeability to TZADI and SHIN), noting that just as the

latter root refers to “sharpness” (like *v’shinantam* which means that one ought to review his Torah learning over and over until he has sharpened himself through it, or like the word *shen*, “tooth”), so does the former. Rabbi Pappenheim actually sees the core meaning of TZADI-NUN as “thorn,” and explains that various other words that use that two-letter string derive from that meaning, including *tzinah* (“a spikey weapon that resembles thorns”), *tzinah* (“sharp coldness”), and *tznumah* (“grain damaged by harsh cold”).

6. *Sirim* – This word appears four times in the Bible in the sense of “thorns” (Isa. 34:13, Nah. 1:10, Ecc. 7:6, Hos. 2:8). Rashi (to Nah. 1:10) writes that some explain *sirim* as related to *hasarah* (“removal”), but does not explain the connection. Perhaps he refers to the painful ordeal of removing thorns that had become stuck in one’s person, or the need to make sure one removes the “thorns” from a given place before one can safely enter. Rabbi Pappenheim offers a more creative way of explaining how *sirim* in the sense of “thorns” relates to “removal” by tracing the word to the biliteral root SAMECH-REISH (“removing something from its prior location”). He explains that *yissurin/mussar* refers to afflicting somebody with intent of causing him to repent and thus “removing” them from their previous sinful state. In a borrowed sense, the word *sirim* as “thorns” materialized because such implements are used to “torture” or “afflict” a person.
7. *Dardar* – The word *dardar* appears twice in the Bible, both times in the phrase *kotz v’dardar* in reference to two different types of thorns. The first time this phrase appears is in Genesis, when Hashem punishes man for eating from the Tree of Knowledge by saying that thorns will begin to grow in the land and confound man’s agricultural endeavors (Gen. 3:18). The second instance is in the Book of the Twelve Prophets, when the prophet Hosea foretells that the Jews’ idolatrous shrines will be abandoned and destroyed, and instead thorns will grow in their place (Hos. 10:8). Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *dardar* to the biliteral root DALET-REISH, defined primarily as “movement without

hindrance or duress.” He sees a whole litany of words as derived from this root, but for our purposes, the main derivative is *dror* (“freedom”), which refers to freedom of movement (like that granted to an emancipated slave), an ownerless bird that is free to fly wherever it wants, and an open field where myrrh was free to grow. The word *dardar* came from this as a type of “edible thorn” that grows in open, ownerless areas (like deserts). Without talking about the etymology of the word *dardar* or what exactly it means, the Yemenite scholar Rabbi Avraham ben Shlomo (to Jud. 8:7) simply relates that people would peel the exterior of the *dardar* and eat its fruit. To me, all of this sounds like a cactus or sabra.

8. *Atad* – This word appears in the Bible four times in the sense of “thorn” (Ps. 58:10, Jud. 9:15-15). It is also the Aramaic word used by the Targum to render the Hebrew word *dardar* (item #7, see Targum to Gen. 3:18 and Hos. 10:8). The word *atad* also appears as part of a proper noun in the name of the site where Jacob was eulogized after his death: *Goren Ha’Atad* (Gen. 50:10-11), which literally means “The Granary of the *Atad*.” The Talmud (*Sotah* 13a) finds this name a bit funny to take a face value, because there’s no such thing as a granary for thorns! Instead, the Talmud expounds on this place name as a reference to the prevailing custom of erecting thorn fences around the perimeter of one’s granary, explaining that a similar thing happened when the kings of Canaan encountered Jacob’s coffin, as the royals placed their jagged crowns around its perimeter to honor him.
9. *Chedek* – This word refers to a “thorn” (known as a “brier” or “stacheldorn”), and appears only twice in the Bible (Prov. 15:19, Mic. 7:4). Outside of Biblical Hebrew, for example in Mishnaic Hebrew and in the Talmud, the root CHET-DALET-KUF refers to such things as “cutting,” “pricking,” “injuring,” “squeezing/wedging in.” All of these are likely derived from the original Biblical meaning of “thorn.” *Ohalei Yehuda* writes that the word *chedek* may be a portmanteau of *chad* (“sharp” or “single”) and *dak* (“thin”), or a metathesis of the word

*dochak* (“force/pressure”). Nachmanides (to *Chullin* 59a) seems to follow this last understanding that connects *chedek* to *dochak*. There was a Tannaic sage named Rabbi Chidka, who is famous for his position that one is obligated to eat *four* meals on the Sabbath (*Shabbat* 117b). It would be interesting to consider whether his name is somehow related to the *chedek* thorn.

10. *Shamir* – The prophet Isaiah compares the Jewish People to a vineyard, warning that if they continue to stray away from Hashem, then He will no longer tend to the vineyard and will instead allow *shamir* and *shayit* to grow there instead of grapes (Isa. 5:6, see also Isa. 10:17). Although the word *shamir* appears in the Bible eight times in the sense of “thorn” (all in the book of Isaiah!), it also appears thrice in the sense of something used to cut rocks (Jer. 17:1, Zech. 7:12, Ezek. 3:9). This latter meaning either refers to some sort of very hard diamond that can be used for cutting less hard rocks, or to the legendary *shamir* worm used for cutting hard rocks (see *Gittin* 68a). Either way, it relates back to the idea of “thorns” because thorns are sharp and can cut. The three early lexicographers Menachem Ibn Saruk, Yonah Ibn Janach, and the Radak all connect *shamir* to the trilateral root SHIN-MEM-REISH, which often means “protecting/guarding,” but they do not intimate how this meaning of the root relates to that more common meaning. *Shoresh Yeshu* (and to some extent Rabbi Hirsch to Gen. 24:6) avers that because one must “watch oneself” when dealing with thorns (i.e., one has to be careful in order to not get hurt by them), and also thorns are used to build fences around fields/gardens to “guard” them, this word for “thorns” is related to the very term for “guarding.” [By the way, the English words *guard*, *yard*, and *garden* are all etymologically related.]
11. *Shayit* – Ibn Janach writes that *shayit* has a cognate word in Arabic that also means “thorn.” Rabbi Pappenheim traces *shayit* to the root SHIN-ALEPH-(HEY), which means “uniformity/equivalence.” As he explains it, the word *shoah* (“holocaust”) also derives from this root, as it implies total uniform

“destruction” across the board. Consequently, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *shayit* refers to those thorns and thistles which tend to grow in the ruins of destroyed and desolate places (a cactus, perhaps?).

12. *Barkan* – The term *barkan* appears twice in the Bible, both times alongside the word *kotz* (Jud. 8:7, 8:16). The early lexicographers (Menachem Ibn Saruk, Yonah Ibn Janach, and Radak) all categorize this word as an offshoot of the root BET-REISH-KUF. The other words derived from that root are *barak* (“lightning”), *barak* (“the shiny luster of a sword”) and *bareket* (a yellowish gemstone, possibly “emerald”). Radak explains the connection between these three words by explaining that the luster of a polished sword and the glow of a *bareket* gemstone both resemble the glow of lightning. But neither Radak nor the other grammarians mentioned above indicate a connection between *barkan* as “thorn” and the meaning of the other words derived from this root. In lieu of such an explanation, Rabbi Yehoshua Steinberg of the Veromemanu Foundation offers the following insight: even though a shiny sword might look nice, its real power as a formidable weapon is in the sharpness of its blade. Accordingly, Rabbi Steinberg suggests that the word *barkan* which denotes a “sharp thorn” was derived from *barak* in the sense of a sword’s glow.
13. *Charul* – This word appears thrice in the Bible (Zeph. 2:9, Prov. 24:31, and Job 30:7). Radak explains it as a sort of grass-like thorn. Others define it as “nettle” or “thistle.” In his work *Keset HaSofer*, Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843–1916) writes how at its core, the biliteral root CHET-REISH means “strong and obstinate movement” (in his work *Barzilai*, he renders it as “anger and destruction”) and proceeds to show how that letter combination combines with every other letter of the Hebrew Alphabet to create trilateral roots related to that concept. Many of those trilateral roots relate to using powerful movements to bore a hole, and that’s exactly how Rabbi Marcus understands the core meaning of the word *charul*. *Ohalei Yehuda* offers two more ways of explaining the etymology of *charul*. First, he understands

that the biliteral root CHET-REISH primarily refers to “heat/dryness,” and thus argues that *charul* is a portmanteau of that root plus the word *lo* (“for him”), in allusion to the dry and “fiery” nature of this type of thorn. Alternatively, *Ohalei Yehuda* argues that the root CHET-REISH-LAMMED may be interpreted in light of the root AYIN-REISH-LAMMED (“blockage/stoppage,” like the term *urel* which refers to man whose foreskin is intact and refers to fruits from a new tree which are “blocked” by Halacha from consumption) due to the interchangeability of CHET and AYIN. He understands the core meaning of AYIN-REISH-LAMMED to be “covering,” thus explaining that *charul* refers to a sort of thorn or thistle that tends to “cover” the face of one’s field.

14. *Akrav* – In two places in the Bible (Deut. 8:15, Ezek. 2:6), the word *akrav* clearly refers to the deadly insect known as a “scorpion.” In another four places, King Rehoboam portends to act more harshly with his subjects than did his father King Solomon, and especially threatens to torture His people with *akravim* (I Kings 12:11, 12:14, II Chron. 10:11, 10:14). In the latter context, the commentators explain that Rehoboam did not mean to use actual scorpions on his people, but rather meant to threaten the use of flogging sticks with thorn-like spikes that resemble scorpions. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Ps. 140:2-4) writes that four-letter animals names in Hebrew that begin with an AYIN are not actually derived from quadrilateral roots, but rather derive from trilateral roots with the letter AYIN added to those roots. Examples of this phenomenon include *atalef* (“bat”), *achsuw* (“venom-spitting snake”), *akabish* (“spider”), *achbar* (“mouse”), and, of course, *akrav*. Rabbi Hirsch thus explains that the root of *akrav* is KUF-REISH-BET (“approaching”) and refers to its perpetual readiness to engage in “warfare” (*krav*) and attack those who threaten it. *Akrav* seems to refer to “thorns” in a borrowed sense, as something whose pokey protrusions are scorpion-like. Interestingly, a place named Maale Akrabaim is mentioned three times in

the Bible (Num. 34:4, Josh. 15:3, and Jud. 1:36), but it’s not clear if or how that city in the southern part of the Holy Land is related to “thorns” or “scorpions.”

15. *Kimosh* – The Vilna Gaon (to Prov. 24:31) differentiates between *kimosh* and *charul* (item #13) by noting that *kimosh* refers to thorns that grow along the perimeter of a field, while *charul* refers to any ordinary thorn that one might could touch and get “burnt” (i.e., pierced/poked). Perhaps we may somehow connect the word *kimosh* (spelled with a KUF) to the name of the Moabite deity Chemosh (spelled with a KAF).

16. *Bashah* – This word only appears once in the Bible, when Job tries to assert his innocence by saying that if he had not given to the poor the tithes required of him, then “instead of wheat shall come out *cho’ach* [item #2], and instead of barley, *bashah*” (Iyov 31:40). From its juxtaposition to *cho’ach*, the commentaries understand that *bashah* is also a type of “thorn” weed that grows in one’s field. Rabbi Pappenheim traces this word to the biliteral root BET-SHIN (“cessation of movement”), whose main derivative is the word *bushah* (“embarrassment”) and from that gave way to various words that bear negative connotations such that people would be embarrassed to be associated with them, like *ba’ash* (“putrid/spoiled/disgusting”), *be’ushim* (“bad quality grapes”), and, I would add, possibly the Aramaic word *bisha* (“evil/bad”).

17. *Sirpad* – This word appears only once in the Bible, when Isaiah offers an encouraging message that reads: “Instead of the *na’atzutz* will arise a cypress-tree, [and] instead of the *sirpad* will arise a myrtle-tree” (Isa. 55:13). The commentators explains that a *sirpad* is a type of thorn that represents the wicked, and the myrtle is a type of tree that represents the righteous (see *Megillah* 10b), with Isaiah’s message relating that in the future the wicked will be taken down from their high pedestal and be replaced with the righteous. [Rashi (there) and Radak (there and in *Sefer HaShorashim*) also understand that *na’atzutz* means “thorn,” but not all commentaries agree to this.]

But we're not done yet, there are at least another three possible words in Biblical Hebrew that refer to "thorns" that *Ohel Moed* does not mention:

18. *Sikim* – The Torah warns that if after the Jews conquer the Holy Land, they leave its Canaanite inhabitants intact, those pagan idolaters will be "as *sikim* ("thorns") in your eyes" (Num. 33:55). Radak in *Sefer HaShorashim* points out that because people typically made the fences around their field out of thorns (the ancient form of barbed wire), the word *mesuchah* ("fence," Mic. 7:4, Ezek. 28:13, Prov. 15:19, Isa. 5:5) derives from the same root as *sikim*, SIN-VAV-KAF. Radak adds in his father's name that the word *sakin* ("knife," which only appears once in the Bible in Prov. 23:2) is also derived from *sikim*. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Num. 33:55) connects the "fence" meaning of SIN-VAV-KAF to the word *sugah/siyag* (whose root is SAMECH-VAV-GIMMEL), via the interchangeability of KAF and GIMMEL. Finally, Rabbi Pappenheim understands *sikim* as derived from the biliteral root SAMECH-KAF ("spread/cover/protect"), because thorn-fence are used to protect the contents of one's field or garden from intruders. In Modern Hebrew, the word *sikah* refers to a "pin."

19. *Sansan* – This word appears only once in the Bible, in the verse "I will ascend the palm tree, [and] I will grasp its *sansan*" (Song of Songs 7:9). Ibn Ezra comments that the word *sansan* has not a counterpart in the Bible, but Rabbi David Golomb (1861-1935) has already pointed out that *sansan* seems to be related to the word *sneh* (above, item #4), because palm tree branches are thorny, a point also made by Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim, the Malbim (to Yech. 17:4), and Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah (Zilberberg) de Kassif (1914-2003).

20. *Saravim* – As mentioned above (item #3), the Jewish People are described as "*saravim* and *salonim*" (Ezek. 2:6). While many commentators explain *saravim* as related to the word *siruv* ("refusal/rebellion"), Donash Ibn Labrat (920-990) proffers that this term refers to a type of "thorn," just like *salonim* does.

Now that we've seen the entire list, we can better appreciate a comment that Rashi made off the cuff. After Rashi (to Yech. 2:6) cited Donash's explanation of the word *saravim* as referring to "thorns," Rashi very nonchalantly added that there are *twenty* words for this noun. The same statement is found in Rabbi Saadia Gaon's commentary to Proverbs (15:19) after he defines the word *chadek* as "thorn." With our entire list in mind, we can now understand exactly what Rashi and Rasag meant when they claimed that there are twenty words for "thorn" in Hebrew. Although, if you've really been keeping track, you can see that we actually have 21 words, including *na'atzuz*.

When explaining this passage in Rashi, Yaakov Reifman (1818-1894) and Rabbi Yechiel Michel Stern (Rav of the Ezras Torah neighborhood in Jerusalem) offer lists of twenty words, but they do not include the word *sansan*. Instead, they include the word *nahalol* (Isa. 7:19). That word is defined by Ibn Saruk's *Machberet Menachem* and Mahari Kara (to Isa. 7:19) as a "thorn," although other commentators understand it differently. Some see *nahlol* as a reference to lowly, unimportant trees that do not bear fruit (see Radak to Isa. 7:19 and in *Sefer HaShorashim*, and Metzudat Zion to Isa. 7:19), while Rabbi Pappenheim sees *nahlol* as related to *nohel/menahel* ("leading/guiding") as referring to the place to where a shepherd would "lead" his young animals.

Interestingly, the Yemenite scholar Rabbi Avraham ben Shlomo (to Judges 8:7) cites Chazal as stating that there are seventeen words for "thorns," but his list differs from the *Ohel Moed*'s list by omitting the words *tzinim* (#5), *akrav* (#14), *bashah* (#16), and *sirpad* (#17) and including the words *maluach*, *masuchah* (a cognate of *sikim*, as explained in item #18), *pirchach*, and *arar*. While Rabbi Avraham ben Shlomo actually provides Arabic names for some of the different types of thorns mentioned in this essay, his explanations lie beyond the scope of this study.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Summer: Ketuvot 9-15

### A New Reality

The *ketuvah* is one of the most widely known items in Jewish law and practice, regardless of the degree of the observance of the community, family or person. Perhaps a widespread custom to write it in a beautiful manner and with accompanying designs gives it a position of prominence. Or perhaps the reason for its “fame” is its place in the wedding ceremony and its being an essential marriage contract, which helps provide integrity and stability to the Jewish family.

On our *daf* we find a dispute between two great Torah sages regarding its origin and halachic status. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says that the institution of the *ketuva* is of Torah origin, whereas Rav Nachman says in the name of Shmuel that it is of Rabbinic origin.

Throughout the ages, commentaries have offered proofs for both positions. For example, in the text of a traditional *ketuva*, the groom writes, “I obligate myself to give you two hundred *zuz* that you are entitled to by the Torah.” The phrase “by the Torah” supports the view that the *ketuva* is of Torah origin (Rabbeinu Tam). Other *Rishonim* rule that the *ketuva* is of Rabbinic origin, offering proofs to that effect while explaining “by the Torah” to mean the *type* of money. This means that the groom obligates himself to pay the value of the type of currency that was used at the time the Torah was given at Mount Sinai – but the obligation in the *ketuva* is nevertheless of Rabbinic origin (Rabbeinu Asher).

I would like to share a novel idea that could also explain why the phrase “obligated by the Torah” appears in the *ketuva* despite its being of Rabbinic inception.

The Shemittah year is a “year of rest” for the Land of Israel. No planting or harvesting may be done that year. The people are dependant on the produce of the sixth year for three years, including the eighth,

because no planting is permitted in the seventh. But Hashem said to not worry. He promises to bless the Land, such that it will provide great abundance in the sixth year. “I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and the Land will produce sufficiently for three years.” (Vayikra 25:21)

On one memorable Yom Tov morning more than forty years ago, I accompanied my revered teacher Harav Moshe Shaapiro (*zatzal*) on a post-davening walk home from shul to our neighboring homes in Bayit V’gan. It was a Shemittah year, and I asked the Rav: “I understand how Hashem’s *bracha* worked during the times when Shemittah was a Torah mitzvah. But nowadays, when the mitzvah is *m’d’Rabbanan*, how could Chazal decree this mitzvah and forbid most agricultural work, relying on the *bracha* in the Torah? How could they be certain that Hashem would grant His *bracha* of abundance due to their decree? Isn’t this like forcing Hashem, so to speak, to give a *bracha* that would not have been needed if not for their Rabbinic decree against farm work in the seventh year?”

As we walked, the Rav explained that any decree from Chazal was more impactful than just the addition of a Rabbinic law to the Shulchan Aruch. He emphasized how, in fact, their decree created a new reality. When they said it was Shemittah, it was really Shemittah and not just an “academic” legal issue. When Chazal instituted Shemittah *m’d’Rabbanan*, it was really a Shemittah year. In a sense, Chazal changed the nature of reality.

This would explain why Hashem’s promised *bracha* would certainly exist for the Shemittah years that Chazal enacted.



To prove his point, Rav Moshe cited a teaching from the Sefer Hachinuch. There is a mitzvah to not refrain from lending to the poor prior to Shemittah out of fear the loan will be cancelled by the Shemittah year. The Torah states, “If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land that Hashem is giving you, you will not harden your heart, and you will not close your hand from your needy brother. Rather, you will open your hand to him and you will lend him sufficient for his needs that he lacks. Beware, lest there be in your heart an unfaithful thought, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release (of the loan) has approached,’ and you will begrudge your needy brother and not give him, and he will cry out to Hashem against you, and it will be a sin to you. You will surely give to him, and your heart will not be grieved when you give to him, for because of this generosity, Hashem will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors.” (Devarim 15:7-10)

Sefer Hachinuch writes that this mitzvah to “not harden your heart, and not close your hand from your needy brother” applies to all people at all times, including nowadays. Rav Moshe rhetorically noted that this means there is a Torah prohibition that is based on Shemittah even when Shemittah is a Rabbinic obligation and not a Torah one. “How can this be understood and not be a paradox?” he said. He explained that although Shemittah nowadays is *m’d’Rabbanan*, it created a reality of Shemittah in every sense. Therefore, one who refrains from lending to the needy out of concern that Shemittah

will cancel the loan is transgressing a Torah prohibition of not lending on account of Shemittah – despite the fact that the actual mitzvah of Shemittah nowadays is of Rabbinic origin and not a Torah mitzvah.

Based on this novel idea that I learned from Rav Moshe, it is possible to explain the text of the *ketuva* – “I am obligated by the Torah” – appears in the *ketuva* despite its being of Rabbinic origin. Even if the *ketuva* is *m’d’Rabbanan*, the obligation it creates is no less than a Torah obligation, which explains and justifies the wording of the *ketuva* as “I am obligated by the Torah.”

On a parenthetical note, the following day I told my *chevruta*, Rav Yisrael Berman *shlita*, the novel idea and its proof that Rav Moshe had taught me a day earlier. Rav Berman immediately presented an argument for why the Sefer Hachinuch’s ruling is not a proof that a Rabbinic decree creates a Torah reality. Even if Shemittah *m’d’Rabbanan* creates a Rabbinic reality but not a Torah one, the Torah mitzvah to not refrain from lending due to Shemittah is understandable. The point of the mitzvah to not refrain from lending due to Shemittah is to show generosity and loving-kindness despite a potential monetary loss caused by Shemittah – whether the Shemittah is of Torah or Rabbinic origin. When I later said these *divrei Torah* to Rav Moshe, he told me that although our point has a degree of validity, his main teaching that a Rabbinic decree creates a new reality is nevertheless without a doubt.

- *Ketuvot 10a*

*\*In loving memory of my mother, Mrs. Edith Newman, on her ninth yahrtzeit.*

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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

## Fat or Fit

The last of the five books of the Torah opens with the introductory words: *These are the words that Moshe spoke*. The Midrash (Sifri) asks: Did Moshe not write the entire Torah? Why are these words singled out? These words have particular significance. The entire book records the remarks of Moshe, a last will and testament, spoken during the last five weeks of his life. And the essence of those remarks is rebuke. The verse cited by the Midrash, a verse which became the catch-phrase to summarize the entirety of the rebuke, is Devarim 32:15: *Jerushun became fat and kicked; you became fat, you became thick, you became corpulent*. This refers to overindulgence in material abundance and pleasure, leading to forsaking Hashem.

Rav Hirsch also attaches great historical significance to this prophetic rebuke, referring to it as the “mournful secret” of Jewish history. In suffering, Israel has generally withstood the test well, but only rarely has it been able to withstand good fortune. Whenever it has grown fat, it has become corpulent and overgrown with fat. The imagery is precise. The more substantial, the fatter the food introduced into the body, the more the body should seek to convert the surplus of nourishment into energy. In theory, the better nourished the body, the more active a person ought to be, and the greater his performance as a result. If successful, he will have control over the abundance and will remain healthy in both mind and body. His greater performance will also increase his moral worth. If, however, he does not act in this manner, and the surplus is merely deposited in his body, he will become corpulent and obese, and instead of having the abundance serve his health, his active self will be overwhelmed by the fat, leading to exhaustion and sluggishness.

Such has been the history of Israel. It failed to utilize its abundance and surplus for increased spiritual and

moral performance. Instead, its moral progress lagged behind its material prosperity, and could not remain the master over its riches. Instead of using them for achievement of moral progress, it drowned in its wealth and prosperity, allowing its better self – the spiritual Divine life within it – to go to sleep. While Israel has weathered danger and persecution, poverty and misery, with remarkable loyalty and commitment, it has not yet stood the test of abundance. *You have grown fat, you have grown thick, you have grown corpulent* has been the outcome whenever Hashem has granted us a period of good fortune.

The formula to reverse this trend was hinted to by our Sages (Nedarim 81a), in explaining why the Land has gone to ruin: *Because they forsook My Torah, which I had placed before them, [meaning] they did not bless the Torah first*. The first, fateful budding of misfortune was this: They did not *first and foremost* praise Hashem for the Torah. While they *did* praise Hashem for the Torah, they valued it much as they valued their other possessions and achievements – it did not attain its befitting primacy.

When Torah is in its rightful paramount place, then all roads lead to it. Every step, every endeavor, every object of study, every intellectual pursuit, every celebrated achievement is then approached through the lens of Torah, and is used as a tool in developing our spiritual selves. When the focus is singular and spiritual, then the self does not retreat into an indulgent sleep. In this way, the sluggish corpulence is replaced by an active engagement, and the reserves of abundance can be used as they were always intended – for our personal, national, and global betterment.

- Sources: *Commentary, Devarim 32:15; Collected Writings I, Tammuz III, pp. 302-308*

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# PARSHA OVERVIEW

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## Devarim

This Torah portion begins the last of the Five Books of The Torah, *Sefer Devarim*. This Book is also called *Mishneh Torah*, "Repetition of the Torah" (hence the Greek/English title "Deuteronomy"). *Sefer Devarim* relates what Moshe told the Jewish People during the last five weeks of his life, as they prepared to cross the Jordan River into the Land of Israel. Moshe reviews the mitzvahs with the people, stressing the change of lifestyle they are about to undergo – from the supernatural existence of the desert under Moshe's guidance, to the apparently natural life they will experience under Yehoshua's leadership in the Land.

The central theme this week is the sin of the spies, the *meraglim*. This Torah portion opens with Moshe alluding to the sins of the previous generation who died in the desert. He describes what would have happened if they had not sinned by sending spies into Eretz Yisrael. Hashem would have given them, without a fight, all the land from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, including the lands of Ammon, Moav and Edom.

Moshe details the subtle sins that culminate in the sin of the spies, and reviews at length this incident and its results. The entire generation would die in the desert and Moshe would not enter Eretz Yisrael. He reminds them that their immediate reaction to Hashem's decree was to want to "go up and fight" to redress the sin. He recounts how they would not listen when he told them not to go, and that they no longer merited vanquishing their enemies miraculously. They had ignored him and suffered a massive defeat. They were not allowed to fight with the kingdoms of Esav, Moav or Ammon. These lands were not to be part of the map of Eretz Yisrael in the meantime. When the conquest of Canaan will begin with Sichon and Og, it will be via natural warfare.

## Va'etchanan

Although Moshe is content that Yehoshua will lead the nation, Moshe nevertheless prays to enter the Land of Israel in order to fulfill its special mitzvahs. Hashem refuses. Moshe reminds the Jewish People of the gathering at Mount Sinai when they received the Torah, that they saw no visual representation of the Divine, but only the sound of words. Moshe impresses on the Jewish People that the Mount Sinai revelation took place before an entire nation, not to a select elite, and that only the Jewish People will ever claim that Hashem spoke to their entire nation. Moshe specifically enjoins the *Bnei Yisrael* to "pass over" the Mount Sinai event to their children throughout all generations.

Moshe predicts, accurately, that when the Jewish People dwell in Eretz Yisrael, they will sin and be scattered among all the nations. They will stay few in number – but will eventually return to Hashem.

Moshe designates three "refuge cities" to which an inadvertent killer may flee. Moshe repeats the Ten Commandments and then teaches the *Shema*, the central credo of Judaism, that there is only One G-d. Moshe warns the people not to succumb to materialism, forgetting their purpose as a spiritual nation. The Torah portion concludes with Moshe exhorting *Bnei Yisrael* not to intermarry when they enter Eretz Yisrael, as they cannot be a treasured and holy nation if they intermarry, and that in doing so they would become indistinguishable from the other nations.

## Ekev

If *Bnei Yisrael* carefully observe even those "minor" mitzvahs that are usually "trampled" underfoot, Moshe promises them that they will be the most blessed of the nations on earth. Moshe tells *Bnei Yisrael* that they will conquer Eretz Canaan little by little – so that the land will not be overrun by wild animals in the hiatus before *Bnei Yisrael* are able to organize and settle the whole land. After again warning *Bnei Yisrael* to burn all carved idols of Canaanite gods, Moshe stresses that the Torah is indivisible and not open to partial observance.

Moshe describes the Land of Israel as a land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, and pomegranates, a land of oil-yielding olives and date-honey. Moshe cautions *Bnei Yisrael* not to become haughty and think that their success in Eretz Yisrael is a result of their own powers or vigor. Rather, it was Hashem who gave them wealth and success. Nor did Hashem drive out the Canaanites because of *Bnei Yisrael's* righteousness, but rather because of the sins of the Canaanites, for the road from Mount Sinai had been a catalogue of large and small sins and rebellions against Hashem and Moshe.

Moshe details the events after Hashem spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, culminating in his bringing down the second set of Tablets on Yom Kippur. Aharon's passing from this world is recorded, as is the elevation of the *Levi'im* to be Hashem's ministers. Moshe points out that the 70 souls who went down to Egypt have now become like the stars of heaven in abundance. After specifying the great virtues of the Land of Israel, Moshe says the second paragraph of the *Shema*, conceptualizing the blessings that accompany keeping mitzvahs, and the curses that result from non-observance.

## Re'eh

Moshe presents to the nation the blessing of a spiritually oriented life, and the curse of becoming disconnected from Hashem. When the nation enters Eretz Yisrael, they must burn down any trees that had been used for idol-worship, and destroy all idolatrous statues. Hashem will choose only one place where the Divine Presence will dwell. Offerings may be brought only there, but not to a private altar.

Moshe repeatedly warns against eating animal blood. In the desert, all meat was slaughtered in the Mishkan, but in Eretz Yisrael meat may be *shechted* anywhere. Moshe lists the categories of foods that may be eaten only in Jerusalem. He warns the nation against copying the ways of the other nations. Since the Torah is complete and perfect, nothing may be added to or subtracted from it. If a so-called prophet tells the people to permanently abandon a Torah law or indulge in idol worship, he is to be put to death. One who entices others to worship idols is to be put to death. A city of idolatry must be razed. It is prohibited to show excessive signs of mourning, such as marking the skin or making a bald spot.

Moshe reiterates the classifications of kosher and non-kosher food and the prohibition of cooking meat and milk. Produce of the second tithe must be eaten in Jerusalem, and if the amount is too large to carry, it may be exchanged for money with which food is bought in Jerusalem and eaten there. In certain years this tithe is given to the poor. *Bnei Yisrael* are instructed to always be open-hearted, and in the seventh year any loans must be discounted, and then Hashem will bless the person in all ways. A Jewish bondsman is released after six years, and must be sent away with generous provisions. If he refuses to leave, his ear is pierced with an awl at the door post and he remains a bondsman until the Jubilee Year. This Torah portion concludes with a description of the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Succot.

## Shoftim

Moshe tells *Bnei Yisrael* to appoint judges and officers in their cities. A bribe of even an insignificant sum is forbidden. Trees are not to be planted near Hashem's altar, as was the way of idolaters. Blemishes in animals designated for offerings and other points of disqualification are listed. The Great Sanhedrin is to make binding decisions on new situations, according to Torah criteria, to prevent the fragmentation of the Torah. A very learned scholar who refuses to accept the halachic decisions of the Sanhedrin incurs the death penalty. A Jewish king may have possessions and symbols of power only as commensurate with the honor of his office, but not for self-aggrandizement. He is to write for himself two *Sifrei Torah* – one to be kept with him wherever he goes, so that he doesn't become haughty. Neither the *Kohanim* nor the *Levi'im* are to inherit land in the Land of Israel. Rather, they are to be supported by the community, by a system of tithes.

All divination is prohibited. Hashem promises the Jewish People that He will send them prophets to guide them, and Moshe explains how a true prophet may be distinguished from a false one. Cities of refuge are to be provided an accidental killer to escape the blood-avenger from the deceased's family. However, someone who kills with malice is to be handed over to the blood-avenger. Moshe cautions *Bnei Yisrael* not to move boundary markers to increase their property. Two witnesses who conspire to frame a third party are to be punished with the very same punishment that they conspired to bring upon the innocent party.

A *kohen* is to be anointed specifically for when Israel goes to war, to instill the nation's trust in Hashem. Among those disqualified from going to war is anyone who has built a new house but not lived in it yet, or anyone who is fearful or fainthearted. An enemy must be given the chance to make peace, but if they refuse, all the males are to be killed. Fruit trees are to be preserved and not cut down during the siege. If a corpse is found between cities, the elders of the nearest city must take a heifer, slaughter it, and wash their hands over it, saying that they are not guilty of the death.

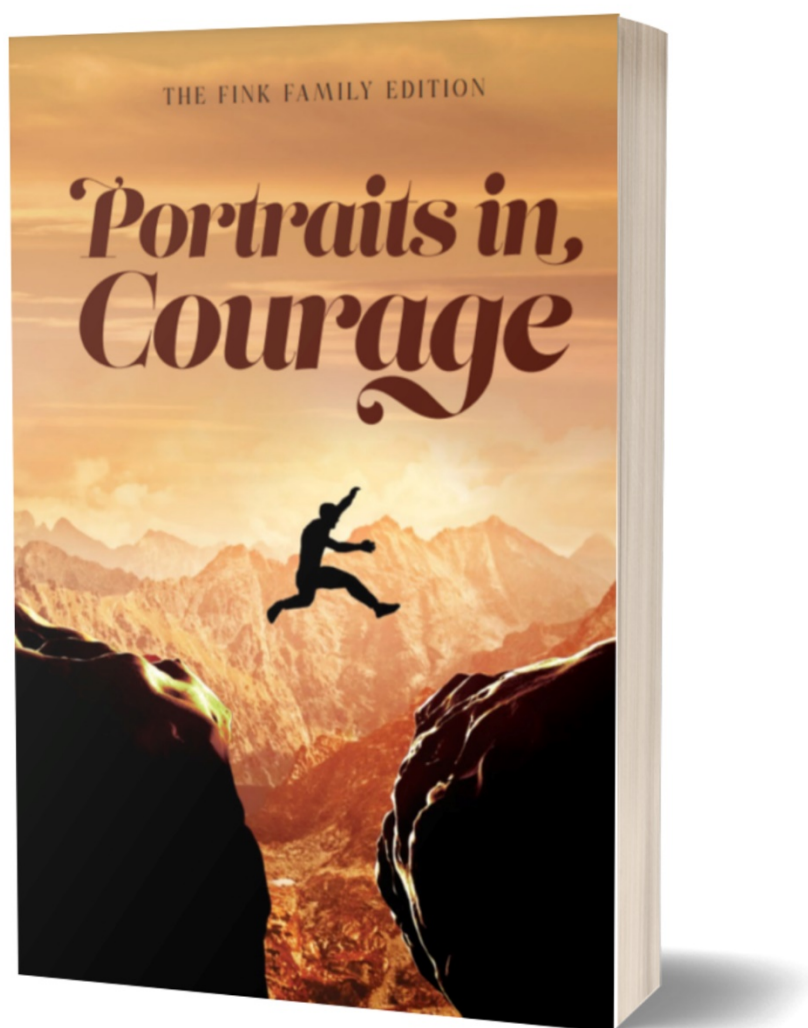
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