

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

### BRIJNET/UNITED SYNAGOGUE - LONDON (O)

## Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Mendel Lew,  
Stanmore & Canons Park Synagogue

**T**his week, two Sidrot are combined and read from the Torah. The name of the first one is Mattot, which means "tribes", since Moses was addressing the 12 Tribes of Israel. Throughout the Torah, whenever the tribes are mentioned, one of two Hebrew words is used: the aforementioned Mattot (otherwise known by its singular use-Mateh) or Shevet. Fascinatingly, both words can also denote a staff or rod. Presumably, there is a link between tribe and staff!

Before examining the link, we will analyse the difference between the two words, Shevet and Mateh. Shevet is recognised as a branch still attached to the tree; it is moist and tender. Mateh, on the other hand, is taken to mean a branch that has been removed from the tree; it is hard and strong.

In Jewish terms, the tree represents the source-G-d. It is from G-d that our souls originate. Depending on the circumstances, the soul might be likened to a Shevet (when attached) or a Mateh (when detached).

Before the soul's descent, it is very much attached to G-d. It inhabits a world that is completely concentrated on G-dliness and spirituality. It is, for all intents and purposes, like a branch still moist and joined to the 'tree'.

Once the soul inhabits a body, providing it with life and spirit, it becomes 'detached' from the source. Its connection to G-d is less apparent. This sense of loneliness is exacerbated by the challenges and trials it encounters constantly from the physical demands of the body that have little or no time for loftier matters. The soul is now like a Mateh, detached from the 'tree'.

Interestingly, when the branch is attached to a tree, it is soft and weak. Yet, once it is removed it gets harder and stronger. It would seem that being separated from the source only adds toughness and durability!

The same exact thing happens with a soul. Once it takes its leave from the source of goodness and purity, it discovers deep, hidden powers and energy that it never knew existed. All the challenges thrown at it only reinforce the toughness and determination to succeed. The soul actually uses the challenge as a

springboard to a greater closeness and understanding of G-d.

On another level, the difference between Shevet and Mateh can be observed throughout our history. Whenever our people's star has truly shone (like the time of the holy Temple in Jerusalem), we have been like a Shevet. But, when the stakes have been raised and we have undergone persecution, we have always managed to remain firm and tough. In fact, we have always come out stronger!

The comparison and link between tribe and staff is now clear and understandable. Perhaps that's why we always read Mattot during the 3 Weeks of sadness. It reminds us that even when we feel subdued, we have the robustness to raise ourselves and succeed.

### THE HAFTARAH

by Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Finchley Synagogue

"Even the people of Nof and Tachpanches will break your skull!" (Jeremiah 2:15)

In the second of our set of three Haftarat for the Three Weeks, the Prophet Jeremiah delivers ominous tidings concerning the impending destruction. Even the people of Nof and Tachpanches will take part in the carnage. Who were these people and why is it significant?

Malbim notes that Nof and Tachpanches were cities of Egypt. At that time, the Kingdom of Israel had long maintained an alliance with the Egyptians, who had pledged to come to the Jewish nation's assistance at any time of crisis.

Yet, despite the covenant that made Egypt a key ally, when Israel faced destruction Egypt actively assisted Israel's enemies. Having forged alliances with neighbours and felt secure in the trust they placed in foreign powers, the People of Israel, in due course, however, were shown the real nature of Egypt's "friendship".

Reflecting on this phenomenon, Jeremiah comments, "Is it not that you have forsaken the L-d your G-d, when He attempted to lead you on the true path, that has brought this upon you?"

Strategic partnerships with other nations are a crucial part of securing stability and maintaining economic viability. The Prophet reminds us that, in addition, we must recognise that the true strength of the Jewish nation is found within our faith and heritage. In

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this spirit, each time we take the Torah out of the Ark we declare in the Berich Shemai: "Not in man do I put my trust, nor upon any angel do I rely, but upon the G-d of Heaven, who is the G-d of truth!" © 2006 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

### YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

## Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

*Adapted by Shaul Barth*

*Translated by Kaeren Fish*

In this week's parasha, we read of the request by the tribes of Gad and Reuven to settle on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. There are two principal stages in this story: the original request, and the elaboration, following Moshe's response.

At first, we read that the two tribes see the eastern bank of the Jordan "and behold, the place was a place for grazing flocks," and therefore they approach Moshe and ask, "If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not bring us over the Jordan."

Moshe's response is immediate and unequivocal. At first, he reproaches these tribes for even suggesting the idea: "Shall your brethren then go to war while you sit here?!" But then he goes on to rebuke them for the more general influence that they are going to have: "Why do you dishearten Bnei Yisrael from passing over to the land which G-d has given them?" In the first sentence, he speaks as a prophet and spiritual guide; in the second, he reacts as a political and military leader, who must consider not only the ethical nature of their request, but also its wider national ramifications. But Moshe does not stop at these two admonitions. He goes on to challenge them in his capacity as Moshe Rabbeinu-the person who has led and accompanied them through the wilderness for forty years, for whom the request by these two tribes comes as a slap in the face in view of all that he has tried to teach and inculcate: "So your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to view the land... and behold, you have risen up in place of your fathers, a gang of sinful people, to stoke up G-d's anger again against Israel."

Following this first part of the story, we reach the second part, where the tribes of Gad and Reuven respond: "We shall build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our children, but we ourselves shall go up armed before Bnei Yisrael until we have brought them to their place... We shall inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan, for our portion has fallen to us on this eastern side of the Jordan."

The commentaries are divided as to whether this reaction is an elaboration of their original request, where Moshe did not at first understand their intention, or whether this represents an amendment to their original plan in light of Moshe's fierce response. The verses themselves leave both options open. Either way, when Moshe hears their explanation, he accepts their request and declares, "If you will do this thing... you shall be guiltless before G-d and Israel, and this land shall be your possession before G-d."

But we are left with an unanswered question: is the request by the tribes of Gad and Reuven now acceptable? Was Moshe's sole concern that these tribes would lend a hand in the conquest of the land? Is the very idea of leaving- or relinquishing their part of the land not in itself problematic?

In Maskehet Bikkurim (1:10), R. Yossi states that bikkurim (first fruits) are not brought from the eastern bank of the Jordan, for it is not called "a land flowing with milk and honey." Here we must ask: is the difference between the two sides of the Jordan so great, in terms of agricultural quality? Is it not possible that excellent produce could be grown on that side, too? The answer must lie on a deeper level, namely, the impurity that the Halakha imputes to "chutza la-aretz," areas outside the Land of Israel.

Now we have a better understanding of Moshe's rebuke, and the problem becomes even more acute: how can these tribes even suggest settling in a land that is spiritually inferior? Does the economic factor-"your servants have cattle" -- justify their preference for a land that, while fertile, is impure?

The Talmud Yerushalmi offers another reason for the difference between Eretz Yisrael and other nearby areas: the former was given by G-d to Israel, and the latter they took for themselves. This distinction explains why the Torah requires that tithes be brought only from the Land of Israel (even if the rabbis expanded the mitzva to include surrounding areas). According to this understanding, Moshe's rebuke shouts out from the verses: "Are you, for economic reasons, choosing to give up the land that 'G-d's eyes are upon it,' in favor of a land that you are taking of your own accord? Do you prefer a land where the intensity of G-d's Presence is incomparable to that of Eretz Yisrael, simply because you have been blessed with much livestock?"

The picture is rounded out by the narrative in Sefer Yehoshua, describing how, following the

conquest of the land, the two-and-a-half tribes who settled on the eastern bank build an altar. They declare that, in the event that in future generations people may suggest that the inhabitants of the eastern side of the Jordan have no portion in the G-d of Israel, this altar will be proof that this territory is indeed part of Eretz Yisrael. Once again, the rebuke resounds in full force: if it is clear to these tribes-already in the generation that seeks to settle there-that the choice of the eastern bank of the Jordan may lead to a future situation where their identification and association with Am Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael will be brought into question, then why do they want so badly to remain there? Is it only because of the material advantages there?

Once again, we must return to our question: is Moshe now satisfied with the request by the tribes of Gad and Reuven, following their explanation? Is his sole concern that they participate in the war of conquest? We must conclude that this is not the case. The turnaround in Moshe's attitude may be understood in light of the fact that at first, he believed that these tribes sought to sever themselves from the rest of the nation. This aspiration was worthy of the strongest opposition and rebuke. If this was what they were after, then they were indeed a "gang of sinful people."

But after their explanation, Moshe lowers his level of opposition: their proposal is still an unworthy one, but they are no longer sinners. Is their idea of making the eastern side of the Jordan their inheritance, owing to economic considerations, a sinful one? Apparently not. Is their request worthy? Certainly not. Those who abandon Eretz Yisrael-the land that G-d has given-for financial (or other) reasons are not sinning, in the regular sense of the word. But they are undoubtedly missing the mark in terms of the aim towards which Moshe, and all the leaders of Jewish history, have tried to lead and educate! *[This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashot Matot-Masei 5762 (2002).]*

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**A**fter exacting revenge upon Midyan (Bamidbar 31:7-10), G-d told Moshe how the spoils should be divided (31:25-30). First they were divided into equal halves, with one half going to the soldiers and the other half going to the rest of the nation. Then, a percentage of each half was given to a specific group; 1/500th of the soldiers' share was given to Elazar the Kohain, and 1/50th of the nation's share was given to the Levi'im. This "donation" is placed by many of the commentators at the center of a dispute between the Rambam and the Ra'avad.

"The entire Tribe of Levi is prohibited from inheriting in the Land of Canaan. They are likewise prohibited from taking a portion of the spoils when the cities are being conquered" (Rambam, Hilchos

Shemitta ve'Yovel 13:10). The Rambam then continues (13:11): "It seems to me that these things only apply in the land that was promised to Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, and was inherited by their children and divided among them; all other lands that are conquered by one of the Kings of Israel, the Kohanim and Levi'im-in those lands and in their spoils-are the same as every other Israelite," i.e. they can inherit it and can share in its spoils. The Ra'avad disagrees, pointing out that the Tribe of Levi didn't "share" in the spoils of Midyan (which was not "land promised to our forefathers"), only getting 1/50th of the nation's half via a special decree that it be given as "terumah" (a mandated donation, not divided as a share of the spoils). If it was only because of the special decree that Levi got any of these spoils, then the law prohibiting Levi from inheriting and from sharing in spoils must apply even in lands not originally promised to our forefathers.

The Kesef Mishnah defends the Rambam's position by saying that if Levi could not share in the spoils of Midyan, G-d would not have allowed them to get any of the spoils at all; the fact that they were given even 1/100th of them proves that the prohibition against taking any spoils does not apply to other lands. As far as why they didn't get a full share of the spoils, the Kesef Mishnah says that it was a special, unique decree ("hora'as sha'ah") that was specific to the situation, and not applicable elsewhere. (The Ra'avad would obviously hold that what was unique and special about the decree was not the amount of spoils that they got, but that they got any spoils at all.)

So why, if (according to the Rambam) the Levi'im should have gotten a full share of these spoils, did they only get a small percentage of the spoils of Midyan? By the same token, if (according to the Ra'avad) they never get any spoils, why did G-d mandate that they get some here? According to both the Rambam and the Ra'avad this was a unique circumstance, dictated by G-d's specific decree that applied only to these spoils. What was it about the spoils of Midyan that brought about this unique decree?

Normally, when there are spoils to be divided, it is because the enemy was defeated and conquered, and their land and possessions were taken over by the victors. Midyan was unique in that despite being a total victory, the land was not conquered. The lands of Sichon and Og became the property of the Children of Israel, eventually given to specific Tribes. Their possessions were on the land, and *something* had to be done with them! They were therefore divided appropriately. Midyan was unique in that the land was left alone after the total victory. The spoils didn't *have* to be brought back to the nation, but were. This really was a unique situation, one that didn't fall under the normal guidelines of how to divide the spoils, because the first question was really if they should even *keep* the spoils; only if they did would the question of *how* to

divide the spoils become relevant. I would like to suggest that the "hora'as sha'ah" here was not limited to what, if anything, the Levi'im should get, but what, if anything, *anyone* should get. And this unique situation produced a unique, one-time-only decree-not only regarding the Levi'im, but for everybody.

Usually, spoils are divided among the soldiers, including the "support-staff" that watched the camp and its possessions during the battle. As the Nodah Be'Yehudah (II, Y"D 201) points out, here the spoils were divided among the entire nation, not just those directly involved in the combat. Part of this unique situation (and therefore unique decree) also applied to the Levi'im. According to the Rambam, it meant that rather than getting an equal share (since Midyan was not part of the "Promised Land"), they only got 1/100th of the spoils. According to the Ra'vaad, it meant that rather than getting nothing at all, they were granted a "mandatory donation" of 1/100th of the spoils. Either way, though, it wasn't (just) the share of the Levi'im that was unique, but the entire situation (having spoils without having been forced to deal with them because the land was conquered) that was unique.

The Rambam's wording backs up this approach, as the Tribe of Levi was only "prohibited from taking a portion of the spoils when the cities are being conquered," and only shared the spoils of "all other lands (i.e. those not promised to our forefathers) that are conquered by one of the Kings of Israel." Midyan, however, wasn't "conquered," as their land wasn't taken, so a situation-specific decree had to be made. And, as the Kesef Mishnah points out, it therefore cannot tell us definitively whether the Levi'im can share in the spoils of other lands after they are conquered. May G-d grant us victory over all of our enemies, as soon as is most beneficial. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**I**n one of this week's portions Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe 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 rejects 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 Gad becomes a tribe that asks to live outside Israel.

Menashe is the eldest son of Joseph. When he is born Joseph calls him Menashe, "For G-d has made me forget (nashani, the root of Menashe) 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 Menashe'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 those 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 now for Jews in the Diaspora - in times of need we should, like the two and a half tribes, run to Israel rather than from Israel. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

**(A**nd Moses explained to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuven that before they enter Trans-Jordan they must first fight the battle with their brethren on the west bank of the Jordan River) "and we shall conquer the land before the L-rd and afterwards you shall return (to Trans-Jordan) so that you shall appear to be innocent before the L-rd and before the Israelites" (Numbers 32:22).

Apparently the Bible thinks it important that the Tribes of Gad and of Reuven not only do what is right but also appear to do what is right. Therefore they cannot settle on the Eastern side of Jordan-Trans-Jordan-before they join what's left of the tribes in the battle for the west bank of Jordan, where their brethren

will settle. And from these words, "and you shall appear to be innocent before the L-rd and before the Israelites" we learn that an individual must always conduct himself in a manner which is beyond reproach; we can never do anything which would make other people think that we did something wrong. In common religious parlance, such zealous concern that we not appear to do anything wrong is the importance "marit ayin" or literally the seeing eye. But why is it so important to be concerned with what others think? I once heard from a very wise Rabbi that he had to decide early on in his Rabbinate whether he was out to please his congregants or he was out to please G-d; he decided to try to please G-d, because G-d has a much better memory than his congregants would ever have. So why isn't our Bible satisfied with our pleasing G-d? Why must we be so considerate of what others think?

I believe that the message here is not very different from the message of the one half shekel which every Israelite must give to be counted into the census. It is one half shekel not a whole shekel in order to remind each of us how dependant we are on each other, how much of an interdependent entity the Israelite nation really is. We live our daily lives in the presence of others, whose respect for us is necessary if we ourselves are to feel respectable, or worthy of respect. Our own self image derives from how others see us. And if we do not realize our dependency on others, neither will we be sensitive to the dependency of others upon us. "You shall love your Neighbor as yourself" is predicated upon this fundamental feeling of interdependence which links every Israelite to every other Israelite.

Therefore our Sages teach us: "One who enters the Temple office to give his half shekel should not come wearing a robe with large sleeves or with a shoe or with phylacteries or with an amulet (objects which tend to seal stolen money) lest he become poor and people say that he was punished for having stolen from the temple treasury or lest he become wealthy and people say that he profited from taking from the Temple treasury. Every individual must be innocent in the eyes of humanity as well as in the eyes of G-d"... (Mishnah Shekalim 3,2) Our sages further command us "The family of Garmu which had the special recipe for making the Temple Showbread which remained fresh for seven days would never serve bread on their own table lest others think that they had taken from the Temple Showbread; similarly the family of Avtinas, who had the special recipe for the Temple sweet smelling incense would never have any of their daughters walk out of the house perfumed...."(Tosefta Yoma Chapter 2:2,6).

There is however a second side to this fascinating law. At the same time that the individual must be sensitive to what others think, the others must give every individual the benefit of the doubt. No one in

Judaism is considered guilty unless his guilt is proven. Hence the great Talmudic Sage Resh Lakish taught, "one who is suspicious of an innocent individual is worthy of being punished on his person" (Tractate Shabbat 97a) And similarly Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perahia taught "you must judge every human being on the scale of merit" (Mishnah Avot 1,6)

Therefore our normative law deals with both of these concerns at the same time. Hence if someone wishes to drink coconut milk (which is considered to be a vegetable and not a dairy product) he must place the coconut shells on the table. In that way no one would suspect him of eating meat and drinking milk at the same time. However if you happen to pass a picnic table with your friend, and you see him eating hamburgers together with what appears to be a glass of milk-and you do not see any coconut shells on the table- you must nevertheless assume that what the individual is drinking is coconut milk. After all everyone must be judged on the scale of merit.

What a different world it would be if each of us attempted to act in a manner which would preclude anyone's thinking ill of us and at the same time each of us would never criticize the other, always judging him/her in the most positive way possible. The only downside would be that our table conversations would have to be idea oriented rather than people oriented, and that newspapers would have to stop printing.  
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#### 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 G-ds 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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**RABBI LEVI COOPER**

## To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

**D**reams, nightmares, visions while we sleep - all are part of the nightly regimen. Sometimes we recall our dreams in the morning, other times we remember that we had a nightmare but cannot fathom what scared us so. Some visions are vivid or recurring, others frightening. Though the significance of dreams dates back to biblical times, not having a dream does not seem to be either ill-omened or promising.

It is therefore surprising that our sages state: "Whoever sleeps for seven days without having a dream is called wicked." This homiletic teaching is derived from the verse: "A person will rest in contentment (savei'a) and not be visited with evil" (Proverbs 19:23), changing the vocalization such that the verse reads: "A person who rests for seven (sheva)

without being visited is evil" (B. Berachot 14a). What is so dire about a week of restful sleep without dreams?

The great commentator Rashi (11th century, France) seems to flip the order of the talmudic statement. Instead of saying one who doesn't dream is called evil, Rashi explains that precisely because such a person is evil therefore he is not visited by dreams. Following the biblical paradigm, dreams are understood to be veiled divine communications. The wicked forfeit the privilege of a G-dly message as the Almighty does not deign to visit evil people.

Missing from this explanation is the significance of the seven days without dreams. The great hassidic master, the regal Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin (1797-1850), creatively rendered this teaching with contemporary significance. Unabashedly departing from the obvious meaning of the passage, he offers an ingenious reading of this passage.

Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin recalls that human life is likened to a fleeting dream in the High Holy Days service. Since the Hebrew term for days in Scripture can refer to years (Leviticus 25:29), "seven days" reflects the seven decades of human life (Psalms 90:10). Life can be lived in a trance-like state, frittering away opportunities and wasting potential. Our sages call for us to appreciate and seize the prospect of 70 years in this world. Thus, "one who slumbers in a dream-like state for seven days, without anything, is called evil?"

Elsewhere in the Talmud the Second Temple sage Honi pondered how the psalmist could describe the Babylonian exile as a 70-year dream (Psalms 126:1): "Could one really dreamily slumber for 70 years?" he queried, wondering how 70 years could simply be dismissed (B. Taanit 23a).

One day he perchanced upon a person planting a carob tree: "How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit?"

"Up to 70 years," came the nonchalant reply.

"It is so obvious to you that you will live for 70 years, so that you will benefit from the fruits of this tree?"

Once again the response came in an unflappable tone: "I found this world with carob trees that my ancestors planted for me, thus I plant for my descendants."

Having satisfied his curiosity, Honi sat down to eat and sleep overtook him. A rocky overhang hid him from view, and he slumbered for 70 years.

When Honi awoke he found a man gathering carobs: "Are you the one who planted the tree?"

"I am his grandson," the man answered, and Honi realized he had slept through two entire generations.

The return to Zion after a 70-year sojourn rendered the exile like a dream in the eyes of those who merited the homecoming. Those returning to the

Promised Land to resettle our ancestral terrain and rebuild the Temple felt the 70 interim years had been a fleeting dream, a national slumber. The people were now reawakening to continue their role on the world stage.

Here, a 70-year sleep is depicted as a positive attitude, for it bespeaks of continuity with a lost past, of connection to a national destiny. Honi could not understand how an exiled generation could just be disregarded. Perhaps in his Second Temple reality he yearned for the miraculous First Temple existence and was not able to reconcile the dissonance between the two periods.

Honi was taught a harsh lesson: Yes, 70 years can pass like a dream when that portrayal serves a national purpose of connecting to a previous reality. But for you who doubted the motives of this outlook, you will feel the brunt of a 70-year dream. Honi made his way home. "Is the son of Honi alive?" he asked.

"No, the son of Honi is no more, but his grandson is alive," came the reply; two generations had vanished.

Without pause, Honi responded: "I am Honi!" But he was not believed. Perhaps seeking solace in a safe space, Honi made his way to the beit midrash (study hall).

Upon entering this familiar realm, he heard the sages commenting: "The laws are as clear as they were in the days of Honi," and they continued reminiscing of a by-gone era, "For when Honi entered the beit midrash, any question that the sages had, he would solve."

Encouraged by this memory, Honi announced: "I am he!" Again he was shunned and not accorded the respect he deserved.

In the case of Honi, the lost 70 years left him bereft of family and friends. A later talmudic sage appropriated this adage to the plight of Honi: "Either a havruta (study partner, peer) or death." Honi's fate was tragic: having lost everything, he asked for Divine mercy to take him from this world. With that Honi died, though in truth his existence in this world really ended when he began to slumber.

Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin concludes his comment on a sleepy existence: Our role and purpose in this physical world is to repair the fragmented reality for the sake of the Creator. If we dreamily slumber through our 70 years in this world, waiting to wake up, then we miss the meaning of life. If we do not take any action, if we do not fulfill our destiny, if we do not contribute to society, we indeed deserve to be called evil, for we have squandered the opportunities our existence proffers. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic

commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

**RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF**

## Sfas Emes

The parsha begins (33: 1 -- 2): "These are the journeys of Bnei Yisroel who went out of Egypt... Moshe recorded their departures for their journeys (motza'ei'hem lemas'ei'hem)... these were the journeys for their departures" (mas'ei'hem lemotza'ei'hem).

The Sfas Emes notes that the pasuk reverses the sequence of its key words. First it speaks of "motza'ei 'hem lemas'ei' hem"; then it speaks of "mas'ei'hem lemotza'ei'hem". The Sfas Emes explains the first sequence as reflecting a basic reality: for our story to begin, we first had to get out of Egypt. Therefore, the pasuk starts with "motza'ei'hem"-a word that comes from the shorash "Y'TZ'A", and hence, a word that irresistibly evokes "ye'tzi'as Mitzrayim" (our exodus from Egypt). Once we had made that break-out, we could proceed on our journeys. Apparently, our liberation from Egypt was not a "one shot" process in which once and for all, we moved to a higher stage of development in our relationship with HaShem. On the contrary, the Sfas Emes finds it relevant to observe that every "masa" (journey) took us further from Egypt. Evidently, escape from the cesspool of tum'a which Egypt was known to be had to be gradual, involving many small steps. The Sfas Emes may have inferred this point from the pasuk's use of the word "motza'ei'hem"-plural.

Proceeding in this vein, the Sfas Emes notes that our journeys continued until we reached our goal-Eretz Yisroel. The fact that we had this objective was crucial. For, too often, people break out from a bad situation; but lacking the right objective, go from the frying pan into the fire. Two examples come swiftly to mind. One case is the story of many Jews in the Shtetel. Reacting to the Shtetel's social inequities, they broke away from Yiddishkeit, and sought social justice-in Stalin's tyranny. Another case involves many young Jews who broke away from the materialism of their milieu in America to seek spirituality-in a cult.

The Sfas Emes has presented an analysis in terms of break-out ("freedom from") and journey to ("freedom to"). To conclude this paragraph, he applies this framework in a wholly new context. Thus, he uses this perspective to explain why HaShem has made gashmiyus (materialism) so attractive.

HaShem has arranged things this way so that the right reasons motivate people when they strive to come closer to Him. If gashmiyus was ugly (nivzeh), people might break away and seek HaShem because of their disgust with gashmiyus. But HaShem wants us to abandon gashmiyus and come closer to Him because He is our goal and our objective in life. That is what the pasuk means when it says: "motza'ei'hem

le'mas'eihem"; that our departures-break-outs-be for the sake of our goals-our journeys toward proper objectives.

Now comes a last chidush, the Sfas Emes's reading of the word "mas'eihem". He tells that when a person makes the effort necessary to depart from materialism as a way of life, one person will help-be me'saye'i'a (!) -- another. © 2006 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

#### **DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK**

## **What's Bothering Rashi**

**T**his week we have a double parsha Torah reading, Matot-Masay, the last parshiyot in the Book of Numbers. Matot speaks of the laws of vows, the war with Midian, the story of the two tribes Reuben and Gad and their request to take land in Trans-Jordan. Masay speaks of the journeys in the wilderness, the inheritance of the tribes in the Land of Israel, and the cities of refuge.

Matot begins with the topic of vows. We learn the laws of a woman who makes a vow and either her father (if unmarried) or her husband annul it. Rashi focuses on intentions versus actions. "But if her father disallowed her on the day of his hearing, all her vows or prohibitions which she forbade on herself shall not stand; and Hashem will forgive her, for her father had disallowed her." (Numbers 30:6)

"And Hashem will forgive her"-RASHI: "To what case is the Scripture referring? To a woman who took the 'Nazirite' vow. Her husband (some change this to 'her father' because these verses refer to a father's nullifying his daughter's vow, not a husband nullifying his wife's vow. In our analysis we will refer to the father) heard and nullified it, but she was unaware of this. She then violated her vow by drinking wine and defiling herself by contact with a corpse. She is in need of forgiveness even though it was nullified. Now if those who[se vows] have been nullified require forgiveness, certainly those who[se vows] have not been nullified."

What would you ask about this comment?

A Question: Rashi feels the need to explain the particular circumstances to which these words are referring. Why? What is not clear? Hint: Rashi's statement, "She is in need of forgiveness even though it was nullified," implies a question. What question?

An Answer: Our verse speaks of a situation where a young woman makes a vow but her father immediately nullifies it. Then it says that the woman is forgiven. "Forgiven for what?" we would ask. If her father nullified her vow, even if she acts contrary to the vow, she has not "violated" anything, since the vow was legitimately annulled. In such a case, what need is there for G-d's forgiveness? This is the question that Rashi is dealing with. How does his explanation help matters? An Answer: Granted the woman's father nullified her vow, but she was not aware of that. She

thought her vow was still valid. So we have a situation where she thought that the vow was valid, but nevertheless she went ahead and violated it by drinking wine. This is an unusual case, where a person intended to commit a sinful act, yet, in fact, did not. Rashi tells us that even though formally and legally she has not sinned, her sinful intention is nevertheless in need of Divine forgiveness.

This is an important message. Judaism has always placed its emphasis on man's actions more than on his intentions or beliefs. Granted that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) makes a point of the importance of intentions by saying, "G-d desires the heart," meaning that He wants our right intentions. Nevertheless, we know, for example, that giving charity, even for selfish motives, is better than not giving. In such a case, intentions are secondary to actions. The Israelites' declaration at Mt. Sinai "We will do and we will hear (i.e. understand)" (Exodus 24:7), which gave precedence to action over intention-is a central credo of the religious Jew. Nevertheless, intentions are not irrelevant. They are the spurs to action. "The heart desires and body implements" for right or for wrong. A person who eats a piece of kosher meat though he thinks it is not kosher, has not transgressed a law for which he can be punished. Yet Rashi's comment teaches us that G-d does hold him accountable. He must ask forgiveness for his sinful intention.

Rashi used a kal v'chomer, a logical induction: If one need ask forgiveness for a permissible act, but for which one had a sinful intention, ( the woman who "violated" a vow that had already been annulled) then we can logically assume that he must certainly ask forgiveness for actually committing a sinful act.

A Question: Is this not all too obvious? Doing a transgression is obviously worse than not doing one! Why the need for Rashi to even mention it. Anyone could have made the same deduction.

Rashi's source is the Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin 81b) where it says: "When Rabbi Akiva would read this verse he would cry and say: 'If a person intended to take a piece of pork and by mistake took a piece of [kosher] veal, he is in need of atonement and forgiveness, how much more so, the person who intended to take a piece of pork and in actuality did take a piece of pork!'"

It is clear that Rabbi Akiva's reaction was an emotional one (he cried), not merely a logically deduced one. He was shaken by the awesome responsibility of keeping G-d's commandments and the dire consequences for the one who transgresses them, even in mind only. His was a mussar reflection. So, asking why such a deduction is necessary, since it is logical, misses the point. The point was not a deduction, analytically arrived at, but an awesome existential awareness. This also may be Rashi's intention. © 2006 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org