

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**D**uring the three weeks between 17 Tammuz and Tisha b'Av, as we recall the destruction of the Temples, we read three of the most searing passages in the prophetic literature, the first two from the opening of the book of Jeremiah, the third, next week, from the first chapter of Isaiah.

At perhaps no other time of the year are we so acutely aware of the enduring force of ancient Israel's great visionaries. The prophets had no power. They were not kings or members of the royal court. They were (usually) not priests or members of the religious establishment. They held no office. They were not elected. Often they were deeply unpopular, none more so than the author of this week's haftarah, Jeremiah, who was arrested, flogged, abused, put on trial and only narrowly escaped with his life. Only rarely were the prophets heeded in their lifetimes: the one clear exception was Jonah, and he spoke to non-Jews, the citizens of Nineveh. Yet their words were recorded for posterity and became a major feature of Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. They were the world's first social critics and their message continues through the centuries. As Kierkegaard almost said: when a king dies, his power ends; when a prophet dies his influence begins.[1]

What was distinctive about the prophet was not that he foretold the future. The ancient world was full of such people: soothsayers, oracles, readers of runes, shamans and other diviners, each of whom claimed inside track with the forces that govern fate and "shape our ends, rough-hew them how we will." Judaism has no time for such people. The Torah bans one "who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead" (Deut. 18:10-11). It disbelieves such practices because it believes in human freedom. The future is not pre-scripted. It depends on us and the choices we make. If a prediction comes true it has succeeded; if a prophecy comes true it has failed. The prophet tells of the future that will happen if we do not heed the danger and mend

our ways. He (or she – there were seven biblical prophetesses) does not predict; he or she warns.

Nor was the prophet distinctive in blessing or cursing the people. That was Bilaam's gift, not Isaiah's or Jeremiah's. In Judaism, blessing comes through priests not prophets.

Several things made the prophets unique. The first was his or her sense of history. The prophets were the first people to see God in history. We tend to take our sense of time for granted. Time happens. Time flows. As the saying goes, time is God's way of keeping everything from happening at once. But actually there are several ways of relating to time and different civilisations have perceived it differently.

There is cyclical time: time as the slow turning of the seasons, or the cycle of birth, growth, decline and death. Cyclical time is time as it occurs in nature. Some trees have long lives; most fruit flies have short ones; but all that lives, dies. The species endures, individual members do not. Kohelet contains the most famous expression of cyclical time in Judaism: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course ... What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

Then there is linear time: time as an inexorable sequence of cause and effect. The French astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace gave this idea its most famous expression in 1814 when he said that if you "know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed," together with all the laws of physics and chemistry, then "nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present" before your eyes. Karl Marx applied this idea to society and history. It is known as historical inevitability, and when transferred to the affairs of humankind it amounts to a massive denial of personal freedom.

Finally there is time as a mere sequence of events with no underlying plot or theme. This leads to the kind of historical writing pioneered by the scholars of ancient Greece, Herodotus and Thucydides.

Each of these has its place, the first in biology, the second in physics, the third in secular history, but none was time as the prophets understood it. The prophets saw time as the arena in which the great drama between God and humanity was played out,

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Rachel Mintz  
Rachel Menucha bas Tzivia, z"l  
by Debra Markowitz and David Kaplan

especially in the history of Israel. If Israel was faithful to its mission, its covenant, then it would flourish. If it was unfaithful it would fail. It would suffer defeat and exile. That is what Jeremiah never tired of telling his contemporaries.

The second prophetic insight was the unbreakable connection between monotheism and morality. Somehow the prophets sensed – it is implicit in all their words, though they do not explain it explicitly – that idolatry was not just false. It was also corrupting. It saw the universe as a multiplicity of powers that often clashed. The battle went to the strong. Might defeated right. The fittest survived while the weak perished. Nietzsche believed this, as did the social Darwinists.

The prophets opposed this with all their force. For them the power of God was secondary; what mattered was the righteousness of God. Precisely because God loved and had redeemed Israel, Israel owed Him loyalty as their sole ultimate sovereign, and if they were unfaithful to God they would also be unfaithful to their fellow humans. They would lie, rob, cheat: Jeremiah doubts whether there was one honest person in the whole of Jerusalem (Jer. 5:1). They would become sexually adulterous and promiscuous: “I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes. They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man’s wife” (Jer. 5:7-8).

Their third great insight was the primacy of ethics over politics. The prophets have surprisingly little to say about politics. Yes, Samuel was wary of monarchy but we find almost nothing in Isaiah or Jeremiah about the way Israel/Judah should be governed. Instead we hear a constant insistence that the strength of a nation – certainly of Israel/Judah – is not military or demographic but moral and spiritual. If the people keep faith with God and one another, no force on earth can defeat them. If they do not, no force can save them. As Jeremiah says in this week’s haftarah, they will discover too late that their false gods offered false comfort:

They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, ‘Come and save us!’ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah. (Jer. 2:27-28)

Jeremiah, the most passionate and tormented of all the prophets, has gone down in history as the prophet of doom. Yet this is unfair. He was also supremely a prophet of hope. He is the man who said that the people of Israel will be as eternal as the sun, moon and stars (Jer. 31). He is the man who, while the Babylonians were laying siege to Jerusalem, bought a field as a public gesture of faith that Jews would return

from exile: “For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (Jer. 32).

Jeremiah’s feelings of doom and hope were not in conflict: there were two sides of the same coin. The God who sentenced His people to exile would be the God who brought them back, for though His people might forsake Him, He would never forsake them. Jeremiah may have lost faith in people; he never lost faith in God.

Prophecy ceased in Israel with Haggai, Zekharia and Malachi in the Second Temple era. But the prophetic truths have not ceased to be true. Only by being faithful to God do people stay faithful to one another. Only by being open to a power greater than themselves do people become greater than themselves. Only by understanding the deep forces that shape history can a people defeat the ravages of history. It took a long time for biblical Israel to learn these truths, and a very long time indeed before they returned to their land, re-entering the arena of history. We must never forget them again. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“These are the journeys of the children of Israel... these are the starting points towards their [destination] journeys... and these are their [destination] journeys toward their starting points.” (Numbers 33:1–2) Undoubtedly the Exodus from Egypt stands unparalleled as the central event of our nation’s collective consciousness, the very epicenter of our history, an event we invoke daily in our recitation of the Shema, on the Sabbath, festivals, and after each and every meal. Still, when we consider the painstaking detail that our portion of Masei devotes to recording all forty-two stops along the way during the forty-year sojourn, we’re somewhat taken aback at what seems to be a largely inconsequential travelogue.

Starting with verse 5 in chapter thirty-three of the book of Bemidbar, and continuing until verse 49, the Torah lists all of the forty-two locations, and since each location is not only a destination to encamp but also a location to journey away from each place-name is mentioned twice. So for forty-four verses the Torah challenges us with its geographical accuracy, reminding us to what length the Torah goes to in order to name names and construct maps – not only in time, which is what the genealogies in Genesis do, but also in space, as we find in our portion.

But forty-two place names must be a record; even if we count Adam to Noach, and Noach to Abraham, and Abraham to Moses, we’re still a far cry from forty-two generations. Why such details now?

Different commentators take different approaches to this question, from Sforno's argument – that the plethora of locations is a way of highlighting the merit of the Jewish people, who, in the lovingkindness of youth, followed after God in the desert, a land not sown – to the Sfat Emet (Masei 5753) who speaks of each location in the desert as a potential for tikkun olam, transforming the barrenness of the wilderness into a singing garden by means of divine words. But I would like to concentrate on the commentary of Nahmanides. Apparently, he is not only troubled by the delineation of the forty-two stages, but also by the additional declaration in the verse that “Moses inscribed...their destination journeys towards their starting points [of origin]” (Numbers 33:2). How may we understand the significance of such detailed travel stations and this very strange formation?

In approaching the issue, Nahmanides first quotes Rashi's comment (who cites the words of Rabbi Moshe the Preacher) that Moses “set his mind to write down the journeying. It was his intention thereby to inform [future generations] of the loving kindness of God”; after all, He protected His nation throughout their manifold travels and way stations, despite their kvetching complaints.

After quoting Rashi, he then turns to Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed, iii:50), who understands the necessity of detail as a means of corroborating the historical truth of the narrative. Moreover, later generations might think “that they sojourned in a desert that was near to cultivated land, and in which man can [easily] live...places in which it

was possible to till and to reap or to feed on plants that were to be found there...or that it was natural for the manna to always come down in those places, or that there were wells of water in those places....” Hence the enumeration of all these way-stations lacking the amenities delineated above is in order to emphasize the extent of the miracle of Israeli subsistence under such difficult physical conditions.

After quoting these views, Nahmanides concludes with a most intriguing and esoteric comment: “Thus the writing down the journeying was a commandment of God, either for reasons mentioned above, or for a purpose the secret of which has not been revealed to us.”

By speaking of “secrets” Nahmanides seems to be telling us – if not beseeching us – to probe further. And I would submit that the secret may be the secret of the Jewish survival. After all, the concept of ma'ase avot siman lebanim (the actions of the fathers are a sign of what will happen to the children) is well known to the sages, and is one of the guiding principles of Nahmanides' biblical commentary.

It may very well be that the interior, hidden message of this text is the fact that we are being given an outline as well as an assurance of what we should

expect over the course of Jewish history. From the time of the exile after the destruction of the Temple, the “goings-forth” of the Jewish people – until our present arrival in the Land of Israel – would certainly add up to at least forty-two distinct stages: Judea, Babylon, Persia, Rome, Europe, North Africa, and the New World. And each particular Diaspora was important in its own right, made its own unique contribution to the text (Oral Law) and texture (customs) of our Jewish civilization, of the kaleidoscope which is the Jewish historical experience; and each is worthy of being recorded and remembered. Are not the Holocaust memorial books, these heroic remains of survivors trying to preserve what little that can be preserved of lost, destroyed worlds, examples of our sense that God commanded us to “write” things down – to remember?!

Perhaps the Jews didn't invent history, but they certainly understood that more important than those hieroglyphics which exalt and praise the rulers in their battles are the places of the Jewish wanderings, the content of the Jewish lifestyle, and the miracle of Jewish survival. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at [bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar](http://bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar). © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

## **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## **Wein Online**

**T**he reading of the book of Bamidbar concludes this week with the parshiyot of Matot and Masei. Jews are inveterate travelers. The long exile that we have suffered has of necessity forced us to travel a great deal. There is almost no place in the world that we have not visited, settled and eventually moved from to a different location. Thus the recording of all of the travels and way stations that the Jews experienced in their years in the Sinai desert is a small prophecy as to the future historical experiences of Jews over millennia of wandering.

The world of our enemies has always accused Jews of being “rootless.” But that is untrue since we have always been rooted in the Land of Israel, consciously or subconsciously, during our entire history as a people. It is in the Exile that we are rootless, never certain of the shifting ground that lies under our weary feet. Thus we are always a restless people filled with curiosity over locations that we have not as yet seen and wonders that we have as not as yet experienced.

The history of the Exile is that Jews arrive at a new destination, settle there, help develop that country or part of the world, begin to feel at home there and attempt to assimilate into the majority culture and society. Suddenly all of this collapses. A mighty and unforeseen wind uproots them after centuries of living

there and they move on to new shores.

There are no more Jews in numbers sufficient to speak of in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, etc. This was the Jewish heartland for centuries. But now we have moved on again to other shores.

All of the travels and way stations described in this week's parsha had only one ultimate goal and destination in mind – entry into the Land of Israel and settlement there. The Israel deniers in our midst, religious and secular, leftists and rightists, academics and almost illiterate (certainly in Jewish history) all share a common delusion – that the home of Jews is somehow not necessarily, and certainly not now in the present, in the Land of Israel.

We are taught that the Jews stayed at the oasis of Kadesh in the desert for thirty eight of their forty year sojourn in the Sinai desert. They became accustomed to living there and felt comfortable there. The Land of Israel was a far off dream and goal of theirs but not an immediate imperative. But the Lord pushed them out of the desert to fight wars that they probably would have wished to avoid and to settle a land, harsh in character but with the potential of being one of milk and honey.

Every way station and desert oasis is recorded for us in this week's parsha in order to remind us that these places exist only in our past, but that our present and future lie only in the Land of Israel. The lessons of this parsha are as valid to us today in our Jewish world as they were to our ancestors long ago at Kadesh. © 2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Galut

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**S**omeone who killed another person unintentionally had to flee to a city of refuge (*ir miklat*) and stay there until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*. It is one of the 613 commandments for the rabbinical court to sentence the accidental killer to this exile.

The logic of this punishment is based on the assumption that it serves as atonement for the killer. Some *Rishonim* write that exile itself does not atone. Rather, atonement comes about only with the subsequent death of the *Kohen Gadol*.

When one person killed another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, he fled to a city of refuge. A court of twenty-three rabbis then summoned him to be tried. If he was found innocent (not responsible for the death), he was let go. If he was found guilty of murder, he was given the death penalty. If he was found unintentionally responsible for the death, he was sentenced to exile and sent back to the city of refuge.

The guilty party was escorted back to the city of refuge by two Torah scholars, to ensure that the relatives of the deceased did not kill him while he was in transit. Once exiled, the unintentional killer could not leave the city of refuge for any reason – neither to do a mitzva nor to testify. Even if he could have been of service to the nation, he did not leave. He did not leave to save people or property, whether from non-Jews, floods, fire, or landslides. If he did venture out, he was likely to be killed by avenging relatives.

As stated earlier, the death of the *Kohen Gadol* allowed him to return home. For this reason, the mother of the *Kohen Gadol* would provide food and clothes for the exiled killers, as she did not want them to pray for the death of her son.

If a killer died and was buried in a city of refuge, and subsequently the *Kohen Gadol* died, the killer's body could be reinterred in his home city.

Once the person exiled was free to go home after the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, he was like any other person. His time in exile had earned him atonement. If an avenging family member then decided to kill him, the avenger was liable to death (as he would have been for any intentional murder).

However, if and when the killer returned to his home town, according to Jewish law he was not allowed to return to his former position (if he had been a community leader). A horrible thing (the unintentional accidental death) had happened through him, and it could not be ignored.

Today, the sentence of exile is not in effect, as we have no cities of refuge. Furthermore, rabbinic courts no longer try capital cases, so neither exile nor the death penalty can be carried out. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

#### RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

## Cross-Currents

**“E**ven Ataros and Divon" is the extent of the Gemara's directive about the halachah (duly codified in the Shulchan Aruch) that Jewish men recite shnayim mikra vi'echad targum -- each pasuk of the week's Torah portion twice and its Targum Onkelos rendering once (Berachos 8b).

The "even," of course, refers to the fact that Ataros and Divon, as names of places, are proper nouns and hence no different in targum than in mikra. All the same, Rav Huna bar Yehuda in the name of Rabbi Ami says, they, too, must be recited a third time.

Although Rashi explains that the places in that pasuk are rendered the same in Targum Onkelos, our Chumashim do indeed have different renderings of those names (with the exception of the final one, Be'on). As do the Targum Yonason ben Uziel and the Targum Yerushalmi, with variations.

What's more, there are dozens of names of places and people throughout the Torah that are

rendered the same in targum as in mikra. Why would the Gemara seize particularly upon Ataros and Divon (especially since they do in fact have targum)? And there are other psukim in the Torah that, like Ataros and Divon, consist entirely of proper nouns.

Tosfos (ibid) say that the Gemara's intention is to direct us to use the alternate targumim even though there is no non-repetitive Onkelos one. (And, presumably, publishers, somewhat misleadingly, included one of those targumim in our editions of Targum Onkelos itself.)

Interesting, though, is the fact that the targum renderings of the names the Gemara mentions, Ataros and Divon, the ones we have in our Chumashim, whether they are Onkelos' or not, are machlela and malbeshta, words whose roots seem to mean "inclusion" and "cloaked."

I wonder if those renderings may be meant to signify that the Torah includes much more in its words than their simple meanings; and that deeper meanings are cloaked in its every word. And, thus, that repeating even a proper noun a third time is indicated. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## Choosing an Army

**A**s the B'nei Yisrael were completing their journey to the Holy Land, Hashem spoke to Moshe with a special command or the people: "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Take vengeance for the B'nei Yisrael from the Midianites; afterward you will be brought in unto your people (die).' Moshe spoke to the people, saying, 'Arm men from among yourselves for the army that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midian. A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Yisrael shall you send to the army.' So, there were delivered from the thousands of the B'nei Yisrael, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for the army. Moshe sent them – a thousand for each tribe for the army – them and Pinchas the son of Elazar the Kohen, to the army, and the sacred vessels and the trumpets for sounding under his authority. They massed against Midian, as Hashem had commanded Moshe, and they killed every male. They killed the Kings of Midian along with their slain ones: Evi, and Rekem, and Tzur, and Chur, and Reva, five Kings of Midian, and Bilaam the son of B'or they killed with the sword. The B'nei Yisrael took captive the women of Midian and their young children; and all their animals and all their livestock and all their wealth they took as spoils."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the major threat to the B'nei Yisrael from the nation of Midian stemmed from the seductive powers of the women of Midian. We saw this at the end of the parasha from two weeks ago (Balak), when the leaders of Midian sent their daughters to seduce the B'nei

Yisrael, and were successful against even the heads of the tribe of Shimon. "It had been declared that breaking the Midianite might was a necessity for ensuring the moral and spiritual integrity of the B'nei Yisrael as the Midianites were continuing to try their arts of seduction on Israel." That is also why, upon the return of the fighters, Moshe reprimanded them for allowing the women to live. "Moshe said to them, 'Did you let every female live? See now, they were the ones who caused the B'nei Yisrael, by the word of Bilaam, to commit a trespass against Hashem regarding the matter of Peor; and the plague occurred in the assembly of Hashem.'"

The language of the Torah appears to be unusual concerning the fighting force that was to be sent to battle against Midian. Moshe told the people, "A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Yisrael shall you send to the army. So, there were delivered from the thousands of the B'nei Yisrael, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for the army. Moshe sent them – a thousand for each tribe for the army – them and Pinchas the son of Elazar the Kohen, to the army, and the sacred vessels and the trumpets for sounding under his authority." The repetition of the words, "a thousand from a tribe" and later, "Moshe sent them – a thousand for each tribe for the army," is an indication that there is an additional message being conveyed by the Torah. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that there were really three thousand righteous men assigned from each tribe: (1) a thousand to fight, (2) a thousand to prepare and guard the weapons and act as reinforcements should they be needed, and (3) a thousand to pray to Hashem for success and for the lives of those in battle. This reflected the same composition of the army and support staff at the battle against Amalek when the elders ascended on the mountain to pray.

The Ramban explains that Moshe did not send the entire fighting force on purpose, "although the Midianites were a large people, and their cities were fortified, and very large. The reason for this is that those who had sinned with the (Midianite) women were many, and they were not fit to execute the vengeance of the Eternal, therefore they chose those men who were known amongst their tribes as righteous men." This may be the reason that HaRav Sorotzkin states that the repetition of the thousand men per tribe comes to include the tribe of Shimon. Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon at the time of this great sin, was seduced by a princess of the Midianites, as were many men within his tribe. It is possible, therefore, that Moshe would have excluded the tribe of Shimon since they might not have been able to qualify as righteous enough to carry out Hashem's vengeance. HaRav Sorotzkin uses this to prove that, in spite of losing twenty-four thousand men in the plague that followed the seduction, the tribe of Shimon was still capable of

finding three thousand righteous men who neither sinned physically nor in their hearts.

Rashi chose a different approach to the repetition of the "thousand from a tribe" and the additional phrase "for all the tribes of Yisrael." In most wars fought by the B'nei Yisrael, the tribe of Levi, which also contained the Kohanim, was excluded. They were to be involved in the Temple. When the tribe of Levi was excluded, the tribe of Yosef was divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, as we have also seen in the division of inherited land. Here, however, Rashi says that the tribe of Levi was included (though not the Kohanim except for Pinchas). One might have thought to exclude Levi because the tribe of Levi would not inherit a portion of the Land. But this war was not a war of conquering land but of vengeance against Midian. One might have thought to exclude the tribe of Levi because Moshe's Father-in-Law was described as a Priest of Midian, and Moshe would not want his own tribe to kill members of his Father-in-Law's family. Here, the command was to kill all the men of Midian. Rashi included the tribe of Levi to indicate that Moshe was willing to avenge Hashem even at the expense of his own family.

The concept of prayer as part of the "fighting force" may be unique to the Army of the B'nei Yisrael. It is clear to Yisrael that no battle is won without the guidance and protection of Hashem. Hashem values our prayers and our study of Torah. What we must keep in mind is that those who are fighting can only be protected by the prayer and Torah study of the truly righteous. Not everyone who devotes time for prayer or Torah study fits that unique quality. The righteous constitute a small minority within this select group. The battle within our society today is dependent on the assessment of those who alone should be chosen for this responsibility.

Choosing an army among fighting age men is not a simple task. Choosing those for the important task of prayer and Torah study is just as daunting. May we search our hearts to find the proper solution. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

**RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## Perceptions

One of the most divisive issues today in Israel politics is the drafting of yeshiva students into the Israeli army. It is not a new issue at all, being hotly debated for decades now. Those pushing for the draft have their reasons, and those against it have theirs, without any real common ground between them.

The Torah is not against yeshiva students going into the army. That is clear from this week's parsha, in which Moshe is told by God Himself to "draft" one thousand soldiers from each of the twelve tribes for the revenge war against the people of Midian. Since every male who could learn Torah learned it at that

time, we can assume that they had to leave their learning for this milchemes mitzvah.

And that is the halacha. Any war that is considered to be a mitzvah, like wiping out the Canaanites when we first arrived at the land, or eradicating Amalek later on in Shaul HaMelech's time requires everyone to "enlist." An existential war, like Israel fought in 1973, was probably such a war as well. But short of that, the Torah limits who can fight and who can't.

What's at stake? Torah. Torah is the lifeline for the Jewish People and, according to the Gemora, the entire world (Shabbos 88a). If people don't learn Torah, it gets forgotten. If it gets forgotten, Creation ceases to justify its existence and null and void return.

That is not something to be taken lightly at all, although it is by many people in power in Israel today who don't even believe Torah was from God at Mt. Sinai. On the contrary, from their perspective, the faster Torah would be forgotten by the Jewish people the better off they would be...we'd all be. They certainly do not credit Torah learning with the miraculous survival of the State of Israel against all odds generation after generation.

These anti-Torah Jews certainly don't attribute their enemies' relentless attacks to their relentless attacks on the Torah world. How can they if they don't believe in Divine Providence and the value of Torah to God? There can be no common ground if one side does not appreciate the importance of what is at stake.

Another problem is that the IDF is designed to be a spiritual melting pot. It aims to make all citizens loyal to the well-being of the State by making it top priority in their lives. It's what gives living and dying for the state meaningful, at least for those who used are to live only for themselves.

The "State" in this week's parsha required the same kind of loyalty, but to God. It was also a melting pot of sorts, causing the soldiers to leave behind their personal concerns for the concerns of the greater good which, again, was God. How can the fate of the Torah world, and the world in general, be left in the hands of anyone but God and the God-fearing Torah leaders in each generation charged with doing His will.

I once asked someone for whom all of this was an issue, "What if Torah is from God, and the world does depend upon the learning of Torah to remain safe?"

He thought about it and said, "If we knew that Torah was in fact from God, we'd have to do everything in our power to protect it...even live by it."

"So," I said to him, "we're in agreement. You agree that if Torah is from God, we have to protect it, and protect those protecting it."

"Yes," he said.

"Then the issue is not really whether we should empty out the yeshiva's to fill up army barracks. If the

Torah says yes, then you have to. If the Torah says no, they you can't. The real issue here is, is Torah from God...and that," I told him, is an entirely different discussion for which we have seminars to answer that question."

Then, smiling at him I casually said, "So, do you want to go to one?"

He smiled back and said, "Well, actually, no."

I believe Torah is from God and it directs my life. He didn't believe it did, and that guided his life. But admitting that if it was from God, the army issue would not be an issue at all but a shaila for those who know it best, which he was not, was enough common ground to end the discussion...peacefully.

That's why, in the words of one Gadol from the recent past, the best we can do with those who disregard the importance of Torah leaning while pushing to limit or end it, is to buy time. Their inability to understand the centrality of Torah learning to the Jewish people and our inability to convince them otherwise means an ongoing battle until Moshiach comes.

In the meantime, all we can is hang on for dear life, because the amount of people leaving Torah is greater than those returning to it. That's a crisis, maybe one that pushes off Moshiach, maybe one that brings him closer. In the meantime, it helps to understand the issues and proponents, if only to make it tomorrow and the next stage of the Messianic Process. © 2025 Rabbi P. Winston and [torah.org](http://torah.org)

## **YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

# **Virtual Beit Medrash**

SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA

HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL

*Summarized by Ari Mermelstein*

**T**his week's parasha opens with a discussion of nedarim (vows), addressing its words to the heads of the tribes. In order to understand why this section was designated for the heads of the tribes, we must examine the unique formulation with which the Torah prefaces the details of the law (30:7): "This is the thing which the Lord has commanded." In the wake of the tragedy at Ba'al Pe'or, the heads of the tribes apparently recommended that Moshe take steps to prevent such an event from recurring. Apparently, they felt that abstinence through self-accepted vows sanctioned by Halakha could serve as the means towards this end, and Moshe in the beginning of this week's parasha responded to this request. "This is the thing which the Lord has commanded" represents the initiation of a category of voluntary vows focused on abstinence, to be included under the rubric of Halakha. The fact that Halakha recognizes vows as a legitimate halakhic norm requires our closer attention.

The Rambam (Hilkhos Nedarim 13:23) writes, "He who takes vows... to correct his ways... is

praiseworthy." Nonetheless, in the next halakha he discourages the acceptance of vows on a regular basis, and subsequently (13:25) sharpens this point in saying that "He who takes vows is tantamount to having built a 'bama'" (a sacrificial altar outside the Temple, upon which it is forbidden to offer sacrifices). What is the meaning of this comparison? A bama represents a person's desire to depart from the standard route of worship in the Temple in order to establish his personal, alternate route. Likewise, self-imposed prohibitions taken on through vows also represent a retreat from the normal world of mitzvot; the person adopts an additional track through which to worship God. Rather than remaining content with the mitzvot that God gave, the person chooses the Torah-sanctioned track of vows, thereby isolating himself from the standard world of avodat Hashem (divine service).

Taken at face value, this scenario does not seem to be negative; on the contrary, the person is motivated by the desire to accept upon himself more obligations. However, one must know where he stands in his avodat Hashem. There is no reason to desert the multitude of commandments which we are bound to fulfill in search of more. Who are you to think that you have exhausted the 613 mitzvot which are the most basic level of observance?

This issue of nedarim parallels a phenomenon which is widespread throughout the contemporary world of Jewish observance. Often, Orthodox Jews dismiss what the Halakha requires of them as being undignified, and opt for "chumrot," or a stricter adherence to the laws. I strongly object to this ubiquitous practice -- it must rather remain the province of rare individuals of great spiritual attainment. Often, by taking on a stricter level of observance which exceeds what God requires of us, we lose the spiritual component in our worship and instead become overly ritualistic. Instead, we should recognize who we are, and not deem ourselves above the basic level of observance.

There was a time when one could look up to the gedolim, such as the Chazon Ish and Rav Chaim Brisker, and admire their strict observance of the law, marvel at the chumrot which they took upon themselves. However, chumrot are no longer relegated to the realm of the gedolim; every simple Jew thinks it his task in life to live as the gedolim do.

I once rode in a car with a student in the Yeshiva who is now an important rabbi. I turned to him and remarked: "I would wager that you wear an especially large garment on which to place the tzitzit." "Rebbe," he responded, "how did you know?" I answered, "Since the Mishna Berura writes that a God-fearing person should don a larger garment, I assume that you see fit to heed his words. I, on the other hand, do not fancy myself to be in that exclusive category, and therefore am satisfied wearing a smaller garment."



Obviously, I am not suggesting that there is no room for creativity in our worship. However, we must recognize the need to properly channel this creativity. There is ample room within the mitzvot, on their basic level, for each person to leave his mark. Although wearing tefillin has a uniform procedure in a formal sense, as far as spiritual content is concerned, no two people don their tefillin in the same way.

So, to summarize, we must exercise a dual caution with regard to adopting chumrot. 1. We must honestly assess our spiritual level and avoid overreaching ourselves and adopting practices which are not consonant with our level. 2. We must try to find our own personal expression within the standard level of mitzva observance required by the Torah. In order for our own creativity to come through, we must do not have to adopt a personal brand of Judaism expressing our unique qualities. *(Originally delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Matot-Mas'ei 5757.)*

#### **RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

### **Migdal Ohr**

“**A**nd Moshe sent them, a thousand per tribe for the army, them and Pinchas, son of Elazar the Kohain, for the army...” (Bamidbar 31:6) Moshe commanded each tribe to muster a thousand soldiers to wage a battle to take revenge on the Midianites who’d led the Jews into sin, and brought about a plague which killed 24,000 people. With these men, Moshe sent Pinchas, sending him into battle along with the representatives from each tribe.

Why did Elazar not accompany the soldiers? And if it was Pinchas, why was he singled out in being named the one to accompany the soldiers into battle against Midian? Rashi tells us three answers.

First of all, we have a principle that when one starts a mitzvah, he should go ahead and finish it. Since Pinchas cast the first stone, as it were, against Kozbi, the Midianite princess who lured the prince of Shimon into sin, he would be the one to finish the job.

Then Rashi says that Pinchas was also sent in order to take revenge for his grandfather Yosef (on his mother’s side) who was sold into slavery in Egypt by the Midianites. Finally, Rashi says that Pinchas went because he was the anointed “war Kohain,” who would accompany soldiers into battle and give them pep talks and raise their spirits.

Why does Rashi have to come up with so many reasons? Why can’t he just choose one and stick to it? The Sifsei Chachomim says the first reason, about having begun the war against Midian was insufficient, as he had actually intended to kill Zimri, and the Midianite Kozbi was an extension of that. Therefore, Rashi included the reason of Yosef.

However, just because the Midianites sold Yosef would not be enough of a reason, because that was good for him, as Yosef became king! Furthermore,

that was so far in the past that any enmity was long forgotten. That’s why the other reason was needed.

Finally, Rashi adds that Pinchas was the anointed war Kohain. However, this fact would not be noteworthy enough on its own to necessitate mention of Pinchas by name. That is why, explains the Sifsei Chachomim, Rashi had to offer all these reasons why Pinchas was the one chosen to accompany the army in the fight against the Midianites.

One further idea can be inferred by Moshe’s choice of language when he commanded that an army be formed. Hashem had told Moshe to avenge Klal Yisrael’s honor, but Moshe told them they were defending Hashem’s honor. By using that language, and appointing Pinchas as the war Kohain, Moshe was underscoring that what Pinchas did to Zimri was based on his desire to end the desecration of Hashem’s name and honor.

So many things went into the decision that Pinchas be sent, and we only see a bit of the puzzle from the way Rashi explains it. This is just one instance, but Hashem is constantly putting together many different moving parts in our lives for multiple reasons. We cannot fathom the magnitude of calculations Hashem utilizes, and we certainly cannot begin to question the things that occur in the world and our lives, because we don’t see the big picture and all the things that have to fall into place just as they should.

*On April 15, 1912, the RMS Titanic sank in the North Atlantic. Supposed to be “unsinkable,” there weren’t enough life boats and over 1500 people died in the frigid waters. A man who heard the news of the tragedy prayed to G-d asking how He could let such a thing happen.*

*“Al-mighty G-d,” the man prayed. “You are all-powerful. You control the sea and the dry land, the heavens and the earth. Why did you let this tragedy occur? How is it that you did not stop the Titanic from sinking, and allowed all those people to perish?”*

*“Are you kidding?!” G-d replied. “Do you have any idea what I had to do to get all those people on one boat?!” © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

