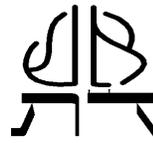


# Toras



# Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

**O**ur Bible develops from the story of a family in the Book of Genesis - Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob his four wives and thirteen children, replete with jealousies, intrigues and sibling rivalries - to the emergence of a nation in the Book of Exodus. And the bridge between family and nation seems to be the twelve tribal divisions enunciated by Jacob, especially in his final blessings before his death.

However, the tribes do not disappear with the development of the nation. In the incidence of the twelve scouts, princes of each tribe are specifically chosen, and this week's Torah portion begins with Moses' presenting the commandments regarding the laws of promises and oaths to the "heads of the tribes" (Numbers 30:2). Indeed, the very division of the land of Israel is established along tribal lines, the Biblical book of Judges is filled with tribal rivalries and murderous tribal conflicts, and even after King David unites the nation under one monarch with a single capital City of Jerusalem, the enmity of Judah and Ephraim persists until the destruction of the Holy Temple. Maimonides goes so far as to legislate separate Courts of Law for each individual tribe. Even to this very day, kohen-priest descendants of Aaron from the tribe of Levi rise to bless the congregation (daily in Israel, on the festivals in the diaspora), and all the descendants of the tribe of Levi are called to the Torah immediately following the first-to-be called kohen. Why retain a tribal system which seems to have only contributed to the internecine strife which prevented the united period of Kings David and Solomon from becoming the norm of Israel's government?!

I believe that a careful reading of this week's Torah portion - and especially paying attention to two different Hebrew words for the noun translated as tribe - will provide the answer to our question; it will also present us with the proper fashion in which to forge a nation dedicated to the ideal of "perfecting the world in

the kingship of Divine".

The Hebrew word generally used for tribe is shevet; when grand-father Jacob concludes his blessings-descriptions of his twelve sons, certainly highlighting the differences and even the tensions between them, the Biblical text states "all of these are the tribes (shivtei) of Israel, twelve (in number) ...." (Genesis 49:28). Similarly, our Torah reading this week speaks of half the tribe (shevet) of Menasheh" (Numbers 32:33).

However, there is another Hebrew word used for tribe, matteh, and it is the noun in the very opening verse of our torah portion: "And Moses spoke to the heads of tribes...\_(mattot, translated by Targum as shivtaya)" (Numbers 30:2). The very Book of Numbers, which opens with a census count of each of the tribes, provides for a representative of each tribe, "one man per tribe" - lamatteh, (Numbers 1:4). Indeed, in the Book of Numbers the Hebrew word matteh (and not shevet) is used for tribe no less than 91 times! What is the reason for these two different Hebrew nouns for the very same concept of tribe? And what is the precise distinction between shevet and matteh?

According to most of our classical commentaries, shevet is to be defined as a ruling rod whereas matteh is a supporting staff. When grand-father Jacob blesses Judah, he declares, "The rod (shevet) shall not depart from Judah..." The Talmudic Sages interpret, "the rod refers to the exilarchs of Babylon, who strong-handedly (tyrannically) rule the nation with a rod; they derive their authority from the Gentile governments" (Genesis 49:10, Rashi ad loc). The Hebrew word matteh, on the other hand, is a supporting staff, as in the modern Hebrew position of RaMatKal, or Chief of Staff, with staff referring to a support group of Knowledgeable and experienced individuals. In our Book of Numbers, when Korah challenged Aaron's leadership as High Priest from the tribe of Levi, each tribe was asked by G-d to take a staff and write upon the staff the name of the prince of each tribe; on the staff of the tribe of Levi was to be written the name of Aaron. "...And behold, the staff of Aaron of the tribe of Levi flowered, a flower arose, a bud blossomed and almond fruit matured" (Numbers 17:24). The staff (matteh) of the tribe (matteh) of Levi supported Aaron's appointment as High Priest, Kohen Gadol. The best Hebrew translation of matteh is mishenet, a word used for the support staff of an elderly person with difficulty walking, and is also a Talmudic

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in honor of  
Michael Bernet  
on his 74th birthday  
by his wife Sheila Tannenbaum  
Mazel Tov!**

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idiom for the son of a widow who serves as her aid and benefactor. This is likewise how many commentaries understand King David's psalm (23): "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me through green pastures...Your rod (shivtekha) and your staff (mishantekha), they comfort me". The Psalmist is saying that sometimes he feels G-d's punishing rod, and sometimes he feels G-d's supporting staff; in both cases they give him comfort, because he knows that G-d means for his well-being! (In this context, mishenet is a synonym for matteh).

In effect, the Torah is teaching us that a nation comprised of different and distinctive tribes has both negative and positive possibilities. On the one hand, a particular tribe can be desirous of unilateral control (shevet), initiating a rivalry and even war. The United States of America - the individual states being analogous to the various tribes - underwent just such a fierce and threatening Civil War.

But too centralized a governmental power can turn unity into uniformity and produce all of the tyranny of a totalitarian Tower of Babel. Different tribes - each with its own cultural flavor, temperament and specific point of view - can provide a unity with diversity, an orchestra comprised of many individual instruments, as long as there is one conductor who recognizes, respects and knows how to "orchestrate" the different sounds into one magnificent symphony. Obviously, the tribes must subscribe to a united goal and agree upon basic values, ideals and rules of conduct. But differences which are respected and which respect others can provide the breadth, depth and growth possibility which is the best defense against stagnation and tyranny. Such a system of inclusive leadership will also leave room for many more individuals to express themselves and for special interest groups to contribute and flourish.

Hence the world must have different nations, nations must have different cities (tribes, edot), cities must have different communities, communities must have different committees, and committees must have different families. It must be, in my grand-mother's words, a "velt mit veltelakh, a world with little worlds, - as long as each little world, as well as the greater world, remains committed to the integrity and inviolability of every individual and does not countenance fanatic bigotry in any form. As the prophet Micah teaches, as long as "humanity does not learn war anymore," "every individual can call upon his god and we will call upon the Lord our G-d forever." (Micah 4). ©2004 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he conclusion of the book of Bamidbar that these parshiyot mark, to a great extent ends the narrative section of the Torah. The generation of Egypt and Sinai is no more. Moshe's fate that he too will not enter the Land of Israel has been sealed. Yet, in order for the new generation and the new leader of Israel, Yehoshua, to succeed, a review as to what occurred to the previous generation is necessary. It would not be farfetched to suggest that the parsha of Maasei, which details all of the stops and way places of Israel in the desert journey of the Jewish people, can be considered already as part of Dvarim - "Mishneh Torah" - Moshe's repetition of the Torah at the end of his life. Only if one knows where one has been and has learned something valuable from that experience can one confidently continue on one's journey. Even though the future is always an unknown and uncertain commodity, knowledge of the past minimizes the surprises that may yet lie ahead. The Torah goes into great detail to inform us of where we have been, how we got there and what happened to us on that journey. This is all in the hope that something can be gleaned from the past and applied to our current and future situations and challenges.

For a people so rich in historic experience and worldly knowledge, the Jews somehow surprisingly are reluctant to incorporate hard-earned lessons of the past into current attitudes, values and behavior. The past errors of the encouragement of assimilation, of belief in utopian solutions to human and societal problems, of naive pacifism and lack of self-pride, of worshipping strange gods and false idols, all are repeated again in our times. It is as though the long journey of Israel and all of its way stations has been forgotten, misinterpreted and ignored. We could construct our own parshat Maasei from the experiences of the Jewish people over the past three hundred years. We would be wise to remember the debacle of nineteenth century Jewish German assimilation, the destruction that the Jewish left foisted upon us in its blind and foolish belief in Marxist

doctrine and the uncaring aloofness of Western civilization, in the main, towards Jewish suffering and persecution. If we remembered our own Maasei, we could easily say: "Been there, done that" to most of the ideas now floated about for solving our problems. We are not doomed to repeat all of the past errors committed on our journey through history. Yet, if we forget or ignore the lessons that those past errors produced, our present and future problems are bound to increase, substantially and intensively.

Thus, it is obvious that every generation writes its own parshat Maasei. The greatness of such a parsha is only realized when it has meaningfully absorbed the lessons of the previous parshiyot Maasei of Jewish life. This guide to the past is the strongest guarantee of the success of our journey into the future.

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### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

**T**here are two difficulties with the laws pertaining to vows which appear at the beginning of the Torah portion of Matot. First, the opening verse of the passage is surprising. "And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes in Bnei Yisrael, saying..." [Bamidbar 30:2]. The Rashbam writes, "I was asked in Aniov, in the city of Loshdon, about the meaning of this. Where else is there any passage that starts in this way? It does not begin as usual, 'And G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, if a man makes a vow...' Why does the passage begin with the words of Moshe, without a previous command by G-d?" Second, why does the passage of vows appear in the Torah at this point, between the list of holiday sacrifices and the story of the war against Midyan and the requests of the tribes of Gad and Reuven?

Evidently both questions can be answered together. The passage of the sacrifices gives the impression that all holiness in the world stems exclusively from the power of the Almighty, who establishes the times which are to be "declared holy" [Bamidbar 28:18]. In fact, the Torah portion of Pinchas ends with the words, "This is what you should make for your holidays, except for your vows and your donations" [29:39]. This implies that a man still has an option to make something holy through his vows and donations. The passage of the vows expands this idea and shows the potential power of a man, who must heed not only G-d's word but also his own promises. "He shall not break his word, he must do whatever comes out of his mouth" [30:3]. Therefore this passage is different in that it does not begin with a command by G-d to Moshe but rather by the words of Moshe to the leaders of the

tribes. This puts extra emphasis on the great power that the Almighty gave to man in His world.

In the later passages of this portion, it becomes clear how much influence this human power can have. The tribes of Reuven and Gad turn to Moshe with a request to receive a heritage on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. After Moshe checks their sincerity, he makes an explicit condition with them that they will receive their desired heritage only if they first lead the others to the western side of the Jordan. The holy character of the eastern side of the Jordan and the fact that it will become part of Eretz Yisrael depends on only one thing—the tribes must first fulfill their vow. Moshe therefore emphasizes, "If you will do this, if you will go first before G-d to war, and every armed man will cross the Jordan before G-d... Then this land will be a heritage before G-d for you. But if you will not do this, see how you have sinned before G-d... Build cities for your children and fences for your sheep, and do what you have stated." [32:20-24].

Thus, it is quite reasonable that the leaders Moshe put in charge of making sure that this agreement is fulfilled are the ones that he commanded about vows in general. "And Moshe commanded Elazar the Kohen and Yehoshua Bin Nun, and the heads of the tribal families in Bnei Yisrael... Then you can give them the land of Gilad for a heritage." [32:28-29]. The two commands in the Torah that were given directly to the heads of the tribes are linked to each other. The people who first heard that man is responsible to fulfill his own vows are the ones who will make sure that the agreement about the eastern side of the Jordan will be observed.

### **Moshe and Anger**

by Rabbi Shemaryahu Bekerman

In our society there are many sources of tension: between religious and nonreligious, between Sephardi and Ashkenazi, between left and right. There are also tensions in the home environment, between parents and children and between teachers and students. Tension can lead to anger, and this can often lead to violence.

In the Torah portion of Matot, it is written, "And Elazar the Kohen said to the men of the army who returned from war, this is the law of the Torah that G-d commanded Moshe" [Bamidbar 31:21]. Rashi explains, "Elazar the Kohen said—since Moshe became angry he made a mistake, and he forgot the laws of purifying the utensils of the Gentiles (with respect to what was taken from Midyan). The same thing occurred on the eighth day of the dedication of the Tabernacle, as is written, 'And Moshe became angry at Elazar and Itamar' [Vayikra 10:16] (about burning the goat sacrifice instead of eating it in a holy place). He became angry and made a mistake. The same is true of 'listen you rebels' [Bamidbar 20:10], 'And he struck the stone' [20:11]. Because of his anger he erred."

There is one other place that Moshe showed his anger. In the portion of Ki Tissa, it is written, "And Moshe became angry and he threw the Tablets out of his hands" [Shemot 32:19]. Why doesn't Rashi mention this example of anger in his commentary on this week's Torah portion?

In my opinion, there are three different types of anger. The first can be compared to idol worship, when a person becomes so full of anger that he no longer has control of his actions. This type of anger is completely forbidden. The second type of anger appears suddenly, without advance thought, and it can lead to mistakes. This type of anger is not good, and it is the type that Rashi mentions in his commentary on this week's portion. The third type of anger is meant for educational purposes, like when Moshe reacted to the Golden Calf. This third type of anger is desirable in the eyes of G-d.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, the Almighty indicated that He wanted to destroy Bnei Yisrael. Moshe prayed for them and the Almighty accepted his prayer. "And G-d relented about the evil that He had spoken about doing to His nation" [Shemot 32:14]. This shows that Moshe's anger was not of a forbidden and harmful type but rather an educational approach, based on reasoning and thought. Moshe descended the mountain with the Tablets in his hands, and when he saw the Golden Calf he became angry and shattered the Tablets in a rage. Only after his anger had subsided (after the Calf was burned, Bnei Yisrael drank from its ashes, and three thousand sinners in the nation died) was he able to ascend the mountain again in order to receive the second set of Tablets.

(In memory of Rabbi Yosef, Chana, and Shuv-El Dikstein, who were murdered on 17 Av 5762)

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Taking a Closer Look**

**W**hen the army returned from destroying Midyan (Bamidbar 3:13-20), Moshe was angry that the women that had caused some to sin were brought back as captives. After giving directions as to how they should rectify that, Moshe instructed the warriors as to how to become ritually clean from the contact with the corpses of those that they had killed. Then (13:21-24) Elazar, the Kohain Gadol, tells them that besides taking care of the "tumah" aspect (the ritual uncleanness), they must also take care of the "kashrus" aspect, by removing the non-kosher particles on the surface and absorbed into the vessels (i.e. the pots and pans that had been used by the Midyanim). The obvious question is why it was Elazar who taught (or reminded) them about making sure the vessels were "kashered," and not Moshe.

Rashi (31:21) explains that "because Moshe became angry, he made a mistake, for the laws of [having to] cleanse [the vessels] of non-Jews became hidden from him," i.e. he should have taught it to them,

but forgot. Rashi then brings other examples of when Moshe's anger led to his making a mistake (getting upset at Elazar and Isamar at the consecration of the Mishkan and hitting the rock instead of speaking to it). Several issues can be raised regarding Rashi's explanation.

For one thing, where was Moshe when Elazar taught the laws of making these pots and pans kosher? It would seem unlikely that Elazar would have the audacity to point out what Moshe forgot to add with Moshe standing right there next to him. Even if Moshe had already left, and Elazar was still standing there in front of the army, it would be very awkward for him to add that, "by the way, Moshe forgot to tell you to kasher the vessels before you use them." We would have expected Elazar to (quietly) remind Moshe before he left that there was more to be said, or at least consult with him before taking it upon himself to teach it himself.

Additionally, the Sifri (157), after bringing the approach Rashi uses (that Moshe's anger caused him to forget the law), says that "there are some that say that Moshe gave Elazar the Kohain permission to speak, so that when Moshe leaves this world they do not say to him (Elazar) 'during the life of Moshe your Rebbe you never spoke a thing, what are you speaking now [for] (i.e. what gives you the right to speak now).'" It seems, then, according to the second approach in the Sifri, that Elazar didn't teach these laws because Moshe forgot them, but because Moshe wanted him too—so that he would be able to continue teaching after Moshe dies. Why did Rashi choose the first approach to explain the laws being taught by Elazar instead of Moshe rather than the second one? Wouldn't it have been preferable to use the approach that casts Moshe in a more positive light?

(Even if Rashi wanted to teach us the moral lesson about the danger of getting angry, he could have done so by one of the other references—where we know that Moshe made mistakes thinking that the offering should have been eaten instead of burned and hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. Why teach it to us in a situation where it's possible that Moshe did not forget the law, but purposely had someone else teach it?)

The Tur (in both his "longer" commentary and in the "Ba'al HaTurim), says that "Moshe spoke to the Heads of the Thousands (i.e. the officers) [regarding] the section relevant to ritual cleanliness, and they didn't have any metal vessels in their hands, only valuable garments. But Elazar the Kohain spoke to the men of the army and saw that in their hands were vessels used [for food] that are found in houses, therefore he taught them the laws of cleansing (i.e. kashering) [them]." The verses bear this out, as when Moshe got upset it was at "those in charge of the army, the officers over thousands and the officers over hundreds" (31:14). It was to these same leaders that the instructions for removing the "tumah" were given. Elazar, on the other

hand, spoke to "the men of the army," (31:21), i.e. all 12,000 of them.

This is consistent with the implication in the Talmud (Eiruvin 63a) that Moshe was not present when Elazar taught the laws of "koshering." When discussing the prohibition against teaching a law in front of your Rebbe, a distinction is made between saying the law literally in his presence, or in a situation where the Rebbe should have been consulted (or the one to state the law). If it is done right in front of the Rebbe, it is punishable by death (by heavenly decree), while if the Rebbe is not right there, it is still forbidden, but not punishable by death. Instead, the violator loses his position of greatness. This is learned from Elazar, who because he said these laws instead of Moshe, lost his position (as Yehoshua would no longer have to consult with him, i.e. through the Urim v'Tumim, but would receive prophecy straight from G-d). Obviously, then, Elazar's mistake of relating the law instead of his Rebbe (Moshe) was not done literally right in front of Moshe, or we could not learn from his case (and he would have received a much worse punishment).

Although Moshe taught the laws of ritual purity only to the officers, they were just as relevant to the lower-ranking soldiers. It was understood that the officers would then relate the laws to the soldiers. If the laws were meant for the entire army (and not just the officers who stood before him), Moshe should have taught all the laws that the soldiers needed to know, including the laws of making the vessels kosher. Even if the officers had no metal utensils, the soldiers did. Rashi is telling us that this oversight (which would not have occurred had Moshe seen the vessels right in front of him as Elazar did) was due to Moshe's having gotten angry. Why Moshe wasn't the one to address all of the troops is another issue, but he should have covered all of the laws the first time, and didn't. If Moshe had wanted Elazar to start teaching publicly, it would have been to the officers, who were going to teach whatever laws they learned to the soldiers. Since Moshe taught some of the relevant laws, he should have taught all of them.

Elazar realized that Moshe had made a mistake; the question is how he reacted. According to the Sifri, he did exactly what he should have done—spoke to Moshe afterwards about what to do as far as teaching the laws of kashering the utensils. It was at this time that Moshe suggested that Elazar be the one to address the troops, as this way they would hear him teach during Moshe's lifetime. The Talmud, however, is of the opinion that Elazar did not consult with Moshe first, and takes him to task for not doing so. Rashi didn't want to get involved in this dispute, so only mentioned the part that was agreed to by both approaches—that because of Moshe's anger he didn't see the larger picture and forgot to mention the laws of kashering.

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**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

In one of this week's portions Reuven and Gad and half of Menasheh request to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan. A cursory review of their request gives us insight into why these particular tribes tried to remain outside Israel.

Reuven was, of course, the first son of Yaakov (Jacob). When the brothers returned from Egypt and told their father that the viceroy (who was really Joseph) insisted they bring Binyamin (Benjamin) to Egypt before they would be given more food, Reuven steps forward. Turning to his father he declares: If I do not bring Benjamin back you can kill my two sons. Yaakov regrets Reuven's overture. (Genesis 42:37-38)

Only after Yehuda comes forward saying he would be a surety for Binyamin "if I don't return him I will have sinned to you all my days" does Yaakov relent. (Genesis 43:9)

The difference between Yehuda and Reuven is obvious. Yehuda assumes responsibility. He expresses a total commitment to Binyamin and is ready to put himself on the line if he fails. Not so, Reuven. He guarantees Binyamin's safety by using his children as collateral rather than himself.

Not surprisingly the children of Reuven who don't understand the message of areivut, of caring for others, bear children and a tribe that prefers to remain apart from Israel.

Gad is one of the children of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. He is described as being very strong. In the words of Yaakov's blessing as explicated by Rashi: "Troops (armies) shall be found of Gad." (Genesis 49:19) Still when Joseph is sold Gad does not come forward to protect him. Here again, it is understandable that from Gad becomes a tribe that asks to live outside Israel.

Menashe is the eldest of Joseph. When he is born Joseph calls him Menasheh "For God has made me forget (nashani, the root of Menasheh). All my toil and all my father's house." (Genesis 42:51) here is a description of one who breaks with his home. Not coincidentally Menasheh's children wish to separate from Israel.

Moshe (Moses) tells the two and a half tribes that they may live outside Israel but only after they first help conquer and settle the land. Here Moshe teaches the message of areivut to tribes who come from a tribe where the sense of caring is missing. And these tribes get the message. They lead the way in helping liberate the land. They were able to turn around the lack of areivut in their family history into a sense of real commitment to the Jewish people.

An important message especially today as Jews in the Diaspora stay away from Israel as Israel faces danger. This story teaches that in times of need

we should, like the two and a half tribes, run to Israel rather than from Israel. © 2001 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

**RABBI MORDECHAI WOLLENBERG**

## Weekly Thoughts

**T**his week's Parsha speaks in great detail about the journeys of the Children of Israel through their years in the wilderness. The Torah specifies each and every one of the 42 journeys which they undertook.

The Torah does not just tell us things for no reason. There is always a lesson which we can take away for our everyday lives.

All of us have embarked upon many journeys throughout our lives, both physically and spiritually.

We make many stops along the way. These stops are important, they are rungs on the ladder, stages on the way to our destination. It is all too easy, once we get there, to forget about the stages we passed along the way. Sometimes we forget about the people who helped us along the way. This week's Parsha reminds us that even though we may have reached our destination, we should always be cognizant of the path which brought us there and not to take for granted those who have encouraged and guided us throughout our "journeys". Those previous stages may seem like mere 'stepping stones' now that we have reached our goal, but they are nonetheless important.

At the time, they represented a journey, progress, a step closer to our destination. They are still important now as without them we would not be where we are today.

A young boy was traveling from Jerusalem to the Galilee.

He arrived at a four-way crossroads and discovered, to his horror, that the sign had fallen down.

Now he had no way to know which road to take to reach his destination.

What was he to do?

The answer was simple. He knew where he was coming from—Jerusalem. By arranging the sign so that Jerusalem pointed to the path he had just come from, he was able to figure out which way to go.

When we know where we have come from, we can know where we are going to. This week's Parshas remind us of this. May we all strive, and ultimately reach our destination. © 2004 torah.org & Rabbi M. Wollenberg

**RABBI ZVI MILLER**

## The Salant Foundation

**S**himon is traveling to LA on business. When he arrives at his destination, the route that he took to get there is immaterial. Yet even though the final destination of Klal Yisrael was to reach the land of Israel, nevertheless, the Torah recorded each stopping point of their forty year trek through the desert. What is

the importance of recounting the name of each place in their journey?

The nature of earthly pleasures is that they are momentary, i.e., the enjoyment cannot be experienced after the actual stimulation. Whereas spiritual delights are fully alive as long as they are remembered. For instance, if someone learned a meaningful Torah concept, it is a source of joy to him each time he reflects upon it.

In light of this, it is apparent that HaShem endowed man with a spirit in order to grant us the opportunity to attain lasting pleasure through our spiritual endeavors. Moreover, this leads us to the conclusion that the soul is eternal. For since the Creator provided man with the capacity to perform spiritual acts, it must be that He also furnished man with the potential to achieve never-ending pleasure.

In addition, each separate spiritual preparatory act that we do in order to perform a Mitzvah serves a lasting purpose, and therefore is a source of unending joy. Hence, each stage of Klal Yisrael's journey served as a preparatory step to bring us to the ultimate goal of reaching the Land of Israel. Therefore, the Torah enumerated each successive location to teach us that every preliminary stage was eternally significant, in and of itself.

When a person works the earth and is blessed with a bountiful harvest, the longer the fruits of his hand lasts, the greater his joy. How much more precious are our spiritual attainments, for each preparatory act—and surely every Mitzvah that we do—creates a fountain of eternal delight for our souls.

Implement: Taste the lasting joy of every Mitzvah that you perform. [Based on Ohr RaShaz of Rav Simchah Zissel Levovitz, page 184] © 2004 Rabbi Z. Miller & The Salant Foundation

**RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF**

## Sfas Emes

**T**he Parsha begins with Moshe Rabbeinu in a meeting with the leaders of the Shevatim. Moshe tells them: "Zeh Hadavar Asher Tsiva HaShem". (This is—exactly—what HaShem has commanded".)

The Sfas Emes cites Rashi, who, in turn, follows the comment of the Sifrei. (The Sifrei is a classical commentary—dating from Tana'itic times—on Bemidbar and Devarim.) The Sifrei tells us that when Moshe transmitted the words of HaShem, he sometimes introduced those words with "Koh Ahmar HaShem". "Koh" means: "more or less like this". Hence, the introductory sentence as a whole is: "This is—approximately—what HaShem said...". Moshe Rabbeinu, however, operated at a level much higher than all other prophets. As a result, Moshe was often able to transmit HaShem's message with such precision that he could introduce the message with: "Zeh Hadavar...". ("This is exactly what HaShem said".) The

Torah signals this higher degree of clarity and precision by using the word "Zeh" rather than "Koh".

Now the Sfas Emes asks a basic question: If the greater degree of clarity that "Zeh" implies is a virtue, why were some of Moshe's communications from HaShem to Bnei Yisroel preceded by "Koh"?

The Sfas Emes answers: There are things in the world which cannot really be clarified, things that we cannot really grasp. We can handle these topics, only imprecisely—with similes, allusions, parables—that is, only approximately, only "more or less". That is, there is a whole realm of reality for which "Koh" is the best that can be applied; "Zeh" invokes a standard that is unattainable.

We have a statement from the prophet Yeshayahu that states explicitly (Yeshayahu, 55:8): "For My thoughts are not your thoughts...". But I have the impression that when the Sfas Emes refers to things that we cannot really grasp, he has much more in mind than merely "thoughts". Whole configurations of reality seem to be the issue.

An example from another context may help to clarify the difference between "... My thoughts" and "entire configurations". The example comes from our Tefila of Shacharis on Shabbos, the piyut that begins "Hakol Yoducho". Nusach Ashkenaz goes on to say: "Ein Ke'erkecha"—"We cannot measure Your greatness". By contrast, Nusach Sefard says "Ein Aroch Eilecha"—"We don't even have the METRIC with which we could even conceivably measure Your greatness".

Where is this realm that we cannot really understand? You might guess that the Sfas Emes is referring here to "Olam Haba". For in fact, we know little about the world to come. If that was your answer, you guessed wrong, underestimating the Sfas Emes's subtlety. The Sfas Emes tells us that in fact the realm which we cannot truly grasp is—Olam Haze!h!

Note the double play on words: "Olam" evokes the thought of He'eleim—"hidden". By contrast, "Haze!h" implies definite clarity. You may ask: Which is it: Hidden or definite clarity? The Sfas Emes seems to be saying: Both; that this double play on words is telling us that we live in a world of ambiguity.

You may find this confusing. That is exactly what the Sfas Emes is telling us: That the world is a very confusing place. And by all indications, that is exactly how HaShem wants it to be. Moshe Rabbeinu was on a level so high that he could pierce the Hester and perceive the world as it truly is, with the quality of "Zeh". So, too, were Bnei Yisroel at the time of Matan Torah. Unfortunately, we lost this capability when we made the golden calf. As the Torah says (Shemos, 33:6): "Va'yis'natzlu Bnei Yisroel Es Ed'yam...". (ArtScroll: "And the Children of Israel were stripped of their jewelry ..."). Question: What "jewelry?" Answer: The crowns that we had been given when we said "Na'aseh Venishma".

The Sfas Emes makes the point all the more forceful as he reads "Edy'am" not only as "their jewelry", but also as coming from the root "Eid"—witness or testimony. This reading gives us the pasuk just cited as: "Bnei Yisroel lost the clarity of perception that they had been granted at Sinai".

But all is not lost! The Sfas Emes quotes a ma'amar of Chazal, who tell us that the crowns of truthful insight are restored to Bnei Yisroel on Shabbos. The Zohar explains that, by observing Shabbos, we are testifying as witnesses ("Eidim") that HaShem created the world and gives the world its existence. Thus, by keeping the Mitzvos of Shabbos, we have greater access to HaShem and—penetrating the shroud of Hester—to an accurate picture of reality.

Shabbos, then, takes on the quality of "Zeh Hadavar!" This quality of enhanced perception stands in sharp contrast to the situation on Yemos Hachol (days in which the world may seem "empty" (from the root "chalol") of HaShem's presence.) During the week, the most we can achieve is to see the world as if through darkly stained glasses; i.e. with the imperfect vision of "Koh".

Note how high are the Sfas Emes's standards and expectations when he tells us what we must do to reach even the inferior level of "Koh". How can a person achieve "Koh?" By doing everything that his action Leshem Shamayim (to bring honor to HaShem) and by doing so even though the truth concerning the world is hidden.

One might expect that the Sfas Emes would rank Shabbos above Yemei Hama'aseh (the days of work) in all respects and without qualification. In fact, the world is more complex. The Sfas Emes remarks that Shabbos also depends on the days of work. Why? How? Because to reach the level of "Zeh Hadavar"—fully accurate metaphysical perception—a person must start with "Koh"—incomplete, and hence, unsatisfying perception. That's us. © 2004 Rabbi N.C. Leffl & torah.org

**RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## Kinder & Gentler Killers

**T**his week we read about the cities of refuge. A man who kills someone accidentally is exiled to an Ir Miklat, a city of refuge. In addition to killers, a very distinguished group of people, the Levites, lived in those cities. Their job was something similar to today's Rabbis. They traveled throughout Israel, teaching and preaching. The Levites would return to their homes and neighbors, people who killed through carelessness, who were convianslaughter of sorts. They played an integral role in the killer's rehabilitation.

The sentence imposed on the killers was also very unique. It was not defined by time, but rather by circumstance. The killers would go free only when the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would die. The Talmud in Makos tells us that the Kohen Gadol's family members

were quite worried. They were not concerned that there would be an assassination plot against the Kohen Gadol's life. They were worried that the convicts would pray that the Kohen Gadol would die before his due time, thus releasing them early. In order to dissuade them, the mother of the Kohen Gadol would distribute food and clothing to the inmates to deter them from praying that her son die.

It is hard to understand. Are there no loved ones waiting for these outcasts with food and clothing to be offered upon release? Were the Kohen Gadol's mom's cookies worth exile in the city of refuge? How did these gifts work as bribes?

Reb Aryeh Levine took it upon himself to visit Jewish inmates, mostly members of the Irgun, held under British rule prior to Israel's statehood. He became like a father to those prisoners, bringing them food, clothes and love. For years, despite sweltering heat and frigid rains, he never missed a Shabbos visit, save one.

Once, in the midst of a Shabbos service, a very excited messenger called him out of the prison. Reb Aryeh's daughter had become paralyzed and the doctors were helpless. He was needed for support at home, immediately. After the Shabbos, an Arab messenger was sent by the concerned inmates to inquire what tragedy interrupted the weekly visit.

The next Shabbos, despite the enduring tragedy at home, the Rabbi went to the prison as usual. Normally during the Torah reading, prisoners would pledge a few coins to charity. This week the donations were far different.

"I will give up a week of my life for the sake of Reb Aryeh's daughter," the first convict pledged. Another prisoner announced that he would give a month from his. Each one called to the Torah upped the previous pledge until the last prisoner cried out, "what is our life compared to Reb Aryeh's anguish? I will give all my remaining days for the sake of the Rabbi's daughter."

At this unbelievable display of love and affection, Reb Aryeh broke down and wept.

Miraculous as it may sound, that Saturday night Reb Aryeh's daughter began to move and within days was fully recovered.

The cities of refuge were not jails, nor were they mere detention camps. They were environments in which reckless people became aware that careless actions have serious ramifications. They were constantly under the influence of their neighbors, the Levites. They would observe them pray, learn, and teach others. They would see the epitome of awareness and care for fellow beings.

The mission of the Kohen Gadol's mother was not just to distribute food. It was to develop a bond with those people whose carelessness spurred a death. They saw the love a parent had for her son as she subconsciously plead with the inmates to spare her child. They saw how a total stranger, despite her great

esteem, would make sure that their needs in the city of refuge were cared for. They may have even thought of the loved one they killed and his family.

After developing an awareness of life, they would never be able to pray for the death of anyone, even if it meant their own freedom. In fact, they, like Reb Aryeh's prisoners, may have offered their years for the merit of the Kohen Gadol.

The Torah can not punish without teaching and rehabilitating. It infuses a love for life and spirituality into former careless killers. Its goal is to mold a new person whose attitudes will cause him to be kinder, gentler, and a lot more careful. *The story was adapted from A Tzadik in Our Time, by Simcha Raz, © 1976 Feldheim Publishers. © 1997 Rabbi M.Kamenetzky & torah.org*

### RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

One of the laws in this week's parashah is that an accidental murderer must flee to a City of Refuge and remain there until the incumbent Kohen Gadol passes away. Why is the fate of a manslayer bound up with that of the Kohen Gadol? R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1894-1955; founder and rosh yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland) explains:

The Kohen Gadol's job is to bring the Shechinah to rest among the Jewish People. On the other hand, murder drives the Shechinah away. [Our Sages teach that even one who kills accidentally is considered a murderer in some sense because G-d protects blameless people from committing offenses even unintentionally.] One who has committed such an act cannot be part of the same society as the Kohen Gadol. Moreover, such a person must realize that he cannot continue life as usual. Instead, he must uproot himself and go to a City of Refuge and begin a new life. Only when the Kohen Gadol dies can the accidental murderer feel that the chapter of his life that was so inimical to the Kohen Gadol's mission is over, and then he can return to his former home.

This understanding has broader applications, R' Bloch observes. Any time a person has experienced a spiritual setback, even inadvertently and unintentionally, he must realize that he cannot go on with life as usual. Rather, some change is required to address the situation in which he finds himself.

(In addition, R' Bloch teaches, we learn from here that a person must act in a way that furthers the mission of the Kohen Gadol and other spiritual leaders.) (Peninei Da'at) © 2004 Rabbi S. Katzl & torah.org

