Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
Vayishlach 5773

Weekly Parsha :: Rabbi Berel Wein
VAYISHLACH

In this week's Parsha, Yaakov sends emissaries to meet his brother Eisav. Midrash, as its want, supplies differing opinions as to who these emissaries were. In fact, Midrash again, as is usual with its insights, offers contradictory views. One interpretation is that the emissaries were humans, servants and allies of Yaakov. A second view is that they were angels, heavenly messengers employed by Yaakov to safeguard him and his family from the malevolence of Eisav.

So which interpretation is true? In addition, Midrash offers different insights into what occurred when these emissaries of Yaakov, whether angels or humans, actually encountered Eisav and his armed band. One opinion in Midrash is that Yaakov's emissaries were aggressive and threatening to Eisav, and actually inflicted blows upon his group. Another opinion in Midrash portrayed Yaakov's emissaries as being conciliatory, friendly and even subservient to Eisav.

So again, which opinion is true and accurate? We see that even within Yaakov his emotions are conflicted. He prepares for war, but at the same time is ready to pay heavy monetary tribute to Eisav.

Later in the Parsha, Yaakov wrestles with an anonymous adversary. Again, Midrash supplies different identities as to who this opponent was. Some say that he was an angel, so to speak, the guardian angle of Eisav. Others say that he was a human being, a highwayman and robber. Still others say that he was an intellectual and scholar. So, once more, we are faced with having to determine what we are to make of all of this. What is the moral insight that Midrash wants to communicate to us with all of these different opinions?

Abraham Lincoln, in one of his famous inaugural speeches to the American public, states that he prayed that "the better angels" within the individual would prevail, thereby ending slavery and preventing deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans in a bitter civil war. Whether angels or humans, Lincoln pointed out, is dependent on perspective.

Yaakov saw angels while Eisav saw only humans. What Yaakov saw as being reasonable, conciliatory and generous, Eisav saw as being threatening and aggressive. Someone may appear to be a scholar and intellectual, or even to be a friend, but may really be only a highwayman and a brigand.

Yaakov, who after his years in the house of Lavan, recognizes this dichotomy of perspective. He knows that Eisav does not see the world and life with the same view as he does. He hopes that Eisav will yet come around to viewing matters in the same perspective as does Yaakov. Though he prepares for war, which is Eisav's perspective, he combines it with cooperation and even tribute in order to achieve harmony and peace, which is his perspective.

This, I believe, is a fitting metaphor for our times and circumstances. The perspective of Yaakov – the State of Israel and the Jewish world generally – differs radically from the perspective of our enemies and even from our erstwhile friends. We hope to be able to change that perspective and align it more closely with our view. But until that happens we must deal with reality and be ready with both the sword and the olive branch, prayer and good deeds.

Shabat shalom

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vayishlach
For the week ending 1 December 2012 / 16 Kislev 5773
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Insights
Protecting An Endangered Species
"I have sojourned with Lavan." (32:5)

One of the reasons I like swimming is that waterproof smart-phones have not yet been invented. (Please, do not show this article to Nokia, Motorola, et al!)

A few months ago, I noticed one of my swimming buddies carefully placing a towel at the end of the pool right by the edge of the water. He did a few laps and then coasted to a halt in front of his poolside towel. He carefully dried his hands and then he flipped the towel open to reveal – a smart-phone.

Is it my imagination or has solitude become an endangered species?

Life can be divided into two distinct phases: input and output.

In one's childhood, our brains are largely set to "record", and we record by imitation. A child learns to speak by imitating his mother. A boy starts to learn by imitating his teacher.

Part of raising a child is to encourage positive role-modeling and minimize contact with negative stereotypes.

In this week's Torah portion, Yaakov sends a message to Esav that he "sojourned with Lavan." The numerical equivalent of garti, "sojourned," is 613. Yaakov was hinting to his brother Esav that Lavan's negative influence had not rubbed off on him, that he still kept the 613 mitzvot.

A similar example is when Yaakov prays to G-d (28:21) to return him in peace to his father's house without Lavan's negative influence. Even though already 75 years old, Yaakov was still concerned that the natural instinct to imitate would lead him astray.

This also explains the Torah's praise of Rivka. Despite being surrounded from the cradle by evil people she was able to sense that they were unsuitable role models and did not learn from them. Only an inherent holiness could have protected her.

The second phase starts when a child reaches maturity, or should reach maturity.

At this point, imitation should give way to our motivation. It's not enough for us to do things because "that's the way we always did it at home." Lessons learned through imitation must be re-learned and made our own. If not, we will never grow to be truly independent thinkers and doers. Not only that, but our own ability to be role models for our own children and students will be severely limited.

At a certain point, we have to pick up the ball and run with it by ourselves.

The only way we do this is by giving ourselves time; time to introspect, to examine our lives, our wants, our goals. A quarter of an hour a week may be sufficient, but it has to be quality time. If one's spouse or child comes and asks for advice, we would make sure to close the door, take the phone off the hook, and give them our undivided attention. Should we not give ourselves the same attention?

In a world where the deep-sea smart-phone is just around the corner, it takes a little effort to create the silence of solitude that is the key to maturity.

•Based on Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum
Parshas VAYISHLACH

Yaakov became very frightened, and it distressed him. (32:8)

Rashi explains the dual fears that Yaakov Avinu experienced. He was frightened that he would be killed, and he was distressed that, in the course of the battle, he might kill "acheirim," others. Notably, Yaakov had greater fear concerning the harm he might inflict on others than the harm by which he might be victimized. Apparently, our Patriarch never heard of "collateral damage," a term which has regrettably been popularized in contemporary society. People's lives have no value, they are secondary to a higher cause. Some make it; some do not. That is collateral damage. We cannot have it all. Someone will suffer. The Jewish nation has a

contrasting perspective which values every human life, thus maintaining a very dim view of the sorry excuse of collateral damage.

Let us return to Rashi's original statement. Yaakov feared killing acheirim. Who are the others? Why use this word? Why not simply say that Yaakov feared killing Eisav's men? In the Sefer Peninim Yekarim, we find a homiletic explanation quoted from the Imrei Noam and attributed to Horav Shmuel, zl, m'Ostrovtze, a disciple of the Koznitzer Maggid. When Moshe Rabbeinu was about to kill the Egyptian who was hurting the Jew, the Torah says, Va'yaar ki ein ish, "He saw there was no man…" "and he slew the Egyptian" (Shemos 12:2). Rashi comments that Moshe was not concerned with who might find out. If a Jew is being struck by an Egyptian, one neither asks questions, nor is he concerned that he might get into trouble for helping a Jew. We do what is right. Rashi explains that Moshe saw prophetically that no future convert would descend from the Egyptian assailant. We see Moshe was not taking chances. If there was a possibility of a Jew descending from this Egyptian, Moshe would have desisted and not intervened by inflicting mortal harm on the Egyptian.

Yaakov Avinu had a similar concern. In the Talmud Gitten 56a, we learn that Nero Caesar converted to Judaism. He was the progenitor of the distinguished Tanna Rabbi Meir. Nero was a descendant of Eisav. Thus, Rabbi Meir actually descended from Eisav. The Talmud Horayos 13b states that Rabbi Meir also went by the name Acheirim. He was a student of Elisha ben Avuyah, the Tanna turned apostate, who was later referred to as Acher, the "other one." After Acher left the fold, Rabbi Meir continued his relationship with him, feeling that he could distinguish between that which was halachically correct and that which was not. The sages did not agree with his choice of teacher; therefore, they referred to Rabbi Meir as Acheirim, "Others." Whenever we find a halachic decision being rendered by Acheirim, it is a reference to Rabbi Meir.

With this idea in mind, we understand Yaakov's fear if he were to succeed in killing Eisav. If Eisav died, so did the potential for Acheirim. Without Eisav, there would have been no Rabbi Meir. This was one piece of collateral damage that the Patriarch could not ignore.

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn has broken." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (32:27)

What was the purpose of the debate/fight that took place between Yaakov Avinu and Eisav's guardian angel? Perhaps the answer lies at the end of the narrative when Yaakov refused to allow the angel to leave unless he would first bless him. The commentators explain this blessing as a demand from Yaakov that the angel concede to him that he had received Yitzchak Avinu's blessings by right. Once and for all, Eisav's complaint that Yaakov stole the blessings must be quieted. While it may be a nice gesture, what was to be gained by the angel's blessing? Was this the purpose of their battle? The blessings were granted by Yitzchak and would, thus, take effect regardless of the angel's blessing.

Horav Michoel Peretz, Shlita, explains that there is a great benefit to be derived from the blessing of Eisav's guardian angel. He was Yaakov's greatest combatant, his most serious adversary. To receive a concession from one's antagonist is the greatest approbation one can obtain. Indeed, one's actions should be on the level that he receives acclaim even from those who oppugn his way of life, who are opposed to his level of observance.

Having one's friends and supporters defend him and justify his every action is not an indication of his praiseworthiness and appropriateness. It is when the accolades are sung by his detractors that we see the true success of an individual. Indeed, it is the perspective of those distant from him, of those who are not subjective, that counts the most. They have a better opportunity to grasp the larger picture, to see from a distance what is often overlooked when up close. When Yaakov received the blessing from Eisav's angel, it carried incredible weight, because it demonstrated to the world that he was acting appropriately.

If we keep this principle in mind, we can understand why it was Yaakov's lot in life to fall under the radar of Lavan's evil web of deceit and moral bankruptcy. Think about it: "Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents" (Bereishis 25:27) - the tents of Torah. He devoted his life to Torah study, to self-betterment, to achieving an exalted level of spirituality. So, why was he relegated to living for twenty years with such a roguish person?

Rav Peretz explains that good is best discerned and enhanced when it is contrasted with evil. Hashem created evil, so that good could be appreciated and intensified. From the negative, one sees the positive; in darkness, one achieves a greater perception of light. Yaakov achieved a greater level of purity and holiness as a result of his exposure to his evil brother and wicked uncle. He saw the "pits" and was, thus, able to attain greater appreciation of the "fruit".

Eis tzarah hee l'Yaakov u'mimenah yivashea, "It is a time of travail for Yaakov, and from it he will be saved" (Yirmiyahu 30:7). The travail itself will be the source of Yaakov's salvation. It will bring about an otherwise difficult to achieve salvation. Indeed, the wound itself provides the remedy.

Yaakov saw the positive in every situation, the silver lining in what seemed to be a distressing challenge. As Rachel Imeinu was about to take leave of this world during childbirth, she named the child whom she would sadly not raise, Ben Oni, the son of my pain. She saw the pain associated with his birth, the tragedy that accompanied his entrance into this world. Yaakov also named this child. He called him Binyamin, the son of my right hand, the child of strength. The Patriarch understood that with the increased distress would come greater strength and ennoblement.

At times, when one is up against a stone wall, he works harder to either scale it or break through. This individual would otherwise never have attempted to achieve what had earlier been considered an impossible task. Rav Peretz underscores this idea with the following story: A young man, a baal teshuvah, penitent, who had experienced much hardship in his life, was confronted with yet another challenge. He had finally met a young woman who was nice, a baalas middos, possessing good character traits, who was deeply committed to a Torah life. The young man finally had a chance to move on with his life, to eschew the past and look forward to the future.

There seemed, however, to be a problem. The Rav whom he had engaged to be mesader kiddushin, perform the marriage ceremony, had questions concerning the young woman's pedigree. He felt that there were certain Halachic issues which needed to be clarified. The young man was crestfallen. He felt his life coming to a bitter end. Everything he attempted seemed to fail. He could not even get married.

He approached the Rosh Kollel in his community to ask for help. The Rosh Kollel listened to the young man's story and immediately cloistered himself in his study in order to clarify the halachic questions that had arisen. Two hours later, he emerged with a number of dispensations which allowed the young man to move on with his marriage. Regrettably, the rabbi refused to budge. The Rosh Kollel turned to the preeminent poskim, halachic arbiters, in Eretz Yisrael, who agreed with his ruling. The wedding took place two weeks later. The young man had risen from the depths of depression and was now a different person.

The chassan's anguish spurred the Rosh Kollel to delve deeper into the halachah, to plumb its depths and emerge with a halachic dispensation that would otherwise have been overlooked. Adversity created the opportunity for spiritual growth. From amidst the darkness and gloom, there shone forth brilliant light.

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn has broken." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me"… he said, "No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael." (32:27, 29)

Then G-d said to him, "Your name is Yaakov. Your name shall not always be called Yaakov, but Yisrael shall be your name." (35:10)

At first glance the above pesukim seem to convey the same message. After some perusal, however, we are confronted with a number of questions. First, Yaakov Avinu asked Eisav's angel for a blessing. The blessing turned out to be a name change for the Patriarch; a name change which denoted his spiritual stamina in besting the angel. Yet, when the angel gave the blessing, he began, "No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov." Who cares about his original name? It is the new name that is

important. Why does the angel introduce the new name with a negative mention of his previous name? Second, when Hashem confirms the name change, He begins, "Your name is Yaakov," but it will not always be so. Your name will change. It seems as if the angel sought to underscore that the Patriarch will forever lose the name Yaakov. On the other hand, Hashem is emphasizing the complete opposite: Yaakov's name will be Yaakov, but he will not always be called by his original name but, rather, by his new name, Yisrael.

The Chasam Sofer, zl, offers a penetrating explanation based upon a statement made in the Talmud Berachos 12b. Chazal say that Hashem was telling Yaakov, "Your name will continue to be Yaakov, but Yisrael will be your principal name, with Yaakov serving as a secondary name." The Patriarch would have two names: Yaakov/Yisrael, with Yisrael serving as the primary name.

Eisav's angel had an agenda when he said, "No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov." He wanted to extirpate Yaakov's name permanently from the equation, so that only the name Yisrael would remain. Why? The Chasam Sofer explains that the dual name Yaakov/Yisrael has the same gimatria, numerical equivalent, as kra Satan - 729. Kra Satan is a reference to the Satan's decrees. We implore Hashem to tear, annul, the harsh decrees that Satan seeks to have imposed on us.

Eisav's angel was none other than the Satan. He was acutely aware of the power of Yaakov/Yisrael; thus, he sought to rid the Patriarch of his original name. Yisrael alone was not enough of a threat to him. Both names together were more than he could handle.

Why are both names necessary to impugn Satan's accusations against us? Why is Yisrael - a name that denotes strength, leadership, and the ability to overwhelm - not sufficient for our nation? The Chasam Sofer notes that Yaakov is derived from eikav, heel, which the Patriarch grasped on Eisav as they entered into the world. Yaakov symbolizes humility, as the heel is the lowest part of the body. It is also the first part of the body that is stepped upon when a person walks.

I think that Yisrael is not enough. Strength alone, unless tempered by humility, can be dangerous. How many great people have fallen because they lacked humility; because they always thought they were right; because, in their arrogance, they refused to listen to the advice of a "lesser" person? To triumph over Eisav and his minions, we must maintain the power of ki sarisa, "for you have striven" (and emerged triumphant) and eikav, the lowly heel. Only then will we see success in "crushing" Eisav's influence upon us.

The Steipler Gaon, Horav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, zl, exemplified the profound connotation of his two names. He was a gaon of unparalleled brilliance, a tzaddik who shunned the limelight, despite being the unofficial successor to his brother-in-law, the Chazon Ish. Most of his time was spent studying Torah in his modest apartment. He was the address to which Jews from all over the world turned for blessing, guidance and solace. There is no dearth of stories about the Steipler. I have chosen two that are probably well-known by some and worth repeating for the others. These stories underscore his fiery passion for Torah observance, as well as his outstanding humility.

At the age of nineteen, the Steipler was dispatched to the city of Rogathchov to establish a branch of the Novhardok Yeshivah. While he was there, he was drafted into the Russian Army to fight the Bolshevik Revolution. His unyielding determination to observe mitzvos despite being in an environment that was harshly anti-Semitic and antithetical to anything Jewish is legendary. The first Shabbos of his conscription set the tone for his entire stay in the army. On Erev Shabbos, he marched into the commander's office and notified him that, under no circumstances would he desecrate Shabbos. He was willing to make up the work during the week. Shabbos remained sacrosanct.

The officer was so taken aback by this unprecedented insolence that he agreed. There was, however, one stipulation. It was a suicidal gambit, but if he emerged alive, he could have his Shabbos. The Steipler said that he agreed to any condition. In fact, he did not even care what the stipulation was, since, regardless, he was not going to work on Shabbos. "As a result of your taking 'time off' to observe Shabbos, you will be placing a greater work load on your co-workers. Therefore, they will be allowed the 'privilege' of beating you to their heart's content." We must understand that these men were young, strong Russians whose anti-Semitic feelings were no secret. The opportunity to kill a Jew was a treat for them. The Steipler miraculously lived to tell about these special moments of suffering. As his bones were broken and his body shattered, he was able to say that he was infused with a special feeling of closeness to the Almighty. This is how he approached every mitzvah.

The second story demonstrates his unusual humility. Because of his distinction, everyone sought to have the Steipler attend his simchah. A joyous occasion becomes that much more gratifying with the presence of a Torah luminary. Understandably, the Steipler could not possibly attend each simchah to which he was invited. Especially in his old age, it was a rarity when he would attend a Shabbos bar-mitzvah. Indeed, he could easily spend the entire Shabbos trudging from one simchah to another.

He did, however, make one exception. A young boy was bar-mitzvah and the Steipler entered the shul and wished mazel tov to the father and bar-mitzvah boy. He then bent over to whisper something into the ear of the boy. The interchange took a few minutes - much longer than the average blessing of wishing that the boy grow in Torah and be a nachas to his parents and Klal Yisrael. The boy listened to the Steipler and then declared, "No! No! It is not a problem!" Then the Steipler left.

Anyone who observed the conversation wondered what had occurred. Later on, the Steipler explained that six years earlier, the bar-mitzvah boy, who was seven-years old at the time, was davening in the same shul as the Steipler. The boy was reading out of a very large siddur, causing the Steipler to think that the boy was learning Gemorah during davening. He went over to the boy and mistakenly criticized him for learning when he should be davening. The boy respectfully showed the Steipler that the volume in his hand was a siddur - not a Gemorah. The gadol hador, preeminent Torah giant of the generation, was very apologetic and asked the boy's forgiveness. The boy, of course, forgave him.

The Steipler, however, placed the incident on the back burner for six years until the time at which the boy would legally become an adult. He waited this entire time to once again ask for mechillah, forgiveness. It was concerning this request that the boy replied, "No problem. I did it already."

This is what Yaakov /Yisrael exemplifies, and it is with such qualities that we will render Satan powerless.

And two of Yaakov's sons, Shimon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, took each man his sword, and came upon the city which was resting trustfully and slew every male. (34:25)

Previously, we read that Ha'kol kol Yaakov, the domain of Yaakov, was the study of Torah. V'ha'yadaim yedei Eisav, the hands belonged to Eisav. Physical violence, raising the sword, war, all belonged to Eisav. It was, therefore, incongruous to their very nature for the sons of Yaakov Avinu, Shimon and Levi, to raise their sword to kill an entire city. This is not the Jewish way of dealing with dispute and adversity. The sword is something we would expect from the descendants of Eisav - not Yaakov.

Indeed, the Patriarch took serious umbrage with their actions, claiming that they had clouded the family reputation, besmirched their honor, tainted the name of Yaakov. They responded that they could not allow the pagan to have his way with a Jewish woman. Indeed, as Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, comments, the reason Shechem acted so cavalierly with Dinah was specifically because she was a foreigner, a friendless Jewish girl. Who cares about the Jews? Perhaps they were correct in reacting, but the manner of their response was uncalled for and certainly imprudent.

Rav Hirsch derives from this entire fiasco that the Jew is quite capable of raising his sword. He does not resort to violence because it is abhorrent and against his nature. It is not because he is weak. Throughout history, when the Jew has had to fight, he did so valiantly, with extreme force. If we have become the mildest, most soft-hearted of nations, it is not due to any inherent weakness on our part, to any form of cowardice. It is due to our Torah education, which focuses on humanness and mildness. We can wield the sword, as Eisav does. We do not, because we are Yaakov.

Devorah, the wet-nurse of Rivkah, died, and she was buried below Bais Kel, below the plateau; and he named it Allon Bachus. (35:8)

Apparently, the passing of Rivkah Imeinu's nursemaid must have been of critical significance to the Jewish people. Otherwise, it would not have been prominently mentioned in the Torah. In fact, it is recorded immediately after we are notified of Yaakov Avinu's establishing a Mizbayach, Altar, in Bais Kel. While it is true that the elderly nursemaid died and was buried there, does her passing warrant such prominent coverage? Furthermore, the place was named Allon Bachus, due to the excessive weeping that took place there. Who was Devorah that she was granted such honor? What role did she play in Rivkah's life?

Rashi explains that it was not only Devorah who died, but also Rivkah who died. Indeed, the death of Devorah is an allusion to Rivkah's passing, which took place at the same time. Thus, the excessive weeping, with the word bachus, weeping, in the plural, alludes to the double weeping - for Rivkah and Devorah. Rivkah's passing is concealed by the Torah for reasons mentioned by the commentators, connected to her being the mother of the wicked Eisav. The world population was not ready to appreciate the life of the woman who gave them the evil Eisav. We have still not resolved the issue of why Devorah, a woman who reached an advanced age, commanded such outpouring of mourning.

Horav Moshe Tzvi Nahariyah, zl, takes us back to our first encounter with Devorah, which occurred at the time of Rivkah's betrothal to Yitzchak. As the young bride was about to leave home, her family decided to send along her nursemaid. The immediate question which glares at us is: If Rivkah was mature enough to make a decision concerning marriage, why did she require the services of her nursemaid? If she was that young - perhaps she should not be getting married. Furthermore, why does the Torah find it necessary to share this tidbit of information concerning Devorah?

Targum Yonasan ben Uriel writes that Devorah was much more than a nursemaid. She was padgevassa, her mentor, her spiritual advisor, who guided her on the path of observance. As such, it is understandably crucial that Rivkah's descendants be made aware of the pivotal role she played in her life. Rivkah became the illustrious Matriarch as a result of Devorah's tutelage. We owe her a great debt of gratitude.

Rashi and Ramban debate why Devorah was with Yaakov at this point. She was no longer a young woman who could travel freely. Rashi contends that Rivkah sent her to inform Yaakov that it was finally safe to return home. The aged nurse unfortunately died on the way home. Ramban maintains that it is highly unlikely that Rivkah would dispatch an elderly woman to fetch her son. He suggests that, following Rivkah's marriage, the nursemaid took leave and returned to Padan Aram. When Yaakov left Lavan's home, he took Devorah with him out of respect for his mother. He planned to support her in her old age.

Rav Nahariyah suggests that there is more to Devorah's accompanying Yaakov. After all is said and done, she was old and frail, clearly not a candidate for wilderness travel. Yaakov wanted Devorah due to what would be her compelling influence on his sons. Any woman who could survive in Lavan's evil environment and emerge a paragon of virtue, fully-committed to Hashem, must have been a very special woman. She deserved to leave.

How did she survive? How did she remain steadfast in her beliefs? There were no schools, no opportunity for education. How did she do it? The Rosh Yeshivah explains that she was probably one of the "souls made in Charan" (Bereishis 12:5) by Avraham and Sarah. The influence and inspiration she received from the first Patriarch family remained with her for her entire life. Out of a sense of hakoras hatov, gratitude, to Avraham and Sarah, she decided to remain with Yaakov's family and help with the "kids." Her influence was far-reaching, warranting her special mention in the Torah.

Va'ani Tefillah

V'laasos u'l'kayeim. To observe and to uphold.

To observe is the goal of Torah study. Practical application is the fundamental purpose of limud ha'Torah, study of the Torah. Only if one is proficient in the Torah can he apply its laws practically. There are people who perform mitzvos by rote, following what others do, with no clue concerning the "why," "how," and "what for." It is not enough simply to "do." One must execute the mitzvah properly with meaning and enthusiasm. Horav Akiva Sofer, zl, defines v'laasos u'l'kayeim, as an entreaty that we be able to perform mitzvos and transmit what we do to the next generation, thereby seeing to it that the mitzvah is upheld. We must see to it that the mitzvah is not lost on us, but is carried on to our descendants and students.

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, explains that u'l'kayeim applies to the strengthening of mitzvos by championing them even if it involves hardship. Some mitzvos may even interfere with one's livelihood or other aspects of his daily endeavor. We implore the Almighty for strength to transcend the challenge, to triumph over the hardships, so that, in face of all odds, we succeed in upholding all of the mitzvos.

Sponsored l'zechar nishmas R' Noach ben R' Yehudah Aryeh z"l niftar 22 Kislev 5726 by his family

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column, Parshat Vayetze

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h

"The Nurturing Leader"

The class I was teaching on the subject of leadership, using the book of Genesis as a source text, was proving to be quite a learning experience for me. The diversity of the students in the class was proving to be especially important, because each student was stressing a different aspect of leadership. The class confirmed for me that, as Rabbi Nachman of Breslav put it, "Every shepherd has his own melody."

This week's class, focusing on the weekly Torah portion of Vayishlach (Genesis 32:4-36:43) was in one sense very much like the previous class sessions. However, as we will see, it had its own unique flavor.

The class began with a statement by Carol. The reader will remember that Carol had demonstrated early on that she preferred the role of "big sister" in the group. She characteristically defended the underdog in the often heated debates among her fellow students. She showed herself to be an optimist, seeing only the good in people, and she had a way of sensitively taking care of others.

"You have all been teasing me," she began, "and have been calling me 'the big sister.' Well, I am proud to play that role in the group, because I think that taking care of others in a sisterly, or even in a motherly, fashion is one important kind of leadership and one that is especially lacking nowadays. And I intend to prove it from an often overlooked verse in this week's Torah portion."

At this point, Carol launched into what was obviously a very well-prepared lecture. She began by briefly summarizing the events surrounding Jacob's return to the land of Canaan. She described Jacob's encounter with Esau, his dramatic sojourn in Shechem, and finally his arrival in Bethel, at which point we read this brief passage: "Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-Bachut, the Oak of the Weeping."

It was at this moment that Carol became quite emotional. "There is something about this brief verse that touched me very deeply. I didn't recall ever having learned of the existence of anyone named Deborah in our study of Genesis so far. Yet her death is not only noted in the Bible, but apparently it evoked great mourning. Obviously Jacob and his sons were very grieved by her passing. I felt almost possessed by a need to find out more about this Deborah."

She shared her little research project with the class and told them of her discovery that Deborah was indeed referred to earlier in the Torah portion of Chayei Sarah, which we read three weeks ago, although there, she went unnamed.

"It was way back when, long before Rebecca's son, Jacob, was even born," she explained, "that his mother Rebecca departed from her home and family to journey to Canaan and marry Isaac. But her brother and mother did not let her go alone. As we read in chapter 24 verse 59, 'They sent off

their sister Rebecca and her nurse along with Abraham's servant...' That nurse was Deborah."

Carol continued to report upon her probing analysis of the situation. She pointed out that many years intervened between the first mention of the nurse Deborah and her ultimate passing as a member of Jacob's camp. She asked me and the rest of the class whether we had any idea how this old nurse ended up in Jacob's camp in the first place. Before any of us had a chance to answer her she excitedly told us what she had discovered in Rashi's commentary.

"Rashi suggests that Rebecca had sent Deborah back to her brother Laban's home in Haran to send for Jacob and tell him that it was time for him to come home to Canaan, as she had promised she would do in chapter 27 verse 45: 'When your brother's anger subsides...I will send for you and fetch you from there.' Deborah was Rebecca's emissary and, although by then an aged woman, traveled at her mistress's behest from Beersheba to Haran and ultimately back to Bethel, where she died, was buried, and was so profoundly mourned."

It was unusual for any one student in this class to be able to hold the floor without interruption from one of the other students. But Carol clearly had the rest of the class transfixed. I was about to intervene and ask the others if they wished to participate when Carol preempted me.

"I know that I am monopolizing this session, but the research that I just shared with you has led me to speculate on why Rebecca would choose to use this old woman to travel hundreds of miles eastward to fetch Jacob and return with him to Canaan. I arrived at my own answer to this question, and it relates to the theory of the type of leadership which fits my personal style.

"We all learned, way back when, just how corrupt the environment in Laban's home was. Rebecca knew that she herself was only able to remain immune to Laban's influence because of the nurture and care which she experienced from infancy at the hands of her dear Deborah. She knew that Jacob and his wives and many children living under Laban's domination were at great risk, physically and spiritually. She had to send someone who could play a role in Jacob's life and in the lives of his children, her grandchildren, akin to the role played by Deborah in her own early childhood. Hence, she beseeched the frail, old Deborah to courageously undertake the mission of nurturing her son's family, despite the difficult journey which was required.

"Here we have," she concluded, "the Torah's allusion to a different type of leadership altogether. Not one of charisma, authority, control, or power. Rather, the tender, nurturing leadership of 'the big sister;' in this case, the old nursemaid. Only she could offer the unique kind of leadership which could keep Jacob and his entire family spiritually pure and physically intact."

The class sat silently, impressed by the amount of research and contemplation that Carol had clearly invested in this tour de force. It remained for Zalman, the class's "talmid chacham," to provide the icing for Carol's delicious cake.

"Your beautiful insights, Carol," he said in a soft voice suffused with genuine respect, "give extra depth to an exceptional Midrash quoted in the commentary known as Daat Zekainim MiBaalei HaTosafot. This Midrash connects Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, with another Deborah who lived hundreds of years later, Deborah the Prophetess. In the book of Judges, Chapter 4, we read: 'Deborah…led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.'

"The Midrash identifies the tree under which the later Deborah sat as a compassionate judge with the tree under which the earlier Deborah was buried. It is almost as if the earlier Deborah was the role model for the type of 'big sister' nurturing leadership which the later Deborah emulated with such historic success."

As I said at the outset of this column, this was a very different session, and one which introduced a very different, but fundamentally important, concept of leadership.

Indeed as Rabbi Nachman, himself a leader who nurtures the Jewish people even today, 200 years after his death, insisted: "Every shepherd has his own melody." Every leader has his, or her, own leadership style.

Orthodox Union / www.ou.org
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Fear or Distress?

Jacob and Esau are about to meet again after a separation of twenty two years. It is a fraught encounter. Once, Esau had sworn to kill Jacob in revenge for what he saw as the theft of his blessing. Will he do so now – or has time healed the wound? Jacob sends messengers to let his brother know he is coming. They return, saying that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with a force of four hundred men. We then read:

> Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. (32: 8)

The question is obvious. Jacob is in the grip of strong emotions. But why the duplication of verbs? What is the difference between fear and distress? To this a midrash gives a profound answer:

> Rabbi Judah bar Ilai said: Are not fear and distress identical? The meaning, however, is that "he was afraid" that he might be killed. "He was distressed" that he might kill. For Jacob thought: If he prevails against me, will he not kill me; while if I prevail against him, will I not kill him? That is the meaning of "he was afraid" – lest he should be killed; "and distressed" – lest he should kill.

The difference between being afraid and distressed, according to the midrash, is that the first is a physical anxiety; the second a moral one. It is one thing to fear one's own death, quite another to contemplate being the cause of someone else's. However, a further question now arises. Surely self-defence is permitted in Jewish law? If Esau were to try to kill Jacob, Jacob would be justified in fighting back, if necessary at the cost of Esau's life. Why then should this possibility raise moral qualms? This is the issue addressed by Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, author of the commentary on Rashi, Siftei Chakhamim:

One might argue that Jacob should surely not be distressed about the possibility of killing Esau, for there is an explicit rule: "If someone comes to kill you, forestall it by killing him." None the less, Jacob did have qualms, fearing that in the course of the fight he might kill some of Esau's men, who were not themselves intent on killing Jacob but merely on fighting Jacob's men. And even though Esau's men were pursuing Jacob's men, and every person has the right to save the life of the pursued at the cost of the life of the pursuer, none the less there is a condition: "If the pursued could have been saved by maiming a limb of the pursuer, but instead the rescuer killed the pursuer, the rescuer is liable to capital punishment on that account." Hence Jacob feared that, in the confusion of battle, he might kill some of Esau's men when he might have restrained them by merely inflicting injury on them.

The principle at stake, according to the Siftei Chakhamim, is the minimum use of force. Jacob was distressed at the possibility that in the heat of conflict he might kill some of the combatants when injury alone might have been all that was necessary to defend the lives of those – including himself – who were under attack.

There is, however, a second possibility, namely that the midrash means what it says, no more, no less: that Jacob was distressed at the possibility of being forced to kill even if that were entirely justified.

At stake is the concept of a moral dilemma. A dilemma is not simply a conflict. There are many moral conflicts. May we perform an abortion to save the life of the mother? Should we obey a parent when he or she asks us to do something forbidden in Jewish law? May we break Shabbat to extend the life of a terminally ill patient? These questions have answers. There is a right course of action and a wrong one. Two duties conflict and we have meta-halakhic principles to tell us which takes priority. There are some systems in which all moral conflicts are of this kind. There is always

a decision procedure and thus a determinate answer to the question, "What shall I do?"

A dilemma, however, is a situation in which there is no right answer. I ought not to do A (allow myself to be killed); I ought not to do B (kill someone else); but I must do one or the other. To put it more precisely, there may be situations in which doing the right thing is not the end of the matter. The conflict may be inherently tragic. The fact that one principle (self-defence) overrides another (the prohibition against killing) does not mean that, faced with such a choice, I am without qualms. Sometimes being moral means that I experience distress at having to make such a choice. Doing the right thing may mean that I do not feel remorse or guilt, but I still feel regret or grief that I had to do what I did.

A moral system which leaves room for the existence of dilemmas is one that does not attempt to eliminate the complexities of the moral life. In a conflict between two rights or two wrongs, there may be a proper way to act (the lesser of two evils, or the greater of two goods), but this does not cancel out all emotional pain. A righteous individual may sometimes be one who is capable of distress even when they know they have acted rightly. What the midrash is telling us is that Judaism recognises the existence of dilemmas. Despite the intricacy of Jewish law and its meta-halakhic principles for deciding which of two duties takes priority, we may still be faced with situations in which there is an ineliminable cause for distress. It was Jacob's greatness that he was capable of moral anxiety even at the prospect of doing something entirely justified, namely defending his life at the cost of his brother's.

That characteristic – distress at violence and potential bloodshed even when undertaken in self-defence – has stayed with the Jewish people ever since. One of the most remarkable phenomena in modern history was the reaction of Israeli soldiers after the Six Day War in 1967. In the weeks preceding the war, few Jews anywhere in the world were unaware that Israel and its people faced terrifying danger. Troops – Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian – were massing on all its borders. Israel was surrounded by enemies who had sworn to drive its people into the sea. In the event, it won one of the most stunning military victories of all time. The sense of relief was overwhelming, as was the exhilaration at the re-unification of Jerusalem and the fact that Jews could now pray (as they had been unable to do for nineteen years) at the Western Wall. Even the most secular Israelis admitted to feeling intense religious emotion at what they knew was an historic triumph.

Yet, in the months after the war, as conversations took place throughout Israel, it became clear that the mood among those who had taken part in the war was anything but triumphal. It was sombre, reflective, even anguished. That year, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem gave an honorary doctorate to Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the war. During his speech of acceptance he said:

> "We find more and more a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is incomplete, and more than a small portion of sorrow and shock prevails in their festivities, and there are those who abstain from celebration. The warriors in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory but the price of victory: their comrades who fell beside them bleeding, and I know that even the terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men. It may be that the Jewish people has never learned or accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and therefore we receive it with mixed feelings."

A people capable of feeling distress, even in victory, is one that knows the tragic complexity of the moral life. Sometimes it is not enough to make the right choice. One must also fight to create a world in which such choices do not arise because we have sought and found non-violent ways of resolving conflict.

To read more writings and teachings from the Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, please visit www.chiefrabbi.org.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayishlach
The Jug May Be Only Half Full, But It Will Never Be Empty

After Yaakov crossed the river Yabok with his entire family, he re-crossed the river and returned to the other side by himself. There, he wrestled with "a man" until morning. Tosfos teaches that he went back for small jugs that he left behind (al tikra levado ela l'kado). What was in those jugs?

The Sefer Sifsei Kohen writes that in Parshas Vayeitzei, the Medrash Rabbah says that when Yaakov took "from the rocks of the place and placed them around his head," he took a small jug of oil and anointed those rocks with the oil from the jug. Miraculously, the Medrash says, the jug did not empty. It was still full of oil. Yaakov recognized that this was a very special jug – it was a sign of great blessing. It was this little jug that accompanied him all the years in Charan and it is this little jug that he ret urned for when he noticed that he left it behind when crossing the Yabok Brook.

It was this very jug which would in future years be used to anoint the keylim of the Mishkan and also the Kohen Gadol and the Kings. It was this very jug that Eliyahu instructed the woman to use to fill her pitchers when she had no food for her children [Melachim I Chapter 17]. Yaakov prophetically saw all the miracles and historic events that were to be associated with this jug and that is what prompted him to go back across the brook to retrieve it.

The author of Sefer Sifsei Kohen suggests that "without a doubt" it was this same miraculous jug which was found by the Chashmonaim in the Chanuka miracle, involving the one day supply of oil which lasted for 8 days.

A Deeper Look At The Dialog Between Yaakov and His Son's Shimon And Levi

This week's parsha contains the troubling incident of Dena's capture and violation by Shechem son of Chamor. Shechem fell in love with Dena and wanted to marry her. Yaakov's sons negotiated a deal whereby they would let him marry their sister if he – and all the people of his city – agreed to circumcise themselves first. When the townspeople were weak on the third day following the circumcision, Shimon and Levi wiped out the entire city and rescued their sister.

There are several troubling points in this story. The pasuk states: "Now Yaakov heard that he had defiled this daughter Dinah, while his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Yaakov kept silent until their arrival." [Bereshis 34:5]

First of all, why was there no immediate action on Yaakov's part? Why did he have to wait for his sons to return?

Second of all, after Shimon and Levi carried out their plan of wiping out the city, Yaakov curses them. He blames them for destroying his reputation amongst the local population. This, too, is very strange. Yaakov heard the plan ahead of time. He certainly had to be aware that the proposal to have the people of Shechem circumcised was all a ruse. Yaakov knew that his sons never had any intention of letting their sister marry this person.

Third of all, after Yaakov chastises his sons and they respond "Shall our sister be treated like a harlot?" the parsha ends. We are left wondering: What was Yaakov's reaction to his sons' response? Did he hear what they said? Did he agree? Did he disagree? The Torah leaves us hanging.

The Ramban explains something very important and Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky adds context to this Ramban. The Ramban writes that the plan Yaakov agreed to was to convince the people of Shechem that they would allow Dena to marry Shechem if they all circumcised themselves and then to march in when everyone was in pain on the third day following the surgery, rescue Dinah, and escape wit h her – leaving all the townspeople alive and well. Yaakov never agreed to the subsequent action of Shimon and Levi to wipe out the entire city.

This approach solves some problems, but it does not explain why Yaakov did not himself act initially and why he left the negotiations and the development of the plan of action to his sons. Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky explains that Yaakov Avinu was the symbol of truth in the world (Ish haEmes). There are two types of behavior. The first approach is straight, honest, 100% above board. What you see is what you get. The second approach (Plan B) is that when dealing with a bunch of liars, thieves and terrorists, you cannot negotiate with the same level of integrity as when dealing with an honest individual.

These "terrorists" had to be dealt with surreptitiously and dishonestly. Yaakov Avinu could not do that. As the "Ish HaEmes," he had to protect his reputation and the reputation of the Almighty (concern for Chillul HaShem). Th erefore when Yaakov heard about what happened with Dinah, he knew instinctively that he could not handle the situation based on his mode of operation. He knew that these people had to be dealt with based on a level of integrity that was appropriate to their actions. Such action fell outside of his range of operation. He therefore delegated the handling of the situation to his sons.

He did go along with their plan which involved a degree of dishonesty – but he never signed onto the massacre that took place. He chastised them for carrying out such action. They responded "Shall our sister be treated as a harlot?" Did Yaakov accept that? Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky states that Yaakov did not fully accept this argument. He does not respond now, but he responds later in Parshas Vayechi.

While on his death bed after calling all his sons in to give them a blessing before he died, Yaakov tells Shimon and Levi: "Stolen tools are their weapons. Into their design may my soul not enter! With their congregation do not unite, O my honor... Accursed is their rage for it is mighty, and their wrath for it is harsh; I will divide them in Jacob and I will disperse them in Israel." [Bereshis 49:5-6]. The simple reading of this curse is that "the combination of you two is so terrible I have to separate you from one another". Rashi other there has a different reading of this "curse". Yaakov sees their nature and decrees that they should be the school teachers in Israel, the Rabbis, and the scribes. "This is your just reward for doing this." Incredible! Yaakov is upset with these brothers. They cannot be trusted. So what does he do with them? They are going to be the educators of the Jewish people. Everyone will entrust their children into the hands of the Tribes of Shimon and Levi. The validity of the Sefer Torah will be placed in their hands.

Rav Yaakov explains that Yaakov Avinu saw a tremendous attribute in Shimon and Levi – the attribute of "Shall our sister be treated as a harlot?" 'If someone in our family is hurt, it bothers me. ' The other brothers had the same thing happen to their sister as well, but they were able to live with it. Shimon and Levi were not willing to live with it, because it was not right. It was a travesty. They felt that their sister's travesty was their travesty. Her hurt was their hurt. People like that - who are selfless, who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of somebody else - can handle the job of teaching better than anyone else in Klal Yisrael. Being in a classroom all day, getting paid less than everybody else, not having great job security, not having the respect of people who make a lot of money... Only one type of personality is good for that – the "Shimon and Levi personality".

When Yaakov saw their reaction -– how much it bothered them that their sister should be treated like a harlot – he said "I have the right job for you. The right job for you is t o be the teachers of school children in Israel."

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD

Rav Kook List
Rav Kook on the Torah Portion
Vayishlach: The Service of Pillars and Altars

Returning to Beth El

Having survived the confrontation with Esau and his militia, the mysterious nighttime struggle at Peniel, the abduction of his daughter Dinah, and the battle of Shechem - Jacob finally made his way back to Beth El. Twenty years earlier, Jacob had stayed overnight in Beth El, dreaming of angels and Divine protection as he fled from his brother Esau. Now he would fulfill his decades-old promise to worship God in that holy place.

In preparation for this spiritual journey, Jacob instructed his family:

"Remove the foreign gods that are in your midst. Purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then we will rise and ascend to Beth El. There I will construct an altar to God, Who answered me in my hour of trouble, and Who accompanied me in the path that I took." (Gen. 35:2-3)

The first time Jacob had come to Beth El, he had erected a matzeivah, a pillar to worship God. But now, Jacob built a mizbei'ach, an altar. What is the difference between worshipping God with a matzeivah and with a mizbei'ach?

The Torah later prohibits erecting a matzeivah, even if it is used to worship God (Deut. 16:22). The Sages explained that the matzeivah "was beloved in the time of the Patriarchs, but abhorred in the time of their descendants" (Sifri Shoftim 146).

What brought about this change in status?

Service of the Klal

The difference between a matzeivah and a mizbei'ach is primarily a physical one. A matzeivah is a single large stone, while a mizbei'ach is an altar constructed from many stones. The switch from matzeivah to mizbei'ach indicates a paradigm shift that took place in the way God was to be served, between the time of the Patriarchs and their descendants.

Each of the three Avot - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - had his own path of serving God. Abraham served God with his overriding traits of love, kindness and hospitality. Isaac served God with awe and submission, traits he acquired at the Akeidah. And Jacob, the 'scholarly man who dwelled in tents [of Torah],' served God with his trait of Torah.

In the time of the Patriarchs, each of the Avot was the sole leading light of his generation. His special trait dominated the era; his path of serving God was the appropriate path for that time. This period was aptly represented by the metaphor of the matzeivah. A single stone, a single path to serve God.

As Jacob returned to the Land of Israel, however, the situation had changed. He arrived at Beth El with twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel. No longer was there a single spiritual path for the generation. This was the start of a new era: the service of the klal, the collective. Each of Jacob's sons developed his own way of serving God, based on a unique combination of the spiritual paths of the three Avot.

The Jewish people requires a variety of talents and fields of expertise. Spiritual leadership and kohanim came from the tribe of Levi. Kings and national leaders from Judah, while Issachar excelled in producing scholars and judges. Other tribes specialized in commerce, agriculture, and defending the nation.

With Jacob's return to Beth El, the new paradigm of serving God became the mizbei'ach, composed of many stones. This was no longer a time of one single, uniform service of God. There were many paths to serve God, which joined together in one altar, as all aspired to the same goal of serving God.

'Change Your Clothes'

With these divergent paths to serve God, however, a new problem arose. Each group may come to believe that their path is the most important, and belittle the efforts of others. Jacob realized, as they prepared to worship God with the multiple stone mizbei'ach at Beth El, that it was necessary to take special measures to unite the family.

Jacob therefore instructed his family, "Remove the foreign gods in your midst." The Sages taught that the evil inclination is a 'foreign god' (Shabbat 105b). Jacob pleaded that they remove the evil inclination which makes others 'foreign' and estranged. We must recognize that, on the inside, we are united in purpose and soul. For this reason, the Torah refers to Jacob's family as "seventy soul" (Ex. 1:5) - in the singular. For the souls of the Jewish people are united at their source.

It is only the externals - in deeds and actions - that separate us. Therefore Jacob requested that they purify themselves by changing their clothes. It is only the superficial exterior which conceals our true inner unity.

Then, Jacob announced, we will be ready to ascend to Beth El, and worship God together. There we will serve God using a mizbei'ach, composed of many stones and many paths - but all working together toward the same goal of serving God.

(Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 74-75)

Comments and inquiries may be sent to: mailto:RavKookList@gmail.com

Weekly Halacha
by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Competition for Clients

Question: How does the Halachah view an insurance or travel agent who tries to wrest away an established client from another Jewish agent? Is it proper for a Judaica store owner, a wig stylist, or a kosher caterer to recruit the established clients of his or her Jewish competitor?

Discussion: Many poskim maintain that it is prohibited to actively pursue a client or a customer, Jewish or non-Jewish, if the client has developed an ongoing business relationship with a competitor. The classic case quoted in Rama1 is that of a medieval tailor who for many years had an exclusive account with a local non-Jew. When another Jewish tailor actively sought the non-Jew's business, the dispute between the two tailors was brought before the Rashba. The Rashba ruled that the second tailor was acting improperly and that the account should remain the exclusive right of the first tailor.

The Rashba explains that his ruling is based on the following halachic concept: The long-term business relationship and apparent commitment between the tailor and his client gives the tailor a certain sense of semichus da'as, a well-founded assumption and expectation that this particular account is his. Even though there was no explicit verbal or contractual agreement between them regarding future business, still it was clearly understood that he will continue to be the tailor for this non-Jew. No other Jew is allowed, therefore, to infringe on that existing relationship and understanding, and one who does so is acting improperly and should be censured.2

Nevertheless, rules the Rashba, if by the time beis din was notified the second tailor had already succeeded in wresting the account away from the first tailor, beis din is powerless to force him to relinquish it, since in a very literal sense the second tailor did not actually take something which is not his. Technically speaking, the account was not signed and sealed and, therefore, it was open to bidding from competition. [This is especially true when dealing with a non-Jewish customer, since more often than not, non-Jews do not have a sense of loyalty towards their Jewish tradesmen and will readily drop one business relationship in favor of another.3]

Indeed, the Rama quotes opinions which disagree with the Rashba altogether and permit—or at the very least, do not object to—the second tailor's actively pursuing any account that he can, regardless of any long-term relationship his competitor may have had with an existing account.4

In the years since the Rashba's ruling, various customs evolved in European communities regarding this issue. Some communities strictly forbade their members from pursuing each other's steady business accounts, going so far as to invalidate such contracts and returning the accounts to the original vendor or tradesman.5 Other communities prohibited such dealings but did not invalidate them if they already transpired, while yet others allowed such competition and did not restrict it in any way.6

Although today a clear-cut custom does not exist, the opinion of the majority of the poskim7 is to follow the middle-of-the-road ruling of the Rashba, which is to prohibit and discourage this type of competition whenever possible,8 but not to invalidate a business deal once it has been transacted.

Based on the above, the answer to our original question concerning the insurance or travel agent, Judaica store owner, wig stylist, and caterer should be very clear: If a Jewish vendor or tradesman has a long-term9 steady customer with whom he assumes and expects to continue doing business, another Jew is not allowed to lure that customer away. If, however, the competitor was ignorant of—or disregarded—this rule and succeeded in collaring the account, he cannot be forced to give it up, nor is one allowed to refer to him as a rasha, a wicked person.

There are, however, two very important considerations which may drastically affect the halachah in several of the cases mentioned above.

It is obvious that one is restricted from soliciting another person's steady business only if all other competitors will also restrict themselves from soliciting established accounts. If, however, the particular business field is full of non-Jewish or non-observant salesmen who will not restrict their customer-baiting activities, then the restriction is lifted.10

The insurance field, for instance, is filled with agents who are constantly attempting to lure established accounts from other agents or agencies. This is a legal procedure and considered normal business practice. There is no restriction, therefore, on an observant Jewish agent soliciting business from another agent's established accounts, since, as explained, even if he will not solicit the account, others surely will. There is no requirement for the observant agent to place himself at a disadvantage.

The halachah is different, however, in regard to Judaica store owners, wig stylists, or kosher caterers. These types of businesses are generally run by observant Jews who follow the dictates of Halachah. Consequently, when a particular vendor regularly assumes and expects that a steady long-term account will remain his for the foreseeable future, one may not pursue that account.

Ultimately, therefore, there is no blanket answer. The halachah will depend on the type of business and on the general business climate in that particular field. If, as is the case in many service-type businesses, customers are generally not pursued by others in the field and are usually loyal to their provider, then the observant businessman may not compete for their business. On the other hand, the observant businessman is unrestricted in competing for business in a field where competition is the norm (e.g., commission-based businesses).

Another important point to remember is that the restriction applies only to a businessman soliciting or enticing a client to buy his product over his competitions. It is permitted, however, for the client or customer to solicit a different provider or agent, even though he has been doing steady business with a particular concern for a long period of time.11

Note: As in all matters of Halachah, one should consult a rabbi before deciding how to approach a questionable situation. Especially in regard to business-related issues, where it is almost impossible for one to be completely objective as it is his livelihood which is at stake, the halachic perspective of a competent authority is imperative.

1 C.M. 156:5, based on Teshuvos Rashba 6:259.

2 Rashba offers two Talmudic sources for this ruling: a) Bava Basra 21a, concerning fish which were almost netted by a fisherman and then swept away at the last moment by a competing fisherman; b) Gittin 30a, concerning the laws of makirei kehunah, which give a Kohen the right to claim his steady stipend from the Yisrael because of the assumption that they are his, based on their long-term relationship.

3 Indeed, some poskim are of the opinion that the Rashba's ruling applies only to competitors pursuing a non-Jew's business, as in the case of the two tailors. If the tailors were competing for a Jewish customer, the first tailor would have an even stronger case, since Jewish customers have a greater degree of loyalty and commitment to their service providers, tradesmen, etc., and the first tailor would have had a firmer assumption that the account would remain his; Chasam Sofer, C.M. 79; Beis Efrayim 29; Maharsham 1:151. See Seridei Eish 3:66 for a different approach.

4 The logic behind this view may be explained in one of two ways: a) Semichus da'as, assumptions and expectations, are neither legally nor halachicaly binding (Beiur ha-Gra, C.M. 156:5; Aruch ha-Shulchan, C.M. 156:18); b) In a fiercely competitive business world, there are no assumptions and expectations since the threat of competition is always present (Teshuvos Maharshal 36).

5 Teshuvos Maharshal 36 as explained in Masa'as Binyamin 27 and Chasam Sofer, C.M. 61.

6 The various views are quoted in Rama, C.M. 156:5 and Be'er Heitev 12. See also Chavos Yair 42.

7 Chasam Sofer, C.M 61; Beis Efrayim 27; Yeshuos Malko, C.M. 19; Maharil Diskin (pesakim 1); Minchas Yitzchak 2:94; 3:127;

Minchas Tzvi, Sechirus Poalim, 5:24. See also Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav (Hasagas Gevul 13), that a God-fearing person should be stringent in this.

8 Even if the competitor is offering the potential client a lower price, still he may not pursue a client who "belongs" to his competitor; Teshuvos Lechem Rav 216. See also Teshuvos Beis Shelomo, Y.D. 19.

9 The exact length of the relationship is not clearly defined, although some poskim suggest three years (or three deals) as a rule of thumb; see Chavos Yair 42.

10 See Teshuvos Kol Aryeh 135 and Yeshuos Malko, C.M. 19 for an explanation of this issue.

11 Sma, C.M. 386:10.

Rabbi Neustadt is the Yoshev Rosh of the Vaad Harabbonim of Detroit and the Av Beis Din of the Beis Din Tzedek of Detroit. He could be reached at dneustadt@cordetroit.com

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By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

The Halacha and History of the Gid Hanosheh

"And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man realized that he was unable to defeat Yaakov, he struck the "kaf" of Yaakov's thigh, which became dislocated as a result of the wrestling. And the sun rose as Yaakov passed Penuel and he was limping because of his injured thigh. Therefore, the descendents of Yisroel do not eat the sciatic sinew to this very day, for the man struck Yaakov on that sinew, dislocating it" (Breishis 32:25-26, 32-33).

With these words, the Torah introduces us to the mitzvah of gid hanosheh, which forbids us from eating the sciatic nerve, a sinew that runs from the lower back over the top of the hip and down the leg, at which point it divides into other nerves. The Hebrew word gid describes stringy body parts whose texture is too tough to chew comfortably, and may refer to nerves, tendons, ligaments, or even blood vessels (see Rambam, Peirush HaMishnayos, Zevachim 3:4). (The English word sinew is also usually not a medical term, but a laymen's term used in approximately the same way as the word gid.) It is noteworthy that the Chinese word for the Kai Feng Jewish community was "the people who remove the sinew," referring to the gid hanosheh; thus the observance of this mitzvah became the identifying description of the Jews.

An entire chapter of Mishnah and Gemara (the seventh chapter of Chullin) is devoted to the halachic discussion of this mitzvah, which is the third mitzvah mentioned in the Torah. The Gemara (Chullin 91a) there teaches that there is an inner gid that lies along the bone which is prohibited min hatorah, and an outer gid that lies along the meat, which is prohibited only miderabbanan. In addition, a layer of protective fat surrounding the gid is also prohibited miderabbanan.

The Mishnah (Chullin 96a) records a dispute regarding how much of the nerve must be removed, the Tanna Kamma ruling that one must remove the entire gid, whereas Rabbi Yehudah rules that one need remove only the main part of the gid. The Torah forbade only that part of the gid that lies on the top of the hip (the "kaf" of Yaakov's thigh); the rest of the nerve is prohibited as a rabbinic injunction. Rabbi Yehudah contended that the rest of the nerve is not prohibited even miderabbanan, and therefore he did not require its removal (Chullin 96a). (The Ritva, Chullin 92b, contends that according to some opinions the entire main nerve and its branches are forbidden min hatorah.)

The Mishnah teaches that the mitzvah of gid hanosheh applies to all kosher mammals. This includes both species of beheimah, i.e., domesticated kosher species such as cattle and sheep, and species of chayah, i.e., kosher species that are usually (but inaccurately) categorized as wild or non-domesticated species. (I have discussed this inaccuracy more extensively in a different article.) Gid hanosheh does not apply to poultry since the thigh of a bird is shaped differently and therefore it has no "kaf". For this reason, there is no need to remove this sinew from kosher birds.

=There is a major difference between gid hanosheh and the prohibition of cheilev. Whereas gid hanasheh applies to both a beheimah and a chayah, the Torah forbade consumption of certain fats that are predominantly attached to the stomachs and the kidneys of species of beheimah, but not of chayah species (Mishnah, Chullin 89b). There is another mitzvah that is affected by whether a species is a chayah or a beheimah: the mitzvah of kisuy hadam, covering the blood immediately following shechitah. This mitzvah applies only to fowl and chayah species, but not to beheimah species (Mishnah Chullin 83b). We therefore have three different types of meat species that have variant halachos pertaining to three different mitzvos: Gid hanosheh applies to beheimah and chayah, but not to birds; Cheilev applies to beheimah, but not to chayah and birds. Kisuy hadam applies only to chayah and birds, but not to beheimah.

It is important to note that the halachic definitions of beheimah and chayah are unclear. Since we are uncertain which species are considered beheimah and which are considered chayah, we are stringent and treat any species of which we are uncertain as both beheimah and chayah lichumrah unless we have a mesorah, an oral tradition, about the halachic status of this specific species (see Shach, Yoreh Deah 80:1 as explained by Pri Megadim). Thus, we forbid the cheilev for any such species because it might be a beheimah, yet its blood is covered after slaughter because it might be a chayah. Since we are uncertain whether it is a chayah, the blood is covered without reciting the bracha one usually recites before performing this mitzvah.

The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 28:4) rules that one does not perform kisuy hadam for a buffalo; this determines it to be a beheimah. (He is presumably referring to the Asian water buffalo, which was domesticated in Southern Europe hundreds of years before the Shulchan Aruch.) Rama (ad loc.) however rules that the status of the buffalo is uncertain. According to both opinions, the cheilev is forbidden -- according to the Shulchan Aruch, definitely forbidden as the cheilev of a beheimah, and according to the Rama, out of doubt. There are also several other bovine type species such as the yak, the African Cape buffalo, and both the American and the European bison, all of which should probably be considered a safek if they are a chayah or a beheimah, and therefore their cheilev is prohibited misafek, and their blood must be covered without a bracha. (See Gemara Chullin 59b and 80a; Gra and Pri Chodosh to Yoreh Deah 80; Ohr Somayach, Maachalos Asuros Chapter 1).

TRABERING

Since the Torah prohibits consuming both cheilev and the gid hanosheh, these forbidden parts must be removed from an animal before its meat can be eaten. This process is called "trabering," a Yiddish word that derives from tarba, the Aramaic word for cheilev. The Hebrew word for the process is "nikur," excising, and the artisan who possesses the skill to remove it properly is called a menakeir (pl. menakerim). In truth, both the words traber and the word nikur are also used to describe the kosher butchering that is performing in the front part of the animal, called the forequarters, to remove blood vessels and some fat; however, I will be using the words traber and nikur to mean the more difficult task of trimming the hindquarters from the gid hanosheh and the cheilev. Although there is no absolute delineating point defining where the forequarters end and hindquarters begin, usually the butcher counts the ribs, of which there are thirteen, and slices around the twelfth, considering the area below it to be part of the hindquarters. (The first rib is the one closest to the neck.) As we will discover shortly, not all halachic authorities accept that the meat above the twelfth rib should be treated as part of the forequarters.

Removing the gid hanosheh and forbidden fats from the hindquarters is an extremely arduous process that requires much skill and patience. The Mishnah refers to a dispute among Tannayim whether observant butchers can be trusted to remove the gid hanosheh and non-kosher fats, Rabbi Meir contending that we cannot trust them since removing them is highly tedious (Gemara Chullin 93b). In Rabbi Meir's opinion, someone else must double check after the menakeir is finished to see that the trabering was performed correctly. The halacha does not follow Rabbi Meir, and

technically one may rely on a trained yarei shamayim menakeir to do the job properly. However, in many places the custom was more stringent.
It is interesting to note that the Rama (Yoreh Deah 64:7 and 65:8) points out in two different places that nikur cannot be learned from a text, only through apprenticeship.

SIXTEENTH CENTURY POLAND

The Maharshal reports that most of the menakerim in his day did not perform an adequate job -- when they had a heavy workload one would find that they failed to remove all the cheilev. The Maharshal notes that the menakeir must be not only well trained in his practice but also a yarei shamayim who is meticulous in the work, and that one should not rely on just any typical menakeir. He also quotes an earlier authority, the Maharam Mintz, who followed a standard practice not to eat from anyone's nikur until it was checked by a second menakeir. Since he had this policy all the time, he was able to avoid implying that any particular menakeir was careless or incompetent. Maharashal praises this practice highly, noting that the original menakeir is more careful knowing that someone else will discover if he is sloppy. He reports that, after observing much inadequate nikur, he himself followed this approach of the Maharam Mintz not to eat meat unless a second menakeir had checked the first one's work (Yam Shel Shelomoh, Chullin 1:2, 7:19; Be'er Heiteiv, Yoreh Deah 65:6).

NOT USING HINDQUARTERS

Since most of the forbidden fats and the entire gid hanosheh and all its tributaries are in the hindquarters, in many places the custom developed for Jews to eat meat only of the forequarters, thus considerably simplifying the trabering process. Although most people think that this is an Ashkenazic minhag, the earliest source I have located that mentions this practice is a responsum from the Radbaz (Shu't #162), who was the Chief Rabbi of Egypt almost five hundred years ago – and a Sefardi. (This is itself an interesting observation since the practice of nikur of hindquarters today is far more common among Sefardim than among Ashkenazim.) The Radbaz had been asked about a local custom to slaughter on the eastern side of a building, apparently a Moslem religious practice of the time: The question was whether this practice violates halacha. The Radbaz rules that one may slaughter on the eastern side since there was nothing idolatrous about this practice. One of his reasons is that the Jews only used the forequarters and left the hindquarters plus the non-kosher slaughtered animals (neveilos utreifos, those found to be halachically imperfect or where an error occurred during the shechitah). These were then sold to Moslems, who would not eat them unless they were slaughtered on the Eastern side. The Radbaz approved= the practice not to traber the hindquarters since expert menakerim are hard to find.

ASHKENAZIC 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY PRACTICES

In central Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we find that local need determined whether trabering was performed on the hindquarters. Someone asked the Noda BiYehudah (Shu't Yoreh Deah II #31) whether he should be concerned about the meat located on the forequarters. The Noda BiYehudah contended that some of the fat located between the 11th and the 12th rib is cheilev that requires an expert menakeir to remove. The Noda BiYehudah notes that in Prague, where he was the rav, the area past the 11th rib was trabered by the menakerim who were expert in trabering the hindquarters. In his opinion, if there are no menakerim in town who know how to traber the hindquarters, then one should use only the meat above the eleventh rib.
The Chasam Sofer (Shu't Yoreh Deah #68) disagreed with the Noda BiYehudah, contending that any fat located above the 13th rib is not cheilev and is removed only because of custom. He ruled that in places where there are expert menakerim, they should trim the area beyond the 12th rib; in other places, the regular butchers could trim the area between the 12th rib and the 13th.
Thus, one sees from both of these responsa that in their day it depended on the community and the expertise of the local butchers; many communities did not use the hindquarters meat at all, but sold it as non-kosher because they lacked skilled menakerim. However, communities that had skilled menakerim did utilize their talents and enjoyed kosher hindquarter meat. Neither the Noda BiYehudah nor the Chasam Sofer seem concerned about using the hindquarters as long as expert menakerim are involved.
On the other hand, about this period of time we see that in some places it was becoming accepted practice not to traber the hindquarters. In a teshuvah dated the Tenth of Av 5625 (1865), Rav Shamshon Rephael Hirsch, wrote to Rav Yissochor Berish Bernstein, the Av Beis Din and Rosh Yeshiva of the Hague that one should not relax the custom "already established by our fathers and grandfathers" to refrain from the practice of trabering (Shemesh Merapeh #34).
Although nikur continued to be practiced in the 20th century, in Ashkenazic communities it became the exception rather than the norm. The Aruch Hashulchan notes (Yoreh Deah 64:54, 65:31) that most places did not perform nikur on the hindquarters and instead sold them to non-Jews, although there were still places where it was practiced, including his own city, where very tight controls were kept that it be performed properly.

POLAND, 1936

The practice not to use the hindquarters was apparently universally accepted in Poland by the first third of the twentieth century. Because of a very sad turn of events, this practice created a very unfortunate shaylah. In 1936, the Polish Parliament, influenced by anti-Semitism from neighboring Nazi Germany, banned shechitah and permitted it only for Jewish consumption. The law specified that non-Jews could eat no part of the kosher slaughtered meat. Although they officially claimed that this was in order to recognize the Jews' rights to freedom of religion, it was meant to imply that Judaism is inhumane and also threatened to make kosher meat prohibitively expensive.
This created a shaylah since the custom existed not to traber the hindquarters, in essence treating the entire hindquarters as non-kosher. However, being stringent under the new circumstances would make the price of meat prohibitively expensive since the entire cost of the animal would have to be absorbed by the sale of its forequarters.
A halachic issue now came to the forefront. Once a custom has been established as accepted practice, it has the status of a vow that may not be rescinded (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 214:2). Did the practice of refraining from eating the meat of the hindquarters have the status of a minhag that could not be rescinded?
Rav Chayim Ozer Grodzenski, the posek of the generation, ruled that it was permitted to reintroduce the practice of trabering the hindquarters by experienced, G-d-fearing experts. In his opinion, the practice not to traber the hindquarters did not have the status of a vow that may not be rescinded, nor of a minhag that requires hataras nedarim. He ruled that the practice to not traber was simply because it was not worthwhile to bother since there was an ample supply of meat. Rav Chayim Ozer added that the government's intent in this evil decree was to forcibly close down shechitah by making it financially non-viable. Thus, he felt that it was a mitzvah to permit the hindquarters in order to demonstrate that the decree would not prevent the Jews from having kosher meat. Furthermore, if it were officially accepted that the hindquarters were permitted, there would be proper supervision of the trabering to guarantee that it was performed properly (Shu't Achiezer 3:84).
Initially, several Chassidic rabbayim opposed permitting the practice concerned both about minhag and whether all the people performing nikur would be trained properly and would possess the necessary yiras shamayim. Rav Chayim Ozer then wrote to several of the great rebbes living in Poland, notably the Bobover Rebbe and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, to elicit their support. Both of these rebbes eventually agreed that the time called for permitting nikur of the hindquarters, provided it was performed by trained, yirei shamayim menakerim. All segments of Polish Jewry accepted the decision of Rav Chayim Ozer.

THREE MORE MODERN SHAYLOS

BRUSSELS, 1964

In 1964, Rav Shmaryahu Karelitz, the rav of Brussels, Belgium, sent Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, a shaylah whether they could reinstitute the practice of trabering the hindquarters in Belgium, since they found themselves short of kosher meat. Rav Moshe ruled that as long as a proficient menakeir, licensed by an expert Rav, performed the trabering, there was no reason to prohibit this meat. Rav Moshe writes that refraining from the hindquarters does not have the status of a minhag; simply that butchers did not bother either because they were easily able to sell the hindquarters as non-kosher, or because the butchers lacked the expertise. However, should it become worthwhile to traber the hindquarters, there is no halachic problem with reintroducing the practice, provided the menakeir is a yarei shamayim and properly trained and licensed (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:42).

SOUTH AFRICA, 1990

A dissenting position is found in the responsa of Rav Moshe Sternbuch, shlit"a, currently Rosh Av Beis Din of the Eidah HaChareidis in Yerushalayim and formerly rav of a kehillah in Johannesburg, South Africa. During his tenure in South Africa, he was asked about renewing the practice of trabering there, utilizing the skills of an expert menakeir. Rav Sternbuch prohibited the practice, contending that not trabering the hindquarters has the status of a minhag that may not be altered (Teshuvos VeHanhagos 1:418, 419).

UNITED STATES, 21st CENTURY

Within the last few years, the kosher market has begun regular production of shechitah of animals such as bison (American buffalo) and deer, species where removing the gid hanosheh and the cheilev might be financially worthwhile. I inquired from the OU what their policy is regarding nikur of these hindquarters, and they responded that they permit removing the gid hanosheh, but do not remove the cheilev. This translates into the following: If a species is a beheimah or it is questionable whether it is a chayah or a beheimah, the hindquarters are not trabered and are sold as non-kosher. However, if the species is one concerning which we have a mesorah to treat it as a chayah, there is no halachic requirement to remove any cheilev from the hindquarters, as we learned in the beginning of the article. The only halachic requirement is to remove the gid hanosheh. Thus, on species such as deer, where there is a halachic mesorah that it is a chayah, the hindquarters are trabered and the gid hanosheh is removed. However, on species such as buffalo, where there is no mesorah whether it is a chayah or a beheimah, the hindquarters are left untrabered and are sold as non-kosher.

WHY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CHEILEV AND GID HANOSHEH?

I asked this same question and this is the response they sent me:

"Removing cheilev is difficult and time-consuming, even for those who know how. Removing the gid hanosheh and its subordinate parts is no more difficult than removing veins: one is removing a gid that separates easily from the surrounding meat. Therefore when we know that an animal is a chayah, we allow the removal of the gid hanosheh. Any animals for which we do not have a mesorah whether it is a beheimah or a chayah, such as buffalo, will be treated as a sofek, and kisuy hadam will be performed and the hindquarters will not be used as kosher."

CONCLUSION

Rav Shamshon Rephael Hirsch explains the mitzvah of gid hanosheh as a message that although the spirit of Eisav will never conquer Yaakov and his descendants, Eisav will be able to hamstring Yaakov and prevent him from standing firmly on two feet. Thus Yaakov goes through history with an infirm physical stand and gait. By having to remove the gid hanasheh, whenever Yaakov's descendants sit down to eat meat, they realize that their continued existence is not dependent on their physical strength and stamina, but on spiritual factors which can never be weakened by Eisav's might.

Ohr Somayach :: TalmuDigest :: Shabbat 58 - 64
For the week ending 1 December 2012 / 16 Kislev 5773
by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

The Best Way to Help - Shabbat 63a

What is the best way to help someone in need?

Some very sage advice on this subject was provided by Rabbi Abba in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish:

One who lends money to a needy person performs a greater kindness than one who simply gives him charity. Rashi explains that this is so because the recipient does not suffer the shame which accompanies taking a handout.

An even greater kindness is performed by providing the needy person with funds or goods with which to do business and split the profits. As Maharsha explains, this eliminates the danger of embarrassment which can arise when the receiver of the loan is incapable of repaying it when it comes due. By making him a business partner the philanthropic investor provides him with an opportunity to both replay the loan and to support himself.

What the Sages Say

"If someone planned to do a mitzvah but was prevented from doing so by circumstances beyond his control, he will get credit as if he did it." - Rabbi Ami

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The Kabbalistic Life of Pi
by Gavriel Horan
www.aish.com

The surprising Jewish connection hidden inside the bestselling book and new film.

The upcoming 3D blockbuster, Life of Pi, directed by Ang Lee and based on the bestselling book by Yann Martel, tells the story of a boy adrift on a lifeboat in the Pacific, accompanied by a 400-pound Bengal tiger.

That will make for some great visuals, but the question is whether Hollywood can capture the subtlety of a novel that deals with deeper questions of religious morality and the existence of God. In other words, will the book's content drown in a computer-simulated ocean storm, or will it float?

For years, friends and relatives tried to get me to read Life of Pi, but to no avail. The storyline of an Indian boy, Piscine Patel, who practices Christianity and Islam plus his native Hinduism, always seemed to irritate me. Perhaps other Jews out there also picked up on my aversion: In Pi's spiritual quest, why is Judaism missing? True, Jews represent a less than one percent of the world's population (with an even smaller presence in the novel's Indian homeland), but as the source of both Islam and Christianity, shouldn't Judaism be mentioned?

I finally put my prejudice aside, read Life of Pi from cover-to-cover - and loved every minute. To my surprise, I didn't have to look far for Jewish references. Life of Pi is encoded with esoteric Kabbalistic wisdom sewn into its very fibers. It's as if Martel wished to present the reader with an introduction to Jewish mysticism!

Cosmogony and Kabbalah

On the very first page of the book, an adult Pi reveals that his fourth-year thesis for religious studies at the University of Toronto concerned the "cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed." Cosmogony (yes, l had to look it up on Wikipedia) "is any theory concerning the coming into existence or origin of the universe, or about how reality came to be." Rabbi Luria is better known as the Arizal, the holy lion, the father of modern Kabbalistic thought. We shall soon explore the cosmogony of the Arizal and see how it forms a basis for the entire book.

When challenged to choose, Pi quotes Gandhi: "All religions are true."

An author's note at the beginning of the novel presents his goal: to tell "a story that will make you believe in God." The reader is introduced to the young Hindu-born Piscine Patel, nicknamed Pi, and his unusual religious practices. Stemming from his intense desire to "love God," Pi engages in a

Siddhartha-esque spiritual journey that leads him to convert to Christianity and Islam, despite the fact that the three religions are seemingly mutually exclusive. When challenged to choose one, Pi passionately blurts out a quote from Gandhi: "All religions are true."
Pi is the son of a zookeeper and as we get to know his family, we are also introduced to the animals of the family zoo. In the process we learn a lot about zoology, together with many life lessons that are gleaned from the habits of the animals.
Pi and his family decide to immigrate to Canada in search of a better life. They embark upon a Japanese cargo ship called the Tsimtsum en route for Canada, together with several animal members of their former zoo. Without warning, the ship suddenly sinks somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, leaving Pi and an odd assortment of animals as the sole survivors. Now the story begins of Pi's survival on the lifeboat, together with the last remaining animal, a ferocious adult male Bengal tiger. The story of ingenuity, adventure, courage, faith – and one miracle after another –precipitate Pi's eventual landing on the coast of Mexico 227 days later.

The "Better Story"
While in the hospital recovering, two members of the Japanese government arrive to see if Pi can shed any light on the ill fate of the Tsimtsum. After hearing the account of Pi's miraculous survival, they reject it on grounds of sounding unreasonable. Pi responds with a philosophical diatribe: "Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer... be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater."
The Japanese delegates prefer a more "rational" account of Pi's survival at sea. "We don't want any invention," they say. "We want the 'straight facts'."

"Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?" Pi responds. "The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no?"
The miraculous one is indeed the "better story."
At last, Pi presents them with a more "rational" explanation of his survival which the delegates find much more satisfactory. He then asks which story they prefer: the miraculous one or the dry one. They admit that the miraculous one is indeed the "better story."
"And so it goes with God," Pi replies.
Thus the book concludes with the message that belief in God is indeed the "better story" - a life infused with meaning, purpose and design, far surpassing one based on meaninglessness, chaos and coincidence.

The Hidden World
Now let's return to the Kabbalistic cosmogony of Arizal. Theologians throughout time have tried to understand how God, who is infinite, could create a finite world. According to Kabbalistic thought the question is even stronger. Judaism, as the first Monotheistic religion, not only espouses belief in one God as opposed to many, but also that "God is One" and there is nothing besides Him.
If that's the case, how then do we exist? Or more accurately, how does anything exist?
The Arizal answers by explaining that in order for God to create a finite world, He had to constrict His infinite essence, creating a seeming vacuum wherein something separate from Him could exist.
The world was born in this vacuum. This set the stage where God, the Master Director, is completely hidden. Were He to be revealed, we would cease to exist, melting back into the infinite Oneness of His essence, like a small candle before the sun.
In order to preserve our free will (and our independent existence, for that matter), God must hide Himself. The Hebrew word for world, olam, comes from the same root as the word helem, hidden.
In this hidden world, we have free will to either embrace the illusion of a Godless "reality," or to find God and thus connect ourselves to the ultimate "Reality." It is our choice whether to see God, or not.
The Hebrew word for God's constriction is Tsimtsum – the very name of Pi's ship! This is clearly no coincidence. The sinking of the Tsimtsum throws Pi's life into chaos, cruelly wrenching away his loved ones and his childhood. He is left with a choice: to view the world as a random, cruel place of suffering, or to see the "better story," a world of meaning, love and miracles. Similarly, God's tsimtsum created a world where He is hidden, and things appear completely random. The choice is ours: see only the pain and suffering of this world, or discover the deeper meaning of it all.

A Rational Choice
Ironically, what I initially perceived to be a book that neglected Judaism, turns out to resemble a course in Jewish mysticism 101. I wonder how many readers Martel expected would be well-versed enough in Kabbalah to catch his hidden message.
And yet, Life of Pi falls far short of a "Jewish message." According to Pi, God is the "better story." Belief in God makes life richer, easier and more meaningful – yet has no "factual difference." In other words, we have a choice how we choose to view reality, but neither picture is any more accurate than the other. Furthermore, Pi admits that God is not the "rational" story.
Make an informed, rational decision about the existence of God.
According to Judaism, however, belief in God is very much rational. A person has the obligation to investigate the existence of God to the best of his or her intellectual capacity, and then make an informed, rational decision. If God is True with a capital-T, then it is not only a nice story, it is capital-R Reality.
Now we can understand why, in Pi's view, there is no contradiction in being a member of three different faiths. If God is just another subjective decision to enhance life, then whatever path works for you is valid. If, on the other hand, God is True, then we have an obligation to find out what path best conveys His purpose for mankind.
Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism cannot all be "absolute truth." They can all express common aspects of God, but not in the ways that they contradict each other. For example, although a Muslim believes that Jesus was a prophet, they believe that calling him a god is blasphemy. Similarly, both Christians and Muslims believe that the many gods of Hinduism are idolatry. They cannot all be right.
Pi might believe that God is a nice idea, another choice in the subjective reality of modernity. Jews believe that He is the One and Only Reality.

Gavriel Horan is a freelance journalist, copy writer, and rabbi who lives in Israel with his wife and children. Gavriel is a regular writer for the Hamodia Magazine and writes extensively for other Jewish publications. His favorite pastime is inspiring young Jews to explore their Judaism by running beginner Shabbat experiences for Birthright students and teaching in a post-high school yeshiva.