

Weekly Parsha

Nasso

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The words of the rabbis that “One who sees the shame of the woman who was unfaithful should thereupon abstain from consuming wine” are well known and oft-repeated. The obvious meaning of this message is that in life everyone must drive defensively. Let no one allow one’s self to be found in compromising circumstances and to think that somehow one is immune from its consequences.

In our current world there are numerous shameful and sad examples of people in high office and great achievement who have been brought to shame and grief by the revelations of their indiscretions. The rabbis in Avot stated that there always is “an eye that sees us” – a constantly recording surveillance camera, if you will, that captures our movements and behavior. The public revelation of another’s sin should serve as a reminder to all of the consequences of that sin. The Torah that ordinarily is very protective of one’s right to privacy, even the rights of a sinner, chose to publicize the fate of the unfaithful woman in order to impress upon others the necessity of care and probity in all matters of life.

One should never say: ‘This can never happen to me.’ When it comes to the areas of human appetites and desires there are no automatic safeguards. Rather, only care, vigilance and avoidance of risk and compromising situations are the unique tools of prevention readily available. There is a clear connection that the rabbis make between witnessing sin and imbibing too much wine. Just as driving an automobile under the influence of alcohol and drugs is legally forbidden, so is life generally to be lived free of those types of influences. Addiction to alcohol was a rather rare occurrence in Jewish society over the ages. However acculturation and assimilation over the past century have made alcohol a problem in our current Jewish world. The idea of abstinence from wine as described in the parsha regarding the regimen of the nazir is meant to be taken generally as a message of moderation and good sense.

Like many other things in life, a little alcohol can be pleasurable and beneficial but a lot can be harmful and even lethal. The Torah holds up the faithless woman and the nazir as examples of the dangers that lurk in everyday life. It is essentially foolish for any human being to ignore these omnipresent temptations and dangers.

Again, we read in Avot that one should not trust one’s self even until the final moment of life. An abundance of over-confidence in one’s ability to withstand temptations of all sorts will always lead to unforeseen problems and sad consequences. All of human experience testifies to this conclusion.

Much of the modern world, including much of the current Jewish world as well, mocks and derides any type of defensive driving in personal life matters. The concept of personal freedom has morphed into a lifestyle where any restraints on personal behavior, reasonable as they may be, are attacked and derided. Fashions and mores may change with the times but human behavior does not, and the moral restraints the Torah imposes on us remain eternally valid and cogent.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Courage to Engage with the World

Naso

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

As mentioned in a previous Covenant & Conversation, there was an ongoing debate between the Sages as to whether the Nazirite – whose laws are outlined in this week’s Parsha – was to be praised or not.

Recall that the Nazirite was someone who voluntarily, usually for a specified period, undertook a special form of holiness. This meant that he was forbidden to consume wine or any grape products, to have a haircut and to defile himself by contact with the dead.

Naziriteship was essentially a renunciation of desire. Why someone would choose to do this is not clear. It may be that he wanted to protect

himself against drunkenness or to cure himself of alcoholism. It could be that he wanted to experience a higher form of holiness. Forbidden as he was to have contact with the dead, even for a close relative, he was in this respect in the same position as the High Priest. Becoming a Nazirite was one way in which a non-kohen could adopt kohen-like behaviour. Some Sages argued that the juxtaposition of the law of the Nazirite with that of the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery, hinted at the fact that there were people who became Nazirites to protect themselves from sexual immorality. Alcohol suppresses inhibitions and increases sexual desire.

Be that as it may, there were mixed views on whether it was a good thing or a bad one to become a Nazirite. On the one hand the Torah calls him “holy to God” (Num. 6:8). On the other, at the completion of his period of abstinence, he is commanded to bring a sin offering (Num. 6:13-14). From this, Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar Berebi, drew the following inference:

What is the meaning of the phrase, ‘And make atonement for him, because he sinned against the soul [usually translated as “by coming into contact with the dead”]. (Num. 6:11)?’ Against which soul did he sin? We must conclude that it refers to denying himself the enjoyment of wine. From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life. It follows that one who keeps fasting is called a sinner.

Ta’anit 11a; Nedarim 10a

Clearly R. Eliezer Hakappar is engaging in a polemic against asceticism in Jewish life. We do not know which groups he may have had in mind. Many of the early Christians were ascetics. So in some respects were the members of the Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls. Holy people in many faiths have chosen, in pursuit of spiritual purity, to withdraw from the world, its pleasures and temptations, fasting, afflicting themselves and living in caves, retreats, or monasteries.

In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted self-denying practices – among them the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. It is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Hassidei Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among deeply pious, self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts would have been familiar with Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews toward the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were movements in the first centuries of the common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were dualists, holding that the true God was not the creator of the universe and could not be reached within the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. Hence holiness means withdrawing from the physical world, its pleasures, appetites and desires. The two best-known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the Nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish tendencies in Christianity and Islam.

What is remarkable however is the position of Maimonides, who holds both views, positive and negative. In the Laws of Ethical Character, Maimonides adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer Hakappar:

“A person may say: ‘Desire, honour and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world, therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the other extreme.’ As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing . . . This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way.”

Hilchot De’ot 3:1

Yet in the same book, the Mishneh Torah, he writes:

“Whoever vows to God [to become a Nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy . . . Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a Prophet.”

Hilchot Nezirut 10:14

How does any writer come to adopt so self-contradictory a position – let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer is profound. According to Maimonides, there is not one model of the virtuous life, but two. He calls them respectively the way of the saint (chassid) and the Sage (chacham). The saint is a person of extremes. Maimonides defines chessed as extreme behaviour – good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires (Guide for the Perplexed III, ch. 52). So, for example, “If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint (chassid)” (Hilchot De’ot 1:5).

The Sage is a completely different kind of person, one who follows the “golden mean”, the “middle way” of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. The Sage avoids both miserliness and renunciation of wealth, hoarding or giving away all they have, and thus becomes neither stingy nor foolhardy but generous. He or she knows the twin dangers of too much and too little – excess and deficiency. The Sage weighs conflicting pressures and avoids extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of morality to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. That is what makes Maimonides so acute a thinker. He realises that you can’t have both – that they are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But then what about supporting the members of the saint’s own family? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint’s fellow citizens? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what about the rule of law, and justice? Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. But you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society. They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path. They are seeking personal salvation rather than collective redemption.

It is this deep insight that led Maimonides to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the Nazirite. The Nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a chassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, a high ideal.

But it is not the way of the sage – and you need sages if you seek to perfect society. The reason the sage is not an extremist is because he or she realises that there are other people at stake. There are the members of one’s own family; the others within one’s own community; there are colleagues at work; there is a country to defend and a nation to help build. The sage knows it is dangerous, even morally self-indulgent, to leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For we are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; in society not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others. Hence, while from a personal perspective the Nazirite is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a “sinner” who must bring an atonement offering.

Judaism makes room for individuals to escape from the temptations of the world. The supreme example is the Nazirite. But this is an exception, not the norm. To be a chacham, a sage, is to have the courage to engage with the world, despite all the spiritual risks, and to help bring a fragment of the Divine Presence into the shared spaces of our collective life.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Naso

Who’s on First? No One – They Are All Riding a Merry-Go-Round!

Who’s on First? No One – They Are All Riding a Merry-Go-Round!

Parshas Naso contains Birkas Kohanim (the Priestly Blessing), immediately followed by the identical korbonos (sacrificial offerings) that each of the twelve nesi’im (tribal princes) brought on consecutive days during the Chanukas Hamizbayach (inauguration period of the altar / the Mishkan dedication).

What is the connection between these two Torah parshios? Why does the Torah place Birkas Kohanim right before the parsha of karbanos shel hanesi’im (the princes’ offerings)? Furthermore, we can specifically ask about the connection between karbanos shel hanesi’im and the very last pasuk of Birkas Kohanim, immediately preceding the karbanos shel hanesi’im, namely the pasuk “v’yasem lecha shalom” (and establish peace for you) (Bamidbar 6:26). What do the karbanos of the nesi’im have to do with shalom?

In addition, why are there certain differences among the otherwise identical korbonos that the nesi’im brought? Every nasi brought exactly the same korban, and yet the Torah spells out the exact same details of the offerings twelve times. When I was a little boy, I used to think that this is the hardest parsha to have as your Bar Mitzvah parsha because, with 176 pesukim, it is the longest parsha to lein! However, when I discovered what is in the parsha, I realized that it is not really so hard to lein because we repeat the same six pesukim twelve times!

Nonetheless, there are slight differences. One difference is that while the Torah identifies each of the final eleven nesi’im as “nasi” (the prince of his specific tribe), by the first nasi (Nachshon ben Aminadav of Shevet Yehudah), the pasuk does not mention that he was the nasi. Another difference is that by Shevet Yehuda, the pasuk begins v’korban k’a’ras kesef achas (And his offering was one silver bowl...). Ironically, the conjunctive vov does not appear where we might expect it by princes #2-12 (connecting one nasi’s korban to the next), but rather only by the first nasi from Shevet Yehudah, where we would least expect it (connecting the entire topic of karbanos shel hanesi’im to Birkas Kohanim). Why would that be?

There is a beautiful Kli Yakar on this pasuk, which says that the “vov” at the beginning of the korban of the first nasi is indicative of a connection between karbanos shel hanesi’im and the bracha (blessing) of shalom, which appears at the end of Birkas Kohanim, for if there is no peace, there is nothing.

The last Mishna in Shas (at the end of Tractate Uktzin) says that the Ribbono Shel Olam did not find a more appropriate receptacle to hold bracha for the world than shalom. The Medrash says that shalom is so critical that even the deceased need shalom, as it is written “And you will come to your fathers in shalom.” This does not mean that the deceased fight, but rather, if those who are still living fight with one another then the deceased have no peace either. Unfortunately, such stories occur on a daily basis. Someone dies, there is a contested will, the children are not happy with the division and families get into the most bitter of arguments. The Medrash is saying that if these problems of the living are not solved, even the dead will have no peace.

Then the Kli Yakar writes that all the other brachos of Birkas Kohanim are lacking until the bracha of shalom at the end, and then, after Birkas Kohanim concludes with shalom, the Torah immediately begins another parsha, which also involves shalom (that of the korbonos hanesiim). That is why the latter section is connected to the prior section with the connective vov.

However, what is the connection between the korbonos hanesi’im and the idea of shalom? The connection is that it was not so obvious which nasi should be the first one to offer his korbonos. The Medrash says that Reuven said “I should go first because I am the bechor.” However, the Ribono Shel Olam told Reuven that he would not go first because Yehuda was the melech (king) and the melech needs to go first. Reuven then said “Okay, so I will go second.” Again, the Ribono Shel Olam told him “No. Yissacher comes after Yehuda because he is the shevet of limud haTorah (Torah learning). Reuven was then willing to settle for third place but again he was told that Zevulun merited the third spot, because he supports Yissacher.

So, it was not so simple. As a matter of fact, the Medrash says that the twelve shevatim correspond with the twelve mazalos (constellations).

The mazalos don't stay in the same Heavenly position. They rotate around and around. Chazal say that even though Yehuda brought the first korban, he wasn't really first because the rotation of shevatim was like a merry-go-round. When a merry-go-round is rotating, there is no first and there is no second. Each horse in the merry-go-round moves in a circular movement, constantly changing position, just like the heavenly constellations.

The Medrash is saying that this is how they solved the jealousy problem. Even though Nachshon Ben Aminadav went first, he was only first temporarily. That is why, says the Kli Yakar, Yehudah's korban begins with the conjunctive vov – "v'korbano" (And his korban). Why 'And'? His was the first korban! The answer is that the 'and' does join his korban to the next nasi's korban and then to the next one because they were all going around. And that is also why even though it says nasi this shevet and nasi that shevet, by Nachshon ben Aminadav, it does not call him nasi Yehudah. This is because even though someone had to be 'first' but in the end, he wasn't really first, because they were all rotating. That is the "semichus haparshiyos" between "v'yasem lecha shalom" and the parsha of hakravas hakorbonos. If you don't have shalom, you don't have anything.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

The World's Existence Depends on the Giving of the Torah Revivim

Without the Torah the world could not have fulfilled its destiny * After the Torah had already greatly influenced the world, it seemed to many of the Jews that the people of Israel had completed their role * The current war expresses the deep crisis, and forces us to return to fundamentals * Our Sages instituted that outside the Land of Israel every holiday should be observed for two days * When a visitor has a deep connection to the Land, while he is in the Land he should conduct himself according to the custom of the Land of Israel

Our Sages said that the world was hanging in the balance until the sixth day of Sivan, if Israel would accept the Torah on it – it would exist, and if not, it would return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder (Shabbat 88a). This is because without the Torah, the world could not have fulfilled its destiny. It would have remained enslaved to the shackles of the evil inclination, without the ability to begin a process of moral repair that would bring it to its redemption.

We will illustrate the tremendous influence of the Torah in three areas:

1) Thanks to the guidance of the Torah, the value of marriage was established throughout the entire world. Without the Torah, phenomena of marriages involving incest within the family were common. Therefore, the halakha had to rule that a brother and sister, father and daughter, or mother and son who were married and converted, must separate.

2) The abolition of slavery: One of the principles that the Torah teaches us is that repair requires a deep process, and as long as according to the prevailing consciousness based on reality, the existence of slavery is necessary for the survival of many people, because without slavery the poor would die of hunger, and members of a defeated nation would be put to death – the Torah does not command to abolish slavery. But the Torah commands to treat the slave with respect, who has a soul, and to preserve his right to live and fulfill God's commandments. Not only that, but the Torah itself was given to a nation of slaves who by God's word went out to freedom. Thus, in a gradual process the world progressed to the abolition of slavery.

3) In those times, kings established the law and could bend it as they wished, and judges perverted justice for the strong and wealthy. In a gradual process the commandment was accepted that justice must do equal justice for all, and it is forbidden to discriminate against the poor and needy in judgment. And even the king himself is subject to the law, and therefore, he must write for himself a Torah scroll that would accompany him all the days of his life, and not deviate from its instructions.

The Crisis in Modern Times

After the Torah had already greatly influenced the world, through the religions that accepted part of its values (Christianity and Islam), and through the various thinkers who developed political theory and moral theory in the light of the Torah, it seemed to many of the Jews that the people of Israel had completed their role. There is no longer a need to cling to Jewish identity and preserve the consciousness of exile, and it is possible to join the enlightened nations, and through them, continue to repair the world in the light of the morality of the Torah and the Prophets. Thus began a serious and dangerous process of secularization and assimilation, and came the Communist revolution, and after it, the Holocaust. Even in democratic countries, a dangerous process began of the disintegration of the family, identities and values, until it is clear to many that the world is still far from its repair. However, still, without understanding the Torah in its greatness, the process of assimilation continues.

Let Us Return to Fundamentals

The current war also expresses the deep crisis, and forces us to return to fundamentals. For years, the State of Israel tried to explain to the world that it is ready to compromise with the Arabs, and behold, when despite everything the Arabs attacked us and wickedly harmed civilians – contrary to all international conventions – many in the world do not justify our war to destroy the enemy.

The reason is simple: almost all the official representatives of Israel do not express our absolute connection to the entire Land of Israel, a connection that stems from God's word that bequeathed the Land to our forefathers, and to us. Except for a few ambassadors, like Dror Eydar and Tzipi Hotovely, our representatives do not mention the verses of the Torah, and do not quote the words of the Prophets who prophesied thousands of years ago about the return of the people of Israel to their Land, in order to make it flourish, and bring blessing to the world. The Bible is the most important and famous book in the world, but instead of speaking about it, and expressing the greatness of the miracle of the fulfillment of the Prophets' words, our representatives speak about security and readiness for compromises, without an answer to the Arabs who claim that we came to a foreign land, and dispossessed its inhabitants. Out of wishful thinking, they describe the conflict with the Arabs as a neighborly conflict that can be solved by compromise, instead of explaining to the world that the Muslim Arabs who fight us, fight the people of Israel and the great idea of the Torah of Israel, and to a large extent, all the rest of the world that is not Muslim.

The Holiday of Shavuot

May it be God's will that we merit on the coming holiday of Shavuot for good, to return and connect to the holy Torah, and each person, according to what is suitable for him, will add regularity in Torah study, and through this, we will understand our national destiny – to settle the Land, to do charity and justice, to defeat our enemies, and to bring blessing to the world.

Yom Tov Sheni Shel Galuyot

Our Sages instituted that outside the Land of Israel, every holiday should be observed for two days. The foundation of the institution is that the timing of the holiday depends on the sanctification of the month, and since in the Diaspora they did not know when they sanctified the month in the Land, on the 30th of the previous month or the 31st, they instituted that they should practice two days because of the doubt. However, this institution also had a spiritual foundation. The main revelation of the holiness of Israel and the holidays is in the Land of Israel, while outside the Land of Israel, in order to absorb the holiness of the holiday, they need to observe it for two days. This is analogous to a flashlight, that when it illuminates a close object, its light is strong and focused on a small area, but when it illuminates a distant object, its light weakens, and spreads over a large area. Similarly, the light of the holidays is revealed in the Land of Israel in one focused day, while outside the Land of Israel, their light weakens, and spreads over two days (Derech Mitzvotcha 114a).

Yom Tov Sheni for Diaspora Residents Who Are in the Land

The poskim (Jewish law arbiters) disagreed about the law of a Diaspora resident who ascended to the Land of Israel for a visit. Some say that

when he is in the Land, his status is like a resident of the Land of Israel, and he should observe only one day of the holiday (Chacham Tzvi 167; Shulchan Aruch HaRav 496:11), and according to the majority of poskim, since his place of residence is outside the Land, even when he visits the Land, his status is like a Diaspora resident, and this is the practice (Birchei Yosef 496:7; Mishnah Berurah 496:13).

And although according to the basic law it would have been possible to be lenient, since the law of Yom Tov Sheni is rabbinic, and the rule is that in case of doubt regarding rabbinic law we are lenient, the custom was accepted to be stringent according to the rule that we follow the opinion of the majority of poskim. And since this is the custom, Diaspora residents who are in the Land on Yom Tov Sheni even recite the special blessings for the holiday.

However, it seems that when the visitor has a deep connection to the Land, and therefore, there is some chance that he will choose to immigrate to the Land, while he is in the Land, he should conduct himself according to the custom of the Land of Israel.

Those with Connection Who Are Exempt from Yom Tov Sheni

1) One who comes to the Land for a year of study, his long stay in the Land makes him a resident of the Land of Israel during his stay, and every time he visits the Land, he should observe only one day.

2) One who visits the Land from time to time, when his visits accumulate to a year, he is already somewhat a local resident, and from now on, during the holidays when he stays in the Land, he should observe only one day.

3) One who comes to visit the Land with the intention to immigrate to the Land when this becomes possible, even if he visits for a short time, and years will pass before he can realize his plan, during his stay in the Land, he should conduct himself like a resident of the Land.

4) A visitor who has children or parents who immigrated to the Land, is considered as having a connection to the Land, and during his stay in the Land, he should conduct himself like a resident of the Land.

5) One who buys an apartment in the Land of Israel to live in it during his visits, even though his visits have not yet accumulated to a year, by virtue of his apartment, while he is in the Land, his status is like a resident of the Land of Israel.

6) An expatriate who established his home outside the Land, even if he has been living there for decades, since for a significant period of his life he lived in the Land, as long as there is any chance that he will return to the Land, when he visits the Land, he should conduct himself like residents of the Land of Israel.

However, when they are outside the Land, since in practice their main residence is outside the Land, their status is like Diaspora residents in every matter, and they are obligated to observe Yom Tov Sheni (these laws are explained in Peninei Halakha: Moadim 9:8).

Laws for One Who Stays Awake All Night

One who stays awake all night, needs to wash his hands before the morning prayer. According to the custom of Sephardic Jews, he should not recite a blessing on the washing, and according to the custom of Ashkenazi Jews, the recommendation is to relieve oneself before prayer, and touch one of the covered places on the body that have sweated a little since the previous washing, and thereby become obligated in washing hands with a blessing.

Birchot Ha'Torah (Torah blessings): The prevalent custom is according to Rabbenu Tam, that even one who did not sleep at all throughout the previous day, since he comes to pray the morning prayer of the new day, he recites the Torah blessings. And one who wants to fulfill all opinions, should hear the blessings from his friend, and intend to fulfill his obligation thereby.

Birchot Ha'Shachar (Morning blessings): Even one who stays awake all night recites all the morning blessings, because these blessings were instituted for the general good that exists in the world, and not specifically for the personal good of the one reciting the blessing.

However, some say that one who did not sleep should not recite 'Elokai Neshamah' and 'Hama'avir Sheinah', and therefore, ideally, if there is someone there who slept and is about to recite them, it is better to hear them from him, and intend to fulfill his obligation thereby. And if not,

he should recite them himself. And an Ashkenazi Jew who knows that his father's custom is not to recite them himself, should not recite them.

Time of the blessings: According to halakha, we say the Birchot Ha'Shachar and Birchot Ha'Torah blessings close to the morning prayer. And according to Kabbalah, they customarily say Birchot Ha'Shachar after Chatzot (midnight), and Birchot Ha'Torah after Amud Ha'Shachar (dawn).

Eating and Drinking at Night and Before Morning Prayer

During the night, one is permitted to eat and drink without limitation. And from the half hour close to Amud Ha'Shachar, it is forbidden to establish a meal, lest one be drawn into continuing eating his meal. This includes also being forbidden to eat bread or cakes in the amount of more than a ke'beitzah, but it is permitted to eat, without establishing a meal, vegetables, fruits, and grain dishes, without limitation.

From the time dawn rises, it is forbidden to eat anything and also forbidden to drink a flavored beverage, and even one who began to eat or drink before then – must stop. Only water is permitted to drink after dawn rises (one who needs coffee in order to concentrate in prayer, may drink coffee without sugar, before prayer).

Although this article may be a little late for those sending out wedding invitations for this year's June weddings, it is still helpful in many other ways.

What May I Not Write?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Invitations

"I was told that I should not include quotations from pesukim on my daughter's wedding invitation. Yet, I see that 'everyone' does! Could you please explain the halacha?"

Question #2: Sukkah Decorations

"Someone told me that sukkah decorations should not include any pesukim. Is this true? My children bring home decorations like this from school."

To answer these questions, we need to explain several halachic issues, including:

1. The original prohibition against writing Torah she'be'al peh, and the later "heter" to write and publish it.
2. The concern about producing divrei Torah that will not be treated appropriately.

The original prohibition against writing Torah she'be'al peh

Originally, it was prohibited to write down any Torah she'be'al peh (Gittin 60b), except for an individual's personal notes recorded for one's own review (Rambam, Introduction to Mishneh Torah; see also Rashi, Shabbos 6b s.v. Megilas). The Oral Torah was not permitted to be taught from a written format. Torah she'be'al peh was meant to be just that -- Torah taught completely without any written text. Thus, Moshe Rabbeinu taught us the halachos of the Torah orally, and Klal Yisrael memorized them. Although each student wrote private notes for the sake of review, the Oral Torah was never taught from these notes.

The prohibition against writing Torah she'be'al peh included writing midrashim, prayers and the texts of berachos, as well as translations and commentaries of the Written Torah, since all these are considered Torah she'be'al peh. In those times, all these devarim she'be'kedusha were memorized, and the only parts of the Torah that were written were the pesukim themselves.

The Gemara (Gittin 60b) records this halacha as follows: Devarim she'be'al peh, iy atah resha'ie le'omram bichsav, "You are not permitted to transmit the Oral Torah in writing." The Ritva (ad loc.) explains that this is because divrei Torah taught verbally are understood more precisely, whereas text learning is often misunderstood.

Another prohibition forbade writing the books of Tanach except when writing a complete sefer (Gittin 60a). Thus, one could not write out a parsha or a few pesukim for learning, although it was permitted to write an entire Chumash, such as Sefer Shemos. Similarly, one could not write out part of a sefer of Navi to study or to read the haftarah. In order to recite the haftarahs regularly, every shul needed to own a scroll of each of the eight Nevi'im (Yehoshua, Shoftim, Shemuel, Melachim, Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel, and Terei Asar) in order to read the haftarah from the appropriate sefer. Similarly, a person who wished to study Shiras Devorah or the prayer of Channah had to write the entire Sefer Shoftim or Sefer Shemuel.

Why do we no longer abide by this prohibition?

Chazal realized that it was becoming increasingly difficult for people to learn Torah and to observe certain other mitzvot, such as reading the haftarah. Therefore, they ruled that the prohibition against writing Torah must be superseded by the more vital need of keeping Torah alive in klal Yisrael. This takanah was based on the pasuk, Eis la'asos laShem heifeiru torasecha, which is understood to mean "It is the time to act for Hashem, since Your Torah is being uprooted" (Tehillim 119:126). In order to facilitate Torah study, they permitted

writing individual verses and teaching Oral Torah from written texts. We will refer to this *takanah*, or heter, as “eis la’asos.”

The first part of the Oral Torah to be formally written for structured teaching was the Mishnah, edited by Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi) at the end of the period of the *tanna'im* (circa 3960/200 c.e.). To quote the Rambam, “Rebbe gathered all the laws and explanations that had been studied and interpreted by every *beis din* since the days of Moshe Rabbeinu and organized the Mishnah from them. He (Rebbe) proceeded to teach publicly the scholars of his generation from this text, so that the Oral Torah would not be forgotten from the Jewish people. Why did Rebbe change the method that had been used previously? Because he saw that the numbers of Torah students were decreasing, the difficulties facing the Jewish people were on the rise, the Roman Empire was becoming stronger, and the Jews were becoming increasingly scattered. He therefore authored one work that would be in the hands of all the students, to make it easier to study and remember the Oral Torah” (Introduction to Mishneh Torah).

We see that Rebbe instituted the first formalized use of a text to teach the Oral Torah, because of the new circumstances confronting *klal Yisrael*. After Rebbe’s days, Chazal gradually permitted writing down other texts, first Aggadah (ethical teachings of the Gemara), later the entire Gemara, and still later, the explanations and commentaries on the Gemara.

As a very important aside, we see from the end of the quoted Rambam, “to make it easier to study and remember the Oral Torah,” that even though it is now permitted to write down the Mishnah and Gemara, it is still important to know the entire Oral Torah by heart. The Rambam seems to explain that the Oral Torah that each individual is required to know includes all the accepted conclusions of the Torah she’be’al peh.

In the context of the rule of *eis la’asos*, the Gemara tells us the following story: Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakeish (*amora'im* in Eretz Yisrael shortly after the time of Rebbe) were studying from a Talmudic anthology of ethical teachings, a “sefer Aggadah.”

The Gemara asks, “How could they study from such a book, since it is prohibited to learn Torah from a written text?” The Gemara replies, “Since it is now impossible (to retain all the knowledge of the Torah without a written text), ‘it is the time to act for Hashem, since Your Torah is being uprooted’” (Gittin 60a). We see that the Gemara initially assumed that it was still prohibited to study Torah from a written text, except for the study of Mishnah. The Gemara responded that the prohibition had been further relaxed because it had become even more difficult to learn Torah than it had been in the days of Rebbe.

The Gemara relates a similar episode concerning the recital of the haftarah. As mentioned above, it was originally forbidden to write part of a book of Tanach, and, therefore, every *shul* needed to own scrolls of all the *Nevi'im* in order to read the haftarahs. However, as communities became more scattered, making this increasingly difficult, the Gemara permitted the writing of special haftarah books that contained only the haftarah texts, but not the text of the entire *Nevi'im*. This, too, was permitted because of *eis la’asos* (Gittin 60a).

What else is permitted because of *eis la’asos*?

We see that in order to facilitate Torah learning, Chazal permitted the writing of the Oral Torah and parts of the books of the Written Torah. To what extent did they override the original prohibition?

This is a dispute among early *poskim*, some contending that it is permitted to write only as much as is necessary to prevent Torah from being forgotten. According to this opinion, it is prohibited to write or print even *tefillos* that include *pesukim*, when they are not intended for learning Torah (Rif and *Milchamos Hashem*, Shabbos Chapter 16). This opinion also prohibits writing or printing a translation of Tanach into any language other than the original Aramaic Targum, because a proper translation constitutes Torah she’be’al peh. In addition, this opinion prohibits the printing of a *parsha* of Chumash in order to teach Torah, since one could write or print the entire sefer (Rambam, *Hilchos Sefer Torah* 7:14; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 283:2).

Other *poskim* permit the writing of any Torah that one uses to learn. Thus, they permit writing a single *parsha* in order to teach Torah (Taz, Yoreh Deah 283:1; Shach, Yoreh Deah 283:3) and the translating of Tanach into any language. These *poskim* rally support to their opinion from the fact that Rav Saadya Gaon wrote *sefarim* in Arabic, including commentaries on Tanach (Ran, Shabbos, Chapter 16).

Both opinions agree that it is prohibited to publish translations of Tanach that will not be used to spread Torah knowledge (Ran, Shabbos, Chapter 16).

How does this prohibition affect us?

All of the opinions quoted above prohibit writing disparate parts of the Written Torah and any of the Oral Torah in situations where there is no Torah benefit. For this reason, early *poskim* note that one may not embroider a *pasuk* or a *beracha* on a *talis*, since writing this does not serve to teach Torah (Rabbeinu Yerucham, quoted by *Beis Yosef*, and Taz, Yoreh Deah 283:3. It should be noted that the *Levush* is more lenient, see Shach, Yoreh Deah 283:6.).

Another concern

There is an additional reason why one should not embroider *pesukim* on a *talis*. Since the *talis* could be brought into an unclean place, it is not proper to have a *pasuk* written on it.

A third concern – causing the words of Torah to be destroyed

To explain this concept, we must first introduce a surprising statement of the Gemara: *Ko’svei berachos kesorfei Torah*, “Those who write *berachos* (to enable people to recite them) are considered as if they burnt the Torah” (Shabbos 115b). What does this Gemara mean? We would think that these individuals have performed a tremendous *mitzvah*, since they have enabled people to recite *berachos* correctly!

This statement was authored at the time when it was still prohibited to write down the Oral Torah. At that time, it was forbidden to teach any *halachos* in written form, even the correct text of a *beracha*. Everything had to be taught orally. Therefore, the Gemara states that by writing a *beracha*, even without the name of Hashem (Shu’t Tashbeitz #2), one is violating the *halacha* by teaching Torah she’be’al peh in writing.

But why is it considered like “burning the Torah?”

This Gemara introduces a new prohibition. Someone who writes prohibited Torah works is considered culpable afterwards, if those *divrei Torah* become consumed by a fire! Writing unnecessarily, which results in subsequent destruction, is akin to burning Torah.

We know that it is prohibited to erase or destroy the Name of Hashem (Shabbos 120b), and that this prohibition includes erasing or destroying words of Torah and all other holy writings, including notes of Torah classes, stories of Chazal, *sefarim* for learning, “*benschers*,” etc., even if they do not include Hashem’s Name (Shu’t Tashbeitz #2). Therefore, even small *benschers*, *tefillos haderech* and similar items published with abbreviated names of Hashem are still considered *divrei Torah* imbued with *kedusha*. For the above reason, one must treat these items with proper care and dignity and place them in *sheimos* when they become unusable.

It is also prohibited to cause destruction of words of the Torah indirectly by writing or publishing *divrei Torah* that might subsequently be destroyed. This prohibition exists whenever there is insufficient reason to write or publish the *divrei Torah*. This explains the Gemara’s statement, quoted above, that someone who wrote *berachos* when it was prohibited to do so is held responsible, if the words of Torah are subsequently destroyed.

Although, nowadays, we are permitted to write and print *berachos* and *siddurim* to enable people to recite them properly, it is forbidden to produce these items unnecessarily. It is certainly prohibited to put *pesukim*, parts of *pesukim*, or *divrei Torah* in places where it is likely that they will be treated improperly. Both of these reasons preclude writing *pesukim* on *Sukkah* decorations, unless one can assume that they will be properly cared for.

How much of a *pasuk* is considered to be *divrei Torah*?

Even three words in a row are considered a *pasuk* that may not be written without sufficient reason (see Gittin 6b). However, if the letters are improperly or incompletely formed or spelled, it is permitted (Shu’t Tashbeitz #2).

For this reason, some people print on invitations the following, *Naaleh es Yerushalayim al rosh simchaseinu*, “We will place our memories of Yerushalayim above our celebrations.” This is permitted, because it is not a quotation of a *pasuk*, although it is similar to the *posuk* in Tehillim 137:6.

There is another solution that may be used: rearranging the words of the *pasuk* so that they are not in the correct order. When doing this, one must be certain that one does not have three words in the proper order.

I once received an invitation which stated on the cover, *Yom zeh asah Hashem nismecha venagila bo*, “This day was made by Hashem. We shall rejoice and celebrate on it.” The person who prepared this quotation had done his *halachic* research. Although very similar to the *pasuk*, “*Zeh hayom asah Hashem nagilah v’nismecha bo*” (Tehillim 118:24), the words of the original *pasuk* were transposed in such a way that there were no longer three consecutive words together!

Some authorities permit printing *pesukim* if marks are placed between the words, or if the words are not in a straight line. They feel that these arrangements of words do not constitute *pesukim* (cf. Shu’t Tashbeitz #2 who disagrees).

Some producers of “*lulav bags*” are meticulous not to quote three words of the *pasuk* in order. Thus, they write, “*Ul’kachtem lachem... kapos temarim...us’machtem*” avoiding writing three consecutive words of a *pasuk* (Vayikra 23:40). This is permitted.

Invitations

Perhaps people who print *pesukim* on invitations rely on the fact that this is considered mere poetic writing style, or that the printer has no intent to produce *divrei kedusha*. However, recent authorities prohibit this practice. In Sivan 5750/June ’90, an open letter signed by the *poskei hador* warned that advertisements, invitations, receipts, signs, and raffle tickets should not include *pesukim* or parts of *pesukim*, except when the *pasuk* is written as part of literary style, with no connection to its context.

We live in an age of proliferation of written material. Many pamphlets have the positive value of spreading Torah. We must be careful to show our honor to Hashem by treating pesukim and divrei Torah with proper respect. May we always merit to demonstrate Hashem's honor in the appropriate way!

[CS – Addition:

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Hashem asks Aharon to direct the Kohanim in every generation to bless Bnei Yisrael (Birkas Kohanim) with the three-line blessing, "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you; may Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you; may Hashem turn His countenance to you and establish peace for you" (Bamidbar 6:23-26).

The Ba'al Ha'Akeidah (R' Yitzchak Arama 1420-1494, a Spanish rabbi and author) asks: Why is there a need for Birkas Kohanim? What is the purpose of this commandment? Hashem is the source of all blessing in this world. Does Hashem need the assistance of mortal man to bless His children?

The tzaddik gives a remarkable observation. He explains that an individual's success and all the good he has in life is primarily contingent on the strength of his emunah. It is a conviction and confidence that all the blessing and beneficence come to this world from Hashem, and it is He alone who guides the world. Nothing happens by chance, is driven by man, or influenced by the constellations. One's success is not because the individual is so smart, charismatic, or capable. It is only the power and force of Hashem that grants man contentment and prosperity. Likewise, when a person experiences challenging situations presented by neighbors, friends, or family, they are merely messengers from Heaven.

That is the meaning of "may Hashem turn His countenance to you." May Hashem's messengers serve to heighten and increase our emunah that, indeed, everything – good and otherwise – come from Hashem.

With regard to the Birkas Kohanim, the Zohar comments that actions performed in this earthly world inspire astounding conduct in Heaven. When the Kohanim spread their fingers to bless the Jewish people, it rouses the Divine Presence to dwell upon His people. It is a favorable time in the upper and lower worlds, a moment when strict judgment is reversed to mercy, because when the Kohanim ascend to the bimah, mercy abounds in all of the worlds. One who is affected by a dream can have his dream ameliorated.

R' Shimshon Fuchs was giving a shiur in Eretz Yisrael. After the shiur, one of the participants, dressed in a uniform, came over to speak to him. "Tomorrow, I return to the front lines to join my battalion after a few days off. However, I must tell you something that is difficult for me to understand or to explain logically.

We were searching one of the buildings in Gaza for terrorists or hidden weapons. As the commanding officer, I entered the building first, followed by my troop. We saw there were no hidden weapons or people hiding anywhere, and we prepared to take the stairs leading up to the second floor. And then," he paused, "something crazy happened.

"As I led the soldiers up the stairs, I suddenly saw an elderly man, who looked like a rav, coming down the stairs towards me. He had a long white beard, and wore a rabbinical coat and hat. I was certain I was hallucinating. A rav with a long white beard in a building in Gaza?

"We all drew our weapons, as we thought it was a disguised terrorist. With a compassionate look, the 'rav' begged me in Hebrew not to go up the stairs because it was very dangerous. I told him to move out of the way and not to interfere with our search. However, the 'rav' insisted, 'Sakanah, sakanah – it is dangerous. Do not go up.'

"What should I do at that moment? We were under tremendous pressure, as we could be ambushed in an instant, or the building could explode. However, his sincerity pierced my heart, and I believed that he had been sent from Heaven to save us. I just had this feeling that we should listen to his pleas.

"I immediately ordered my men to leave the building," the officer related in a choked voice. "We rushed out of the building, and it was not more than two minutes later that the entire structure exploded and was totally destroyed.

"I turned to another officer, who was not yet observant, and asked him, 'When you experience such miracles, why don't you publicize it?'

"He answered me, 'You know that we are forbidden to reveal many aspects of our ground operations. And if I would talk about this, people would not believe me and think I'm not normal.'

The officer concluded, "I see that you are a rav who believes in Hashem, so I am telling you this. You should know that there are many other miracles that my friends and I have witnessed, but we don't speak about most of them."

When Naomi was left a poor widow after the death of her wealthy husband, Elimelech, in Moav, she decided to return to her hometown, Bais Lechem. She states (Megillas Rus 1:21), "I went away full, and Hashem has brought me back empty." The Shevet Sofer explains her words in the context of what we have discussed.

When a person is successful in this world, he believes "I went away full," i.e. he enjoys affluence and prosperity due to his own merits. However, when he is not successful, and he is not doing well, "Hashem has brought me back empty," i.e. his failure is due to Hashem. Once the person acknowledges that his decline comes from Hashem, he can then reach the awareness that, in fact, there is nothing great or small, good or otherwise, that does not come directly from Hashem. May we all merit great blessing in all aspects of our lives.

[CS – I have added this late-breaking dvar torah:

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Our Light, Not Our Darkness, Scares Us Most

Fear Not Your Power: An Individual Is a Community; Why Ephraim Can Bring a Shabbos Sacrifice

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Nuremberg Trials

In the film "Judgment at Nuremberg," American judge Dan Haywood sentences Ernst Janning, an important legal figure in Germany even before the rise of Hitler, to life in prison for condemning an innocent Jewish doctor to death in 1935. Janning pleads to Haywood that he was unaware of the magnitude of the Nazi horror and that he would have never assisted Hitler had he known what the monster was scheming.

"Those people, those millions of people," Janning begged for his freedom, "I never knew it would come to that. You must believe it."

To which Judge Haywood replied: "It came to that the first time you sentenced a man to death you knew to be innocent."

100 Million? Big Deal

The story is told that before Mao-Tse-Tung (1893-1976), the founder and leader of the People's Republic of China, brought the Revolution to China and installed the Communist system there, he was warned that millions of Chinese could starve until they got things working properly.

To which Mao responded, "If I have to lose 100 million Chinese peasants for the revolution, then it's worth it."

Indeed, during his leadership, from 1949 to 1976, it is estimated that 70 million of his own people perished.

This is one type of leader: one who can give up 100 million people, as long as his goals are accomplished. Joseph was taught by his father a vastly different message: One person is the world. Taking the life of one person is extinguishing the light of the entire world.

This message is conveyed with astounding depth in the weekly Torah portion, Naso.

The Seventh Day

In the listing of the offerings brought by the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, in dedication of the newly erected Sanctuary, recorded in detail in Naso, the seventh leader is from the tribe of Ephraim.

נָשָׂא ז', מִחוּם: בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי נָשָׂא לְבָנֵי אֶפְרַיִם אֶלֶיֶם בְּנֵי-עֲמִיחֻד

On the seventh day, the leader was of the sons of Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud.

Which begs a great question:

The leaders of the tribes began offering their contributions on the first day of the month of Nissan, the day the Sanctuary was erected, which was on a Sunday.[1] This means that Ephraim brought his offering on

the seventh day of the week, on the Shabbos. But on Shabbos you are not allowed to bring an offering. On Shabbos you may not slaughter an animal, nor can you place meat in a fire, nor can you cook meat—all components necessary for an offering in the Sanctuary!

To be sure, when the Sanctuary stood in the desert, and the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the korbanot (animal and meal offerings) offered on its altar came under two categories: A) "Individual offerings" (korbanot yachid) brought by private citizens, such as the "generosity offering" brought as a donation, the "thanksgiving offering" brought to express one's gratitude for a personal salvation, or the "sin offering" brought to atone for a transgression. B) "Communal offerings" (korbanot tzibbur), such as the daily morning and afternoon offerings brought by the collective nation of Israel from a fund to which every Jew contributed an annual half-shekel.

Torah law forbids the bringing of individual offerings on Shabbat, but permits and obligates the bringing of communal offerings on the holy day.[2]

The offerings brought by the leaders of the tribes were individual offerings, brought by private citizens, paid by their own money, based on their own volition, not communal offerings which are always brought on behalf of the entire people.[3] So, here we face a fascinating question! How then can the leader of Ephraim be allowed to bring these sacrifices on Shabbos?[4]

The Midrash Rabah on this verse raises this enigma.

במדבר רבה נשא יד, א בסופו: דבר אחר, ואפרים מעוז ראשי, מדבר בנשיא אפרים, שהקריב קרבנו לתקנת המזבח ביום השבת, שנאמר: ביום השביעי נשיא לבני אפרים וגו', מנין שיום השבת היה, לפי שפבר אפרים אותו יום שהתחילו הנשיאים יום ראשון היה, מכאן את למד שיום שביעי להקריבה שבת היה, שלא תאמר היאך חלל את השבת נהלא אין קרבן יחיד דוחה את השבת וזה הקריב בשבת, אומר הקדוש ברוך הוא לא על פיו עשה, שאני אמת למשה (נשא ז, יא) נשיא אחד ליום נשיא אחד ליום יקריבו את קרבנם לתקנת המזבח בלא הפסק יקריבו זה אחר זה, הני: ואפרים מעוז ראשי, לך נאמר: ביום השביעי נשיא לבני אפרים וגו'.

במדבר רבה נשא יד, ב: דבר אחר, מי הקדימני ואשלם, מדבר ביוסף שהוא הקדים לשמור את השבת עד שלא נתנה, וטבח טבח והכן (מקץ מג, טז), אומר רבי יוחנן ערב שבת היתה ואין הכן אלא לשבת, שנאמר (בשלח ט, ה) והיה ביום הששי והכיני וגו'. אומר הקדוש ברוך הוא, יוסף אהב שמירת את השבת עד שלא נתנה התורה, הניד שאני משלם לכן בנה שיהא מקריב קרבנו בשבת, מה שאין יחיד מקריב, ועלי לקבל קרבנו בפרצון, הני: מי הקדימני ואשלם, ומנין שכן הוא, ממה שאמור בענין ביום השביעי נשיא לבני אפרים וגו'.

The answer the Midrash gives is intriguing, if enigmatic.

Ephraim was a son of Joseph. The tribe of Ephraim carried the genes and legacy of Joseph. When the brothers of Joseph came to Egypt to obtain food from him, he told the caretaker of his home to "slaughter a slaughtering and prepare a meal,"[5] which the sages understand to mean that he should cook and prepare all the food on Friday to be ready for the Shabbos.

Rabbi Yochanan states that it was Friday afternoon and Joseph told his people to prepare a Shabbos meal. [The word "hachen," prepare, refers to a Shabbos meal, as Moses tells the Jews in the desert: "And it will be on the seventh day, they should prepare, v'heichinu, ahead of time, that which they will bring".][6] Thus, in the entire Torah, Joseph is the first person who is described as preparing a Shabbos meal ahead of time. This was before the Torah was given. So G-d said: "Joseph! You kept Shabbos even before it was given, I will pay you back, that your descendant will offer his sacrifice on Shabbos, which is not the case of ordinary individuals who cannot offer private sacrifices on Shabbos."

Yet this is so strange. What is the logic behind saying that since Joseph kept Shabbos, and prepared for Shabbos on Friday, his great-grandson would bring a sacrifice that ordinarily violates the sanctity of Shabbos?[7] If anything, Joseph should be rewarded by descendants who increase in the sanctity of Shabbos.

What is more, the sages teach that all the Patriarchs observed the entire Torah before it was given, including Shabbos.[8] What then was the uniqueness of Joseph?

I will present to you one possible answer, based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe on Shabbos Parshas Metzora, 7 Nissan, 5741 (1981) and on 19 Kislev 5721 (December 8, 1960).[9]

The Test

For this we have to recall the fateful story of Joseph and the uniqueness of his observing Shabbos in Egypt.

Joseph, an extremely handsome young man, Genesis tells us, attracts the lustful imagination of his master's wife. She desperately tries to engage him in a relationship, yet he steadfastly refuses her. Then came the fateful day, "When he entered the house to do his work and none of the household staff was inside. She grabbed him by his cloak and pleaded, 'lie with me.' He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand, and he fled outside." [10]

Humiliated and furious, she used the cloak as evidence that it was he who attempted to violate her. Her husband, Potiphar, had Joseph imprisoned, where he spent the next twelve years of his life until, through an astonishing turn of events, he was appointed Prime Minister of Egypt. That is when his brothers came for food and he has the Shabbos feast prepared on Friday, since he observed the laws of Shabbos.

The Face of Jacob

The Midrash[11] explains the meaning of the phrase that Joseph "entered the house to do his work and none of the household staff was inside." What type of work did Joseph come to do?

The Midrash says that the "work" Joseph came to do was to yield to the advances of his master's wife. After all of her unceasing pleas, Joseph at last succumbed. However, as the union between them was about to materialize, the visage of his father, Jacob, appeared to him. This caused Joseph to reject the powerful urge. He left his garment in her hand and he fled outdoors.

What was it about Jacob's visage that inspired Joseph to deny the temptation?[12]

The Lonely Slave

Let us reflect more closely on the psychological and physical condition of Joseph during that day when his master's wife lured him into a relationship.

Joseph was a 17-year-old slave in a foreign country. He did not even own his body—his master exercised full control over his life, as was the fate of all ancient and modern slaves. Joseph had not a single friend or relative in the world. His mother died when he was nine years old, and his father thought he was dead. His siblings were the ones who sold him into slavery and robbed him of his youth and liberty. One could only imagine the profound sense of loneliness that pervaded the heart of this lad.

This is the context in which we need to understand Joseph's struggle. A person in such isolation is naturally overtaken by extremely powerful temptations, and is also likely to feel that a single action of his makes little difference in the ultimate scheme of things.

After all, what was at stake if Joseph succumbed to this woman's demands? Nobody was ever likely to find out what had occurred between the two. Joseph would not need to return home in the evening to face a dedicated spouse or a spiritual father, nor would he have to go back to a family or a community of moral standing. This act would not harm his prospects of getting a good shidduch (marriage partner), nor would it get him thrown out of his Yeshiva... He would remain alone after the event, just as he was alone before it. So what's the big deal to engage in a snapshot relationship?

In addition we must take into consideration the power possessed by this Egyptian noblewoman who was inciting Joseph. She was in the position of being able to turn Joseph's life into a paradise or a living hell. In fact, she did the latter, having him incarcerated in an Egyptian dungeon on the false charges that he attempted to violate her. If it was up to her, he would have remained there for life.

The Talmud[13] described the techniques the woman used in order to persuade Joseph. "Each and every day, the wife of Potiphar would attempt to seduce him with words. Clothes she wore for him in the morning she would not wear for him in the evening. Clothes she wore for him in the evening she would not wear for him in the morning. She said to him, 'Surrender yourself to me.' He answered: 'No.' She threatened him, 'I shall confine you in prison...I shall bend your proud stature...I will blind your eyes,'" but Joseph refused her. She then gave him a huge sum of money, but he did not budge.

Let us recall that this story took place before the giving of the Torah, when adultery became forbidden for Jews even at the threat of death. One may argue that in light of the death threats presented to Joseph by his master's wife, it would have been halachically permissible, perhaps even obligatory, for him to engage in the union![14]

What, then, was the secret behind Joseph's moral rectitude? What empowered a lonely and frail slave to reject such an awesome temptation?

"The visage of his father Jacob"! That is what gave Joseph the extraordinary fortitude to smack his impulse in the face and to emphatically dismiss the noblewoman's lure.

But why? Jacob was living many miles away, unaware even of the fact that his son was alive. What was the magic that lay in his physiognomy?

Adam's Moment

The Talmud presents a tradition that the beauty of Jacob reflected the beauty of Adam, the first human being formed by the Almighty Himself.[15] When Joseph saw the visage of Jacob, he was seeing the visage of Adam as well.

Adam, we know, was instructed by G-d not to eat from the fruit of "the tree of knowledge." His disobeying of this directive altered the course of human and world history forever.[16] Though he did something apparently insignificant, merely eating a single fruit from a single tree, this minuscule act still vibrates through the consciousness of humanity to this very day.

Why? Because every single human being is part of the fiber in which heaven and earth are interlaced. "Each person is responsible to say for me the world was created," says the Mishnah.[17] What this means is that there is something in this world which only I can repair and accomplish.

G-d's dream was not to be alone but to have mankind as a partner in the continuous task of healing the world. Each of us was given our particular mission, and on this task the whole world depends. By whatever we do, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption; we either reduce or enhance the power of evil. Something eternal is at stake in every decision, every word, every deed performed by every single man, woman or child.[18]

When Joseph saw the visage of (Jacob which reflected the visage of) Adam, he reclaimed an inner unshakable dignity; he remembered that he was a candle of G-d lit on the cosmic way. Seeing the visage of Adam reminded Joseph how a single act, performed at a single moment by a single man, had the power to change history forever.

At that moment, Joseph remembered, that Adam was not one man; Adam was the entire world. If something would happen to him, if he would die, humanity would die with him. Each decision he made impacted the planet. He could not deceive himself that his actions were unimportant. One move this or that way would define the destiny of mankind.

This is what gave Joseph the fortitude he needed to withstand temptation. This is how he could keep Shabbos as the Prime Minister of Egypt, all alone, with no family or community support. For he realized the depth and significance of his life and decisions.

The greatest mistake in life is to think of yourself as insignificant. Not to realize the centrality of your existence in the cosmic plan. Not to appreciate the truth that you are G-d's personal ambassador to the world. You are never alone, and you are never merely one small individual.

In the words of the Reb Yosef Yitzchak, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1880-1950): [19]

יעדער יחיד איז א רבי, ער איז בכח צו מאכן א רביס און באלעבן א רביס.

Every individual is an entire community; he can create a community and bring life to a community.

Does one need better proof than Joseph's eventual story? Here was one man who saved the entire world from famine!

Your Light

Marianne Williamson's remarks on the subject have become justly famous. She wrote:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that

most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Nuclear Jew

Rabbi David Lapin, from South Africa, once shared this experience.

As soon as I entered the rabbinate of South Africa, I became concerned about retaining my intellectual independence – something I am fiercely protective of – while serving as a community rabbi at the will of a synagogue's board of directors. Therefore, I believed that I also needed to secure an independent source of income. And so I first went to work for an international commodities trading company, and later I founded the leadership consulting firm which I currently lead.

At about that time, an opportunity arose to join a company of commodity traders in Johannesburg, and this is what I did. But I was not sure I was on the right track. Was I right to divide my time between my business and my rabbinic duties? It seemed as if I had two full-time jobs and my family was paying a heavy price as a result.

There came a time when I felt I needed the opinion of someone much wiser than me, someone who had a global perspective that embraced modernity, history and the future. I decided to seek the advice of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

In 1976 I came to New York, but I had not realized that to see the Rebbe one had to make an appointment many months in advance, and at first I was turned away. Only when I wrote a letter to the Rebbe in which I made the argument that my questions impacted the larger Jewish community – and which I insisted be presented to him – did he invite me to wait until he finished his appointments for the night when he would make time to see me.

I will never forget meeting the Rebbe. I recall that he got up from his chair as my wife and I came in, greeted us and insisted that we sit down. At that moment, I realized that we were going to have a real conversation – this was not going to be just a symbolic encounter.

Indeed, the meeting lasted about fifteen minutes, during which time I felt that he was looking right inside me and communicating with me on a level that transcends the mind, getting straight to the heart and the essence of being. In addition, I sensed a kindness and warmth – all at once I was in the presence of a great man, an intellectual genius, a leader of the Jewish people, but also a grandfather who cared about me. In short, it was an amazing experience.

I asked him about the responsibilities that I faced and the limitations that I felt, which seemed overwhelming. How could I manage it all? What should I give up – my business or my Torah teaching? Where should I direct my energies?

His answer to me was that I should give up nothing and continue working in business while still teaching Torah. I do not remember his exact words, but the gist of it was that my being in business increased my ability to bring people closer to Judaism; my profession increased my influence and was a vehicle of kiddush Hashem, of sanctifying the name of G-d. He stressed that I would have greater impact if I was involved with both business and Torah.

I was still very young, and I couldn't imagine how I could continue to do both. So, I burst out with: "I don't think that this is realistic. I'm already up to here... I feel very humbled and very honored that you would even talk to me this way, but it just isn't realistic!"

I remember clearly his response to my outburst. He said: "I'll tell you what your difficulty is. You think that human interaction is like a chemical reaction. But it isn't. In a chemical reaction, there are two elements which interact with each other, and they result in a third compound. But people aren't chemicals. When people interact, the result is a nuclear reaction. A nuclear reaction occurs at the core and then it

radiates in a spherical, rather than a linear, way. As the outer rings of your sphere get bigger and bigger, the number of people you are touching gets bigger and bigger – indeed, there is no limit."

"When you touch the heart of one person, there is a nuclear reaction because that person in turn touches so many other people. So, each person you touch – even if it is a moment's interaction – represents a nuclear reaction in terms of impact. That's what it really is."

He was right of course, and way ahead of the research that, since then, has proven his words to be true. For example, the Framingham Heart Study showed that people's mood affects others three times removed – that is, one's friend's friend's friends. We impact people not just with our words but with our moods and our energy.

Rabbi Lapin concluded:

"I remembered this whenever I stood in front of a class of fifty people. I contemplated that these fifty could in turn be impacting at least one hundred and fifty others. This meant that, both in my work as a rabbi and as a business person, week after week I was affecting tens of thousands of people without realizing it. That's what the Rebbe tried to get across to me. He was talking about the huge amount of holiness that I had the potential to bring into the world.

"I got it. Indeed, he changed my entire mindset when he said, "Don't underestimate what each person is capable of doing. Just remember that when you touch one person you are causing a nuclear reaction." And that's something that I've never forgotten."

The Public Offering

Now, at last, we can appreciate the words of the Midrash.

Joseph, who kept the Shabbos even in Egypt, who remained connected to truth and morality even in depraved Egypt, can do so only because he understood the truth that an individual is really the entire nation and the entire world. So G-d says, when it comes to your offering, it is not an offering of a private citizen; it is an offering of the entire nation. Hence, it can be offered on Shabbos.

No Despair

During our lonely moments of misery, when we, too, may feel that nobody cares for us and we are alone in a large indifferent universe, we ought never fall prey to the easy outlet of immoral gratification or despair. We must remember that something very real and absolute is at stake at every moment of our existence and in every act we do.

You may view your individual actions in the privacy of your bedroom as insignificant. Yet from the perspective of Judaism, these decisions create history.

If you only open your eyes, you will see the visage of your father whispering to you through the silent winds of history that you are not an isolated creature in a titanic world whose behavior is inconsequential. At this very moment, G-d needs you and me to bring redemption to His world.

Or as one WhatsApp clip quipped: It took only one man in China to create the coronavirus; and only one man in Minnesota to stop it.

NOTES [1] Shabbos 87. Of course, the question comes up regardless of which day of the week they began their offerings. With twelve leaders offering each day, one of them had to violate the Shabbos!

[2] This is the reason for the debate about the Passover offering, if it can be brought on Shabbos. While most offerings belong completely to one class or the other, the Passover offering straddles both categories. On the one hand, it possesses certain features which would define it as an individual offering, such as the fact that it is purchased with private funds and eaten by those who brought it; on the other hand, there are qualities about it that are characteristic of the communal offering, such as the fact that it is brought en masse by "the entire community of the congregation of Israel." When the 14th of Nissan—the day on which the Passover offering is brought—falls on a Shabbat, the question of its categorization becomes crucial. Torah law forbids the bringing of individual offerings on Shabbat, but permits and obligates the bringing of communal offerings. Should the Passover offering be regarded as an "individual offering" which cannot be brought on Shabbat, or as a "communal offering" whose obligation supersedes the prohibition of work on the day of rest?

The Talmud relates (Pesachim 66) that one year when Nissan 14 fell on Shabbat, the leaders of the Sanhedrin (the highest court of Torah law) were unable to resolve the question of whether the Passover offering should be brought. Hillel, a scholar newly arrived in the Holy Land from Babylonia, demonstrated that the communal aspect of the Passover offering is its more dominant element, meaning that it should be offered also when its appointed time coincides with Shabbat. In recognition of his superior scholarship, the leaders of the Sanhedrin stepped down and appointed Hillel as their head. (See at length Likkutei Sichos vol. 18, Behaloscha and references noted there.)

[3] Communal offerings will always be obligatory. Individual offerings are sometimes obligatory and sometimes voluntary. The offerings of the leaders of the tribes were voluntary contributions.

[4] The Even Ezra here concludes that it was not pushed off to Sunday. On the seventh day no one brought an offering. But the straightforward reading of the verses seem to indicate that the offerings were brought on consecutive days. The Rogatchover Gaon explains it based on the view that each tribe of Israel is defined as a "kahal," as an independent community (See Sichas Shabbos Metzora 5741, and references noted there.) But this would still raise the problem according to the other views.

[5] Genesis 43:16

[6] Exodus 16:5. This is the usage of a "gezeira shavah," since these words coming from Joseph seem superfluous. In addition, only Shabbos and Yom Tov meals have to be "prepared" in Jewish law, due to their prominence. See Rashi Beitza 2b. (Sichas Shabbos Parshas Metzora 5741)

[7] Perhaps we can suggest the following explanation. If anyone else brought their offering on Shabbos, it could be construed as a lack of respect for Shabbos. But since the descendant of Yosef performs this, he is obviously not disrespecting Shabbos, so it is permitted. But still the question remains, why does G-d want to honor the Shabbos by appearing to desecrate it? As the words of the Midrash state, "Says G-d, in the merit of your keeping Shabbos before the Torah was given, your child will bring his Korban on Shabbos, even though an individual Korban is not brought on Shabbos." There is very clearly some connection here that requires explanation.

Here is an answer presented by the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979). Since the private offering was in preparation for the altar that eventually would host the public offerings, this very act of preparation (even though it was a private offering now) for later public offerings was already considered like a public offering. It was already imbued with the importance of a Karban Tzibur. This is based on the principle that "hazmanah milsa hi" – preparation counts and has importance in and of itself.

This is the "measure for measure" reward that Yosef was granted. You, Yosef, prepared for Shabbos. You instituted the concept that preparation is important. Therefore, I will accept your grandson's offering – even though it is private – on Shabbos. It too is preparation – preparation for a Public Offering, and Joseph has taught us the value of preparing for a great thing to come.

[8] Yuma 28b. End of Kidushin.

[9] See an entirely different explanation in Likkutei Sichos vol. 23 Naso; vol. 20 Miketz (all from Shabbos Metzora 5741). The answer inside is based on a few talks of Shabbos Parshas Metzora 5741.

[10] Genesis 39:11-12.

[11] Bereishis Rabah 87:7. Tanchumah 8-9. Zohar Vayechi 222a. This is also the opinions of two Talmudic sages, in Talmud Sotah 36b, quoted in Rashi to Genesis ibid.

[12] The Talmud in Sotah ibid. relates that Jacob warned Joseph that if he consorted with her, his name would not appear with those of his brothers on the breastplate of the High Priest. That is what led Joseph to resist her importunities. But from the Midrash and Zohar cited in the previous footnote, it appears that it was Jacob's visage per se that inspired Joseph to abstain.

Even from the wording of the Talmud it seems that it was not only Jacob's warning but also the very appearance of his countenance that caused Joseph to reject his master's wife. Here one must wonder what was the power of Jacob's visage?

[13] Yuma 36a

[14] See Benei Yissachar Maamarei Nissan; Pardas Yosef to Parshas Vayeishev; Sichas Yud Tes Kislev 5721.

[15] Bava Metzia 84a; Bava Basra 58a. Cf. Tanya Igeres Hakodesh chapter 7.[16] See Genesis 3:16-24. Talmud Eiruvin 100b. Likkutei Torah of the Arizal Parshas Bereishis. The writings of Kabbalah and Chassidism are actually full of this theme of how Adam and Eve's partaking of the forbidden fruit altered human history for eternity.

[17] Mishna Sanhedrin 37a. Cf. Tanya chapter 41. Sichas Shabbos Vayigash 5729

[18] Mishnah Sanhedrin 37a. Talmud chapter 41. Sichas Shabbos Vayigash 5729.[19] The Rebbe, whose first name was Yosef, said this on Pesach 1949, a few months before his passing in 1950. See the following letter of his successor and son in law, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe:

מכתב יד ניסן תש"י: הורו לנו נשיאנו בכלל ונשיא דורנו, הוא כ"ק מו"ה אדמו"ר הכ"מ בפרט, אשר צריך להשתדל בטובה - גשמיית ורוחנית - גם של יחיד בכל תוקף ועוז. ומובנה הוראה זו, כי הרי אין אנו יודע איהו יקשר ואם כלם כאחד טובים. ומלבד זה שפנש אחת מ ישראל עולם מלא היא מצד עצמה, הנה נתבאר בשיחה הנדפסת בקונטרס [שיחת אחרון של פסח תש"ט]... אשר יעדער יחיד איז א רבים, ער איז בכל צו מאכן א רבים און באלעבן א רבים. זאת אומרת, אשר גם א נמצא בין המושפעים שלו איש אשר בטבעו מתבודד הוא, א פאררוד'דיגער, הרי אין זה אלא מצד טבעו קודם העבודה בעצמו, ומי יודע באיזה מעמד ומצב יח' מחר ולאחר זמן. ובפרט שידוע מרז"ל (ירושלמי כתובות פ"א ס"ב) אשר פסק התורה משנה את הטבע. ואם יקשר את היחיד המתבודד שיה' באתר' דרבי, ובאתר' דרבי, הרי הלה כרבי, יפעול ויח' יחיד זה את כל סביבתו. והשתדלותו [אשר השקיע בו תביא גידולין וגידולי גידולין עד סוף העולם - ל' העולם]

The Crown of Aleppo

The Incredible Loss & Recovery of the Most Authoritative Tanach Manuscript

The Bet on David and Goliath

An archaeologist was digging in the Negev Desert in Israel and came upon a casket containing a mummy. After examining it, he called the curator of a prestigious natural history museum.

"I've just discovered a 3,000-year-old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!" the excited scientist exclaimed.

The curator replied, "Bring him in. We'll check it out."

A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. "You were right about the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know?"

"Easy. There was a piece of paper in his hand that said, '1 million Shekel on Goliath.'"

The Story of the Codex

Secured in the lower level of the famed Shrine of the Book at Jerusalem's Israel Museum sits the Aleppo Codex. Its story is thrilling and mysterious, mirroring the story of the people who authored the Codex, the oldest, most complete, most accurate text of the Hebrew Bible, preserved in its entirety in important Jewish communities in the Near East: Tiberias, Jerusalem, Egypt, and in the city of Aleppo, Syria.

As we celebrate this holiday of Shavuot when we were given the Torah, it is worth recalling this story.

Some call it the Aleppo Codex, some call it the Crown of Aleppo. Its Hebrew name is קֶטֶר אֲרָם צֹזָבָה (Keter Aram Tzova), the "Crown of Aleppo."

What is its uniqueness? This manuscript of the Hebrew Bible—the Tanach—was written around the year 930 by the scribe Shlomo ben Buya and was annotated (with the vowels—nekudos—and cantillations—trup—of the entire Tanach) by Aharon ben Asher. Aharon was considered the greatest expert on biblical texts and devoted his entire life to researching the most accurate version of the Tanach. How is each word spelled? What is its exact pronunciation? What is the musical note with which it is read in shul? How exactly is it written in the Torah Scroll? Although all Torah scrolls were copied from a previous one since there was no printing at the time, all were copied by hand, and over millennia, a mistake here or there creeps in. Aharon ben Asher spent a lifetime discovering the most authoritative text—and it was this Codex that he edited, time and time and time again until he perfected it.

Despite its name, the Keter (the Aleppo Codex) was not written in Aleppo, but in the northern Israeli city of Tiberias. Soon thereafter, the Keter would travel to Jerusalem and quickly become the authoritative text of the Bible for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Now, if you know your history, you know that eleventh-century Jerusalem was no place for a nice Jewish boy or a Jewish Bible. When Jerusalem was ransacked by the Christian Crusaders, the Keter was saved and ransomed from the Crusaders by Jews of Egypt.

In Fustat, Egypt, the Keter came into the possession of the most famous Jew of the day and perhaps of all times – Rabbi Moses Maimonides, the Rambam (1135-1204).

Before his passing in 1204, Maimonides, upon whose contributions to Jewish law, philosophy, and exegesis we still rely, referred to the Keter as the authoritative text of the Bible.

רמב"ם הלכות ספר תורה פרק ח הלכה ד: וספר שמכנו עליו בדברים אלו הוא הספר הידוע במצרים שהוא כולל ארבעה ועשרים ספרים שהיה בירושלים מכמה שנים להגיה ממנו הספרים, ועליו היו הכל סומכים, לפי שהגיהו בו אשר ודקדק בו שנים הרבה והגיהו פעמים רבות כמו שהעתיקו, ועליו סמכתי בספר התורה שכתבתי כהלכתו.

And the book that we relied upon in these matters is the well-known book in Egypt, which contains twenty-four books, which was in Jerusalem some years ago, to revise the books from it, and everyone relied on it since it was revised by Aharon ben Asher, and he worked meticulously on it for many years and revised it many times, as they copied, and I have relied on it in the Torah Scroll that I wrote according to the Halakha.

Here Maimonides is telling us of a complete manuscript of the Bible (twenty-four books), which was revised by Aharon ben Asher over and over again for many years. Maimonides prefers this manuscript to all the other Torah Scrolls and manuscripts, and he decrees as Halacha that Torah scrolls should be written according to this manuscript. Because of the great authority of Maimonides, within a few generations, all Jewish communities accepted his ruling, and all the Torah scrolls of all the Jewish ethnic groups are written according to his instructions, which are based on the codex revised by Aharon ben Asher.

Now, you must understand the significance of this. Maimonides transcribed in his code of law the accurate way the Torah scroll must be transcribed—and it was all from this Codex that fell into his hands and which he trusted more than any other scroll.

As to how the Keter arrived from Egypt to Syria, we are not sure. We know that Rabbi Dovid ben Yehoshua, a direct descendant of Maimonides, traveled through Israel in 1375, going to live in Damascus and eventually Aleppo, a historically strong and rich Jewish community. Some speculated he might have brought it to Syria.

There the Keter sat, in the old Aleppo Synagogue, for over five hundred years, in a chest with two locks, like a nuclear briefcase, not to be opened except in the presence of the bearers of the keys. Two leaders of the community had the keys, but the pact was that nobody would open it not in the presence of the other.

The Riots

The Keter slumbered for centuries – a sacred text under the protectorate of the Aleppo community – right up until November 30, 1947, the morning after the UN General Assembly voted in favor of the establishment of a Jewish State.

That morning a mob attacked the Jewish quarter in Aleppo, setting fire to the synagogues, the start of a riot that would go on for days. The attack, a part of an anti-Jewish wave of unrest across the Middle East and North Africa, resulted in some 75 Jews murdered and several hundred wounded. Following the attack, the

Jewish community went into a steep decline. The wealthy Jews escaped the day after the pogrom and many more fled in small groups in subsequent months. Their property was forfeited and on December 22 the Syrian Government enacted a law forbidding Jews from selling their property. Within a few years after the pogroms, most Jews left Aleppo, a large majority of them relocating to Israel. By 1959, about 2,000 Jews remained in Aleppo. As of 2012, no Jews live in Aleppo. What about the Crown stored away in the synagogue that was attacked? At first, people thought that it had been completely destroyed. Later, however, it turned out that most of the manuscript had been saved. The synagogue sexton, Asher Baghdadi, and his son ran back into the smoldering synagogue to gather the pages of the Crown!

From that day on, the writing was on the wall for the Aleppo Community. For ten years, the Keter went from hiding place to hiding place. It traveled from hand to hand, hiding it from the Syrian authorities. Eventually, in 1958 the Codex was wrapped in cheesecloth and smuggled out by a dairyman to the fledgling new State of Israel. It arrived in Jerusalem and was delivered to the President of Israel, Yitzchak Ben Zvi.

The Missing Pages

The Aleppo Codex originally had 487 pages. Yet, as it reached Israel, it had only 294 parchment pages, written on both sides. Examinations revealed that many pages were missing because of the damage to the Codex during the 1947 pogrom. Mainly the first part of the manuscript was damaged, the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses), of which only the last eleven pages remained. Almost all the Chumash (Five Books of Moses) had been lost, except the final chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy, which were preserved.

Many efforts were made to locate the missing pages of the Aleppo Codex. Despite years of research, and all of types of mysterious and criminal stories circulating, we do not know what happened to the missing pages. Were they burned or destroyed? Were they, perhaps, hidden somewhere? Were they stolen? Did Jewish families from Aleppo take them?

The efforts to ascertain the truth met with many disappointments. Nevertheless, there were two successes: an entire page of the Aleppo Codex from the book of Chronicles reached New York and was preserved by a family from the city of Aleppo. Eventually, that page was given to the National Library in Jerusalem and added to the Aleppo Codex. Then another clue was discovered: a fragment of a page from the Book of Exodus had been preserved in the United States in the wallet of a man from Aleppo, who used it as a kind of lucky charm. This piece of parchment has not yet reached Jerusalem, but a photograph of it has been published.

Today one can see the Codex—whatever parts they found—in the Israel Museum. Its silent pages tell an incredible story, the story not only of a manuscript but of a people holding on to its Torah for the last 3,333 years.

The Soul of a People

In my mind, this narrative captures the story of our people. The book has been the soul of the people, and the people have been the soul of the book.

Just like the Crown of Aleppo, we too traveled from country to country, yet we held on to our Torah, and it held on to us. As a result, we retained our identity if sometimes only in fragments, ultimately returning—like the Codex—to our eternal homeland.

Just like the Crown of Aleppo, they said about us too that we are no more; that we have been destroyed. But in some inexplicable way, 3337 years after Sinai we are still going strong.

The Jewish people are under attack again. Three millennia later, our foes still crave genocide for the Jews, and the world blames the Jews...

We must stand united and strong and always remember that as long as we hold on to the book, eternity belongs to us.

(My thanks to Rabbi Nir Gurevitch, Spiritual leader, Surfers Paradise, Australia, for his assistance with this essay).

Rav Kook Torah

Naso: The Benefits of the Sotah Waters

The Suspected Adulteress

The integrity of the family unit is of primary importance in Judaism. For this unit to function properly, the husband-and-wife relationship must be one of trust and constancy. But what happens when this trust, so vital for a healthy marriage, is broken?

The Torah addresses the situation of the Sotah, the suspected adulteress. This tragic case occurs when a woman, previously cautioned by her husband not to seclude herself with a particular man, violates his warning and is seen alone with that man.

The Torah prescribes an unusual ceremony to deal with this potentially explosive situation. The woman is brought to the entrance of the Temple, where she presents an offering of barley meal. The kohen uncovers her hair and administers a special oath. If the suspected

adulteress insists on her innocence, the kohen gives her to drink from the Sotah waters.[1] If the wife was unfaithful to her husband, these waters poisoned her. But if she was innocent, the waters did not harm her. In fact, they were beneficial: “she will remain unharmed and will become pregnant” (Num. 5:28).

The Benefit of the Waters

The Sages debated the exact nature of the positive effect of the Sotah waters. Rabbi Yishmael understood the verse literally: if she had been barren, she would become pregnant. Rabbi Akiva, however, disagreed. If that were the case, childless women would purposely seclude themselves with another man and drink the Sotah waters in order to bear children! Rather, Rabbi Akiva explained, the waters would ease the pain of childbirth, or produce healthier babies, or induce multiple births (Berachot 31a).

Rabbi Akiva had a good point — the law of the Sotah could potentially turn the holy Temple into a fertility clinic. In fact, the Talmud tells us that one famous woman threatened to do just that. Hannah, the barren wife of Elkana, threatened to go through the Sotah process if her prayers for a child went unanswered. (Her prayers were in fact granted, and she became the mother of the prophet Samuel.)

Why was Rabbi Yishmael not troubled by Rabbi Akiva’s concern?

Rav Kook explained that the ritual for suspected adulteresses was so degrading and terrifying, no woman would willingly submit to it — not even a barren woman desperate for children.

Hannah’s Exceptional Yearning

Hannah, however, was a special case. This extraordinary woman foresaw that her child was destined for spiritual greatness. Hannah’s profound yearning for a child went far beyond the natural desire of a barren woman to have children. She was driven by spiritual aspirations greater than her own personal needs and wants.

Hannah was willing to actively demonstrate that her longing for a child surpassed the normal desire of a barren woman. Thus Hannah was ready to undergo the ordeal of the Sotah ceremony. And in the merit of her remarkable yearning, her prayers were miraculously answered.

Only in this unique case was the natural deterrent of the ordeal of the Sotah insufficient.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, p.135)

[1] Water from the Temple washstand was mixed with earth from the Temple grounds. A bitter root was then soaked in the water. The text of the curse was written on parchment, and the ink was dissolved in the water.

Should You Care About What Others Think of You?

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

“What other people think about me is none of my business.”

While empowering and comforting, is this quote from Eleanor Roosevelt true? Should we care what people think and say about us? Should other people’s opinions about us take up space in our head and heart? Should we be listening and paying attention or is it indeed none of our business?

When negotiating with the tribes who wanted to settle east of the Jordan River, Moshe tells them once the land of Israel is fully conquered, then (Bamidbar 32:22) “Vihyisem nekiyim mei-Hashem u-miYisrael,” “And you shall be clean before God and Israel.”

Based on this, the Mishna (Shekalim 3:2) obligates us to not only avoid doing a wrong thing, but to avoid even the perception that one has done a violation. We must remain innocent in the eyes not just of God, but of our fellow man as well. Indeed, the Chassam Sofer (Teshuvos 6:59) writes that he has been troubled his entire life by this obligation and responsibility. It is one thing to be clean in Hashem’s eyes, since He knows the truth of what we have done. By contrast, the expectation that we can conduct our lives in such a fashion that no person can cast a doubt, or a criticism seems almost impossible.

We have a parallel rabbinic law called maris ayin, a prohibition against doing something that can be misinterpreted as a violation of Jewish law. You have likely heard this term invoked when discussing the

permissibility of going into a non-kosher restaurant to order a kosher drink or use the restroom.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe o.c. 2:40, 4:82) explains that the concern of maris ayin is that someone will misinterpret that something wrong is in fact ok and will come to violate a law themselves. The similar concept of chashad, on the other hand, is behaving in a way that will cause others to be suspicious of your wrongdoing, even if it will not impact their own behavior.

The common denominator of both prohibitions is that in both cases, I must be concerned with what others think about me and regulate my behavior accordingly. Or maybe not.

The Mishkan, the central place of holiness and Shechina had a kiyor, a laver that the Kohanim used to wash their hands and feet in preparation for the avodah, the service in the Mishkan. Though Moshe rejected this gift, disturbed that instruments of vanity would be used in the holy Mishkan, Hashem told him that these were, in fact, the holiest gifts and they must be accepted.

Perhaps as the Kohanim prepared to do their service, they needed to look into these mirrors, evaluate their lives, their decisions and their behavior, and consider how they were perceived by those around them. Only when they could successfully look at themselves in the mirror and be satisfied could they continue to do the avodah, to serve in the holy Mishkan.

Yes, we must consider the impact of our behavior on others, how it will be perceived, what others might learn from it, and what type of impression or misimpression we might be giving. Maris Ayin is something we must be cognizant of. At the same time, if we can look at ourselves in the mirror and genuinely be satisfied, if we believe we are acting appropriately in the eyes of Hashem and those we love and respect, I believe we need not look back and think about how others are reacting; rather, we should remember what other people think about me is none of my business.

When people, particular strangers make nasty comments online and offline, it says much more about them than it does about us. Yes, we should consider if the message has merit, even (maybe especially) when we don’t like the messenger or the way they crafted their message. But if the message is unfair, if we can look at ourselves in the mirror and honestly be satisfied with what we see, we cannot and must not absorb the negativity cast our way.

When I was growing up in Teaneck, we had a barber named Chubby. On his mirror was a sign that said, “He who trims himself to suit everyone will soon whittle himself away.” We simply cannot make everyone happy all the time, nor should we try. We must be clean in the eyes of Hashem and do our best to behave in way that is beyond reproach to others. But once we do, not only should we not take too seriously what others are saying about us, we shouldn’t even listen.

A rabbinic colleague shared with me how his assistant was starting to tell him what others were saying about him. He cut her off and asked, is it important to know, do you think I did something wrong? When she said no, he said, “In that case, I would rather not know, please don’t tell me.” She was flabbergasted and in disbelief that he had the discipline to not want or need to know what was being said. If what other people think about me is none of my business, why would I even want to know? At the end of our Amidah, we ask Hashem: v’limkalelai nafshi sidom, may my soul be silent to those who curse me. It is understandable that we ask for the courage and strength that our lips remain silent, but what does it mean to ask for our soul to do the same?

Perhaps we are not concerned we will react or respond harshly, but we are concerned that the curse or criticism of another person might torment and torture our soul. And so we ask, let my soul remain silent, not become frazzled or frustrated by what others are saying about me.

We must do our best and when we are convinced we have done so, we must work on not caring too much about what people say. If all else fails, remember this truism (origin unknown): “When you’re 20 you care what everyone thinks, when you’re 40 you stop caring what everyone thinks, when you’re 60 you realize no one was ever thinking about you in the first place.”

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

יִבְרַכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ: May Hashem bless you and guard you;

וַיִּשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלַיָּה וַיִּשֶׂם לָהּ שָׁלוֹם, May Hashem lift His countenance to you and place peace upon you (Bamidbar 6:24-26).

Why, after Hashem blesses us with material wealth, and abundance of spiritual wealth, do we need a further blessing? Surely, all of our needs are fulfilled with material and spiritual successes?

Rashi asks: שָׁמָּה תֵּאֱמָרוּ, הֲרֵי מֵאֲכָל נִהְרֵי מִשְׁתָּהּ, אִם אֵין שְׁלוֹם אֵין כְּלוּם. ת"ל אַחֵר כָּל זֹאת "וְנִתְּתִי שְׁלוֹם בְּאַרְצִי"; מִכָּאן שֶׁהַשְׁלוֹם שָׁקוּל כְּנֶגֶד הַכָּל

No matter how much abundance one has of material goods, and no matter how much Torah one has learned and knows, if peace and harmony are absent from one's life, and R"l, from our nation, all the other blessings cannot be fully realized.

Shalom is so important that our birkas ha'mazon ends with shalom, as the final phrase of 'bentching' states: ה' יזכרך את עמו בשלום - Hashem will grant strength to His nation, Hashem will bless His nation with shalom.

Shalom is so important that our daily Amidah ends with shalom: שָׁלוֹם Hashem place shalom, tovah (good) and bracha (blessing)... upon us and upon Your entire nation of Israel... Blessed are You Hashem, הַמְבָרֵךְ אֶתְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל, Who blesses His nation of Israel בְּשָׁלוֹם. with shalom.

Shalom is so important that the entire Shas (Shishah Sidrei Mishnah) ends with shalom: **אמר רבי שמעון בן שלפתא, לא מצא הקדוש ברוך הוא פלי מחזיקי ברכה לישראל אלא השלום, שנאמר (תהלים כט), ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' ברכה את עמו**

Shalom is so important that the Birkas Kohanim ends with shalom. Shalom is so important, that the name of our beloved, holy city of Jerusalem ends with shalom: Yerushalayim - the city where peace shall be seen (see Medrash Bereishis Rabbah 56:10).

In a world torn asunder, and utterly lacking any vestige of shalom, may Hashem save us, we must internalize this crucial lesson the Torah is teaching us. No matter how much blessing and bounty our nation has, without the כְּלִי מְסֻיָּר בְּרִיחָה of shalom, the other blessings will never suffice.

While we certainly daven each and every day for Hashem to grace us with peace and harmony, each one of us must do our utmost to sow the seeds of shalom within and amongst our nation.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z'l quotes the 15th century Spanish Jewish commentator, Rabbi Yitzchak Arama who explains “that shalom does not mean merely the absence of strife. It means completeness, perfection, the harmonious working of a complex system, integrated diversity, a state in which everything is in its proper place and all is at one with the physical and ethical laws governing the universe” (Covenant and Conversation, Numbers, p.102).

Furthermore, Rabbi Sacks teaches that, “Shalom has rich meaning in Hebrew - harmony between conflicting elements, each of which has its distinctive part to play in the integrated diversity of the whole... From the word shlemut, ‘wholeness, perfection,’ shalom is calibrated harmony between various elements, each with its role, each in its place. It is no accident that the priestly blessings end - as do the vast majority of Jewish prayers - with a prayer for peace. Peace, said the rabbis, is one of the names of G-d Himself, and Maimonides writes that the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world... We have to work for peace, not just pray for it” (ibid, p.105-106).

When we work to cultivate and realize the blessing of Shalom within our families, our kehilos and communities, our nation and our Land, then we will be truly blessed. And then we will merit the ultimate blessing: וְשָׁמִי אֶכְרַכֶּם אֶת־שְׁמִי, עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאֲנִי, וְאַתְּ הָיִיתָ בְּלִבָּם וְהָיִיתָ בְּלִבָּם (Bamidbar 6:27).

[בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום

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