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Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger
Living the Longing for Redemption

It was an immensely successful appeal! Not only were the daughters of Tzlofchod awarded all the land that they had requested, and not only did they merit to have the halachik presentation revisited and clarified, but their name would forever be associated with being passionate lovers of Israel. Moreover, Rashi quotes that our rabbis praise them as emblematic of an entire generation of women, whose avid love of Israel did not buckle under the pressure created by the sin of the spies.

Nevertheless, one does not have to be an ardent cynic to view the women's request as entirely self-serving and materialistically wise, well planned and well planted. True, they submit their plea out of concern for the enduring legacy of their father, but even that does not seem to spell fervent Zionism. Why, then, is the request of these women viewed so benevolently and why is it held up on a pedestal for all time?

Rav Moshe Shternbuch, one of the leading rabbonim of Yerushalayim, explains (in his sefer Ta'am Voda'as) that Rashi and the rabbis of the medrash heard a sense of urgency in the voices of these women. Clearly, there would still be time in the desert and there would be Israeli courts assigned to distribution and allocation of the land. But the daughters of Tzlofchod wanted

to discuss it now, immediately after Moshe floated the land distribution system. It is this excitement, which was born of a sense of immanence, which reveals their love for the land. To these women, settling the land was real and well within grasp because they lived their lives connected to the land and defined by their faith in living redeemed within its borders.

Perhaps Rav Shternbuch read the parsha with some disappointment. Moshe had just described the detailed procedure of entry and inheritance. There could have been many a question. Where was the excitement of the 40 years coming to an end? Where was the anticipation of Hashem revealing Himself through miracles, the likes of which we would know only in the Beis Hamikdash? How many Jews stayed up all night as Jews would do centuries later when their boats brought them within sight of Israel? Yet all we read about is the five daughters of Tzlofchod who felt so connected, to whom entry was so real, that there was no time but now to approach their leadership and then ultimately take their question all the way to the top.

Their love for Israel would become the measure of our connection to Israel and to redemption. As the saintly Chafetz Chaim wrote just over a century ago that the better we can answer the question, "tzipsoh l'y'shua - have you pined for redemption?", i.e. the greater our yearning is for the redemption, the sooner the redemption will come.

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OU Torah
Rabbi Sacks on Parsha
Moses' Disappointment
Britain's Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
7/28/2016 / 22 Tammuz 5776

Hidden beneath the surface of parshat Pinchas the sages uncovered a story of great poignancy. Moses, having seen his sister and brother die, knew that his own time on earth was coming to a close. He prayed to God to appoint a successor: "May the Lord, God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."

There is, though, an obvious question. Why does this episode appear here? It should surely have been positioned seven chapters earlier, either at the point at which God told Moses and Aaron that they would die without entering the land, or shortly thereafter when we read of the death of Aaron.

The sages sensed two clues to the story beneath the story. The first is that it appears immediately after the episode in which the daughters of Tzelophehad sought and were granted their father's share in the land. It was this that triggered Moses' request. A Midrash explains:

What was Moses' reason for making this request after declaring the order of inheritance? Just this, that when the daughters of Tzelophehad inherited from their father, Moses reasoned: the time is right for me to make my own request. If daughters inherit, it is surely right that my sons should inherit my glory.

The second clue lies in God's words to Moses immediately before he made the request for the appointment of a successor:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go up this mountain of Abarim and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was . . ."

The italicised words are seemingly redundant. God was telling Moses he would soon die. Why did He need to add, "as your brother Aaron"? On this the Midrash says: this teaches us that Moses wanted to die the way Aaron did. The Ktav Sofer explains: Aaron had the privilege of knowing that his children would follow in his footsteps. Elazar, his son, was appointed as High Priest in his lifetime. To this day cohanim are direct descendants of Aaron. Moses likewise longed to see one of his sons, Gershom or Eliezer, take his place as leader of the people. It was not to be. That is the story beneath the story.

It had an aftermath. In the book of Judges we read of a man named Micah who established an idolatrous cult in the territory of Ephraim and hired a Levite to officiate in the shrine. Some men from the tribe of Dan, moving north to find more suitable land for themselves, came upon Micah's house and seized both the idolatrous artefacts and the Levite, whom they persuaded to become their priest, saying, "Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?"

Only at the end of the story are we told the name of the idolatrous priest: Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses. In our texts the letter nun has been inserted into the last of these names, so that it can be read as Menasheh rather than Moses. However, the letter, unusually, is written above the line, as a superscription. The Talmud says that the nun was added to avoid besmirching the name of Moses himself, by disclosing that his grandson had become an idolatrous priest.

How are we to explain Moses' apparent failure with his own children and grandchildren? One suggestion made by the sages was that it had to do with the fact that for years he lived in Midian with his father in law Jethro who was at the time an idolatrous priest. Something of the Midianite influence re-appeared in Jonathan three generations later.

Alternatively there are hints here and there that Moses himself was so preoccupied with leading the people that he simply did not have time to attend to the spiritual needs of his children. For instance, when Jethro came to visit his son-in-law after the division of the Red Sea, he brought with him Moses' wife Tziporah and their two sons. They had not been with him until then.

The rabbis went further in speculating about the reason that Moses' own sister and brother Aaron and Miriam spoke negatively about him. What they were referring to, said the sages, is the fact that Moses had physically separated from his wife. He had done so because the nature of his role was such that he had to be in a state of purity the whole time because at any moment he might have to speak or be spoken to by God. They were, in short, complaining that he was neglecting his own family.

A third explanation has to do with the nature of leadership itself. Bureaucratic authority – authority in virtue of office – can be passed down from parent to child. Monarchy is like that. So is aristocracy. So are some forms of religious leadership, like the priesthood. But charismatic authority – in virtue of personal qualities – is never automatically handed on across the generations. Moses was a prophet, and prophecy depends almost entirely on personal qualities. That, incidentally, is why, though kingship and priesthood in Judaism were male prerogatives, prophecy was not. There were prophetesses as well as prophets. In this respect Moses was not unusual. Few charismatic leaders have children who are also charismatic leaders.

A fourth explanation offered by the sages was quite different. On principle, God did not want the crown of Torah to pass from parent to child in dynastic succession. Kingship and priesthood did. But the crown of Torah, they said, belongs to anyone who chooses to take hold of it and bear its responsibilities. "Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob," meaning that it belongs to all of us, not just an elite. The Talmud elaborates:

Be careful [not to neglect] the children of the poor, because from them Torah goes forth ... Why is it not usual for scholars to give birth to sons who are scholars?

R. Joseph said: so that it should not be said that the Torah is their inheritance.
R. Shisha, son of R. Idi said: so that they should not be arrogant towards the community.

Mar Zutra said: because they act highhandedly against the community.

R. Ashi said: because they call people asses.

Rabina said: because they do not first utter a blessing over the Torah.

In other words, the "crown of Torah" was deliberately not hereditary because it might become the prerogative of the rich. Or because children of great scholars might take their inheritance for granted. Or because it could lead to arrogance and contempt for others. Or because learning itself might become a

mere intellectual pursuit rather than a spiritual exercise ("they do not first utter a blessing over the Torah").

However, there is a fifth factor worthy of consideration. Some of the greatest figures in Jewish history did not succeed with all their children. Abraham fathered Ishmael. Isaac and Rebecca gave birth to Esau. All twelve of Jacob's children stayed within the fold, but three of them – Reuben, Shimon and Levi – disappointed their father. Of Shimon and Levi he said, "Let my soul not enter their plot; let my spirit not unite with their meeting" (Gen. 49:6). On the face of it, he was dissociating himself from them.¹ Nonetheless, the three great leaders of the Israelites throughout the exodus – Moses, Aaron and Miriam – were all children of Levi.

Solomon gave birth to Rehoboam, whose disastrous leadership divided the kingdom. Hezekiah, one of Judah's greatest kings, was the father of Menasheh, one of the worst. Not all parents succeed with all their children all the time. How could it be otherwise? We each possess freedom. We are each, to some extent, who we chose to become. Neither genes nor upbringing can guarantee that we become the person our parents want us to be. Nor is it right that parents should over-impose their will on children who have reached the age of maturity.

Often this is for the best. Abraham did not become an idolater like his father Terach. Menasheh, the archetypal evil king, was grandfather to Josiah, one of the best. These are important facts. Judaism places parenthood, education and the home at the heart of its values. One of our first duties is to ensure that our children know about and come to love our religious heritage. But sometimes we fail. Children may go their own way, which is not ours. If this happens to us we should not be paralysed with guilt. Not everyone succeeded with all their children, not even Abraham or Moses or David or Solomon. Not even God himself. "I have raised children and brought them up but they have rebelled against Me" (Is. 1:2).

Two things rescued the story of Moses and his children from tragedy. The book of Chronicles (1 Chron. 23:16, 24:20) refers to Gershom's son not as Jonathan but as Shevual or Shuvael, which the rabbis translated as "return to God". In other words, Jonathan eventually repented of his idolatry and became again a faithful Jew. However far a child has drifted, he or she may in the course of time come back.

The other is hinted at in the genealogy in Numbers 3. It begins with the words, "These are the children of Aaron and Moses," but goes on to list only Aaron's children. On this the rabbis say that because Moses taught Aaron's children they were regarded as his own. In general, "disciples" are called "children".

We may not all have children. Even if we do, we may, despite our best endeavours, find them at least temporarily following a different path. But we can all leave something behind us that will live on. Some do so by following Moses' example: teaching, facilitating or encouraging the next generation. Some do so in line with the rabbinic statement that "the real offspring of the righteous are good deeds."²

When our children follow our path we should be grateful. When they go beyond us, we should give special thanks to God. And when they choose another way, we must be patient, knowing that the greatest Jew of all time had the same experience with one of his grandchildren. And we must never give up hope. Moses' grandson returned. In almost the last words of the last of the prophets, Malachi foresaw a time when God "will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." The estranged will be reunited in faith and love.

¹ Note however that Rashi interprets the curse as limited specifically to Zimri descendant of Shimon, and Korach, descendant of Levi. ² Rashi to Gen. 6:9.

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Parshas Pinchas

**Inheritance - The "Will" of Hashem
by Rabbi Yosef Levinson**

You shall give his inheritance to his closest relative... This shall be a decree of justice for the Bnei Yisrael as Hashem commanded Moshe (Bamidbar 27,11)

Everyone acquires possessions during their lifetime. Some amass wealth while some manage with less, but in the end we all leave this world the same way we entered it - penniless. Our fortune is firmly fixed to this world and neither the advances of science nor the deepest desires of man can discover a means to take it to the next world. Therefore, lawyers advise us to make a will so that we will have peace of mind, knowing that all we have worked for is distributed according to our wishes. The Torah also contains laws of inheritance. However these are far more than just a system of redistribution of wealth. The mitzva of yerusha (inheritance) has much to teach us about appreciating Hashem's goodness and understanding the true value of our property.

The Sefer Hachinuch writes (Mitzva 400) that this mitzva serves as a reminder that Hashem controls the world and that He watches over all his creations. All that we possess in this world came to us through Hashem's will and desire. A gift that Hashem bestows is blessed and therefore eternal. Even though the world was cursed with death because of Adam's sin, Hashem's bracha (blessing) endures. Therefore when one leaves this world, his possessions extend to those who represent his continuity, namely, his offspring. And if one was not blessed with children, then his nearest kin inherits the estate, for perhaps he learnt the proper path in life from his extended family. Alternatively, the deceased may have been considered worthy of Hashem's bracha through his own merits or those of his ancestors. In either case, it is fitting for his inheritance to pass on to his closest relatives.

There are two insights we can learn from the words of Sefer Hachinuch. One lesson is that even if this world was designed to be temporary and should be seen as the means to enter Olam Haba (the Afterlife), nevertheless Hashem's blessings endure even after the recipient can no longer benefit from it. All the more so, the reward awaiting us in Olam Haba will be eternal and is beyond description. As the Mishna teaches (Avos 4:22): "Greater is one hour of bliss in the next world, than a lifetime in this world." Hashem is the essence of good and He created man to benefit from this good. We are not capable of experiencing this good in the present world. Therefore Hashem created Olam Haba, where it will be possible to receive the maximum benefit of His goodness (see Mesillas Yesharim, 1: Derech Hashem Pt. 1, ch. 2).

Another important insight relates to how we perceive the interconnection of the generations. The Michtav Me'Eliyahu (Rav Dessler zt"l) writes (vol.2 p. 217, vol. 3 p. 250) that each person has a unique role to perform in Hashem's Master Plan. Hashem gives him all the keilim (tools) he requires to fulfil this purpose. These include his physical abilities, his mental faculties, natural tendencies, talents and capabilities. Also included in this list are his circumstances, his property, his environment and all that transpires during his lifetime. Together these pieces make up the puzzle that is his unique set of tests in life. Man acquires his spiritual portion according to the manner in which he utilises these keilim and how he reacts to the challenges that confront him.

Rav Dessler adds that a person's children continue their parents' mission. This is why children usually resemble their parents in their tendencies, talents and outward appearance - they share the same tests. Therefore the children inherit their parents' property. Just as the parents needed these possessions to perform their personal service to Hashem, so too the next generation requires the same tools to enable them to fulfil their purpose.

While our fortune cannot follow us to the next world, we can merit eternity through it, by setting an example for our offspring and utilising all of Hashem's gifts wisely.

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**Peninim on the Torah by
Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum**

PARASHAS PINCHAS

Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen turned back My wrath from upon Bnei Yisrael, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them. (25:11) Kinaah and kanaus, jealousy and zealotness, are two terms which share the same root word. Indeed, Rashi interprets kanaus, zealotness, as a jealous reaction, which results in vengeance. One becomes outraged when something which he feels is rightfully his has been taken from him. A jealous person feels slighted by someone who has that which he feels is rightfully his. A true zealot feels that when someone impugns Hashem, His Torah and mitzvos, he is infringing upon his religion. Such a person has a sense of kinship with Hashem and is grievously hurt by an action which undermines Hashem. The zealot does not act for attention. He is real. He views a slight against Hashem as a personal affront. A zealot represents the highest moral and spiritual integrity; otherwise, his outrage is nothing more than an act of divisiveness, troublemaking, attention seeking, headline grabbing, by an individual who has no qualms about destroying others in pursuit of his own vested agenda. True kanaus builds; false fanaticism destroys.

The Chazon Ish was known for his deep, abiding love of Hashem and His People. He was uncompromising in his devotion to Hashem and His Torah. Halachah was his moral compass. An act is either right or wrong. He was acutely aware that even good intentions and good deeds, when not carried out in the appropriate place and time, can be counterproductive and even destructive. On more than one occasion he demonstrated how, what appeared to be commendable exactness in halachah, was actually the opposite. The Chazon Ish expended much energy ensuring that Shemittah be fully observed. To this end, he instituted a system in Bnei Brak whereby Otzar Beis Din receives the produce of the fields from the owners and recompenses the owner only for the expense of delivering the produce to Otzar Beis Din. The produce itself is not paid for.

Despite the decision of the Chazon Ish, a group of rabbanim, who under normal circumstances did not have a reputation for strict adherence to halachah, raised objection to Otzar Beis Din. The Chazon Ish strongly suspected the true motives of these rabbis and applied to them a phrase from the Viduy of Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon (recited during the Yom Kippur Katan service). "With respect to that which You were strict, I was lenient; and with respect to that which You were lenient, I was strict". Rather than conform to the strictness of halachah, these chameleons manipulated halachah to suit their self-serving purposes.

The Chazon Ish asked, "What is objectionable to being machmir, taking extra stringencies, above the letter of the law?" He replied that Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon was addressing a situation much like the present one, "Those who objected to the leniency of Otzar Beis Din for those who were meticulous concerning Shemittah observance" were the very same rabbanim who wished to permit all the prohibitions of Shemittah by relying on a heter mechirah" (a fictional sale of the fields of Eretz Yisrael to a gentile). "By opposing the use of the Otzar Beis Din, they hope to demonstrate that, in modern times, Shemittah cannot be observed unless one relies on a heter mechirah. Such rabbis definitely require atonement for their actions", said the Chazon Ish, "for prohibiting that which is permitted".

The Chazon Ish had an intimate relationship with halachah. Thus, if someone undermined halachah, he took umbrage. This person was impugning the very core principles of Yiddishkeit. One does not tinker with halachah.

In another instance, a group of representatives of Neturei Karta (a staunch anti-Zionist group) came to the Chazon Ish, demanding that he censure one of the distinguished Torah leaders of Bnei Brak for being insufficiently anti-Zionist. The Chazon Ish became extremely upset with these men, replying to them very sharply, "You come to Bnei Brak from Yerushalayim, and you presume to tell us how to behave!"

Sadly, one of the younger members of that group spoke to the Chazon Ish with disrespect. He did not live out the year. The Chazon Ish was a great man whose very essence was intertwined with Hashem. To insult an individual of his stature was to insult the Almighty.

He had strong feelings concerning groups whose very foundation was to foment trouble. While the majority was comprised of holy Jews, devoted to seeing the Holy City in its glory, unfettered by their secular coreligionists who were bent on destroying Yerushalayim's kedushah and literally placing a tzelem in the Heichal, an idol in the Sanctuary, many of their followers were interested in nothing but tumult, discord, rabble-rousing and fights that accompanied the protests.

Referring to them, the Chazon Ish once said, "They are Jews from before Mattan Torah, the Giving of the Torah". He meant that their zeal was not guided by Torah principles. On yet another occasion, he compared them to an alarm clock: "It is true that an alarm clock rouses people from their sleep, but in life one must decide whether it is really time to get up, or whether he can sleep in a bit longer". In other words, there is a time and place for everything. Unless one has daas Torah, the wisdom that is derived from total immersion in the Torah, one is unable to discern if the time is right.

Pinchas carried out the halachic dictum, Boel aramis kanaim pogin bo, "A zealous individual may slay one who cohabits with a gentile". To undertake such a drastic response to a blatant desecration of the Torah takes a very special person, one whose love for Hashem is overflowing and who views this dastardly act as usurping the very foundations of Judaism. There is another way. The saintly Apter Rav, zl, was famous for his ahavas Yisrael. His love for all Jews, regardless of their religious affiliation, was legendary. Indeed, the name of his commentary on Chumash is Oheiv Yisrael.

Once, a rumor spread in his city concerning the shochet, ritual slaughterer. The rumormongers alleged that he had acted inappropriately. The community's rav insisted that the shochet be deposed from his position. They could not tolerate a shochet whose morals were suspect. The Apter Rav refused to remove him from his position, claiming that his family relied on him for their sustenance. (Today, we see nothing wrong with character assassination, and, if it entails the loss of livelihood for the victim, it is just too bad. In our unbridled zeal to uphold the Torah we forget and lose sight of the human being factor, too often allowing someone's life to be ruined based upon rumor.) The rav argued, quoting Chazal who permit a zealous Jew to kill someone whose moral turpitude has been unleashed to the point that he is cohabiting with a gentile. If such a person could be killed, he certainly could be subject to losing his business.

The Apter Rav replied, "I interpret that Chazal differently. I view kanaim as tzaddikim, truly righteous Jews, whose love for their errant brother is overwhelming. They look for every opportunity to save him and encourage his return. Pogin bo means pray for him. As we find the word pegia used in the context of prayer: Va'yifga bamakom, "He (Yaakov Avinu) encountered the place" (he prayed there) (Bereishis 28:11) bo, for him. The true kanai, righteous person who cares for his brother, should pray for him, pray that he returns to the proper path of Torah".

Horav Aryeh Levin, zl, the venerable Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, would tender his "rebuke" in such a manner. One Friday night, after candle lighting, Rav Aryeh was walking to shul, when a secular Jew came over and asked for directions. The man held a lit cigarette in his hands and continued smoking as he walked with Rav Aryeh in the direction of his destination. While it was quite difficult for Rav Aryeh to walk on Shabbos alongside a man who was smoking, he never for one moment forgot his etiquette. He inquired about the man's health and welfare and when they parted ways, he wished him well.

During their conversation, the man became overwhelmed with embarrassment. He knew that it was Shabbos, a time in which one is not permitted to smoke. Yet, he had the audacity to approach the Tzaddik of Yerushalayim while smoking a cigarette! The man threw away his cigarette and remarked, "Rebbe! I have never deferred to anyone, but this time I will. I cannot smoke in front of the Rav. In fact, I accept upon myself never to smoke on Shabbos!"

We can see from here that treating a person with respect and warmth might achieve the desired rebuke effectively without harsh rebuke and voice raising. Another time, Rav Aryeh left for shul on Friday night and chanced upon an ice cream store that was quite busy. In fact, the line of customers waiting to purchase ice cream extended around the block. It was Shabbos, and these people were clearly in the process of desecrating the holy day. It goes without saying that the owner whose shop was open was partially responsible for this sacrilege. True, if his store would be shuttered, they would find another place to purchase their ice cream on Shabbos; nonetheless, he was playing a leading role in their chillul Shabbos.

Rav Aryeh entered the store, sat down at one of the tables and groaned, "Shabbos!" He arose from the chair and left the store. Five minutes later, the storekeeper closed the store, and the line of customers dispersed. A few days later, the storekeeper met Rav Aryeh and explained, "When I saw the Rav's reaction to my chillul Shabbos, a true expression of pain over a brother's desecration of a mitzvah which is so dear, I felt that I could no longer be open on Shabbos. No one ever rebuked me in such a manner. The Rav made me see the aveirah, sin, in a manner that I never saw before".

This is the definition of kanaus for Hashem. One personally feels Hashem's pain.

Because he took vengeance for his G-d, and atoned for the Bnei Yisrael. (25:13)

In the Sefer Agra D'Pirka, Horav Tzvi Elimelech, zl, m'Dinov (popularly known as the Bnei Yissachar), quotes Horav Shlomo, zl, m'Karlin, who cites a Midrash (which is not extant): Hashem commanded Eliyahu HaNavi to come to Brissim, circumcision ceremonies. Eliyahu was not happy about this, expressing his concern due to his natural aversion to sin. (Eliyahu is Pinchas, who exacted vengeance for Hashem against Zimri.) How could one who is a kanai, zealot, come to the Bris in which the father is a non-practicing Jew? Hashem replied, "I will forgive him". Eliyahu continued, "What if the guests are sinners?" Hashem countered, "I will also forgive them". Eliyahu asked one more question, "If the Mohel, ritual circumciser, is a sinner?" Hashem said, "I will forgive him too". Eliyahu did not agree to attend the Bris until Hashem guaranteed him that He would forgive all of the attendees.

The Bnei Yissachar now explains the above pasuk, "Because he took vengeance for his G-d, and he atoned for Bnei Yisrael. Due to Pinchas/Eliyahu's inflexibility concerning compromise with a sinner, because of his zealousness borne of love for Hashem, Hashem forgave all of the sinners involved in the Shittim debacle. Eliyahu attends Brissim as a testament to Hashem's promise to grant forgiveness to the attendees of a Bris. Otherwise, Eliyahu would not attend.

Horav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zl, wonders how a Bris could have a greater power of forgiveness than Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year; the day referred to as the Day of Atonement atones only if the sinner sincerely repents. Otherwise, it passes, and he continues to remain an unrepentant sinner. Yet, attending a Bris is a guarantee of forgiveness. What does a Bris have that Yom Kippur does not? Rav Shlomo Zalman explains that the Bris has Eliyahu HaNavi who cannot tolerate the spiritual stain created by sin and sinners. As a result, Hashem gave him an assurance that He would absolve the sinners. Thus, a Bris is a propitious opportunity for spiritual ascendancy. Perhaps, if we would realize the auspiciousness of this occasion and the extraordinary opportunity available for us (especially if we are in need of a yeshuah, salvation), we would do more than grab a bagel and run. Our mere presence has a personal spiritual effect. Why squander it?

Eliyahu HaNavi visits with us during another occasion: the Pesach Seder, when we celebrate yetzias Mitzrayim, the Egyptian exodus. Why Eliyahu? He is, after all, the herald of the Final Redemption. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning. Eliyahu HaNavi is referred to as Malach HaBris, since he attends every celebration. He serves as a testament that Hashem's People still adhere to the Bris, covenant. The Korban Pesach may be eaten only by a Jew who is circumcised. An areil, uncircumcised Jew, may not partake. Korban Pesach and Bris Milah go hand in hand. Therefore, following every Bris and every Seder, Eliyahu serves as our intercessor to Hashem.

<http://5tjt.com>

Halachic Musings

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman

Pokémon Go, a game for smartphones and other mobile devices, makes use of “augmented reality.” Virtual creatures appear on the screen as if they are in the player’s surroundings in the real world. The goal of the game is to battle, capture, and train these virtual creatures. The game has achieved record status in terms of downloading. Over 10 million people downloaded it in the first week. It is estimated that the game—which was released just this month—has been downloaded onto one of every four Android phones. Five days after its release, the market value of Nintendo stock rose \$9 billion. That is huge.

But there is also a huge problem: distraction.

Across the world, players of Pokémon Go are concerned about fighting and capturing the Pokémon, and pay little attention to what actually lies before them physically. In California, two men fell off a 90-foot cliff while hunting Pokémon in Encinitas. In Baltimore, a Pokémon Go player crashed his SUV into a police vehicle and it was filmed by the officer’s body cam. A New Jersey woman climbed a tree inside Eglinton Cemetery and had to call 911 when she could not get herself down.

The game was just released in Japan last week. In Otso, Japan, this past Monday, a 21-year-old worker playing the game drove into a line of cars waiting at a red light. “I was focused on the game and did not notice the car in front of me,” the man was quoted as telling the police. In Sapporo, Japan, an elementary-school student playing the game while cycling crashed into another bicycle Sunday morning, the police said. The student suffered minor injuries.

The Question

What happens if Reuven leaves a package on the sidewalk, and Shimon, who is playing Pokémon Go, smashes it while walking? Who is responsible? Or what if Reuven leaves a bicycle on the sidewalk, and Shimon (still playing Pokémon Go) trips over it and he is injured or his phone is damaged? Is Reuven responsible for the damage to Shimon or his phone? Does the fact that Shimon was playing Pokémon Go make any difference?

My young chavrusa, Yisroel Reichman, pointed out another question. If the Pokémon Go player got eaten by the Pokémon monster (or at least his “avatar” did) as a result of his stumbling upon the bicycle left on the sidewalk, and he suffers a financial loss from this, does the owner of the bicycle have to pay damages?

General Halachah

Although it may seem counterintuitive, the general halachah is that a person who is walking and breaks something is exempt. This is based upon a fascinating principle found in Bava Kamma 27b. There it states that it is not the nature of a person to be looking down to where he is walking. For this reason, if Reuven has dug a pit in a public area, he is responsible for the damage that Shimon incurred while walking. Leaving an object, such as a bicycle, where someone can trip over it is analogous to digging a hole in a public area. The Aruch HaShulchan (C.M. 412:5) states this.

Application To Pokémon Go

From the above, it would seem that the Pokémon Go player is exempt and the person who left the bicycle out may even be responsible for the broken phone of the Pokémon Go player.

However, there may be another issue here. The view of the Tosfos (“U’Shmuel” 27b) is that there are two types of oness, and only a complete oness is exempt from damages. The Baalei Tosfos (based on the Gemara in Bava Metzia 82b) distinguish between a watchman who allowed an item to get lost and a watchman who allowed an item to get stolen. They thus distinguish between two types of oness. It can readily be argued that a Pokémon Go player who breaks an item is compared to the lesser oness and is thus liable. It could also be argued that the concept of “people do not look where they are going” applies here across the board and the Pokémon Go player is not making things worse.

The language of the Shulchan Aruch (in C.M. 378:1 as clarified by the Shach) indicates that a person who causes damage to another must pay. However, this is only if the person suffering the damage is a complete oness, completely faultless. We assume that the halachah of “a person generally is busy with his thoughts and does not look downward” is treated like an oness gamur. If, however, it was not a complete oness, but only a partial oness, it would seem that the one at fault would be obligated to pay. The Gemara in Bava Kamma 48b states the reason is that both either had permission or didn’t have permission, but if one had permission to be there and the other did not, the one that did not is liable.

The Chazon Ish (Bava Kamma 4:2) explains the halachah of present “with permission” and present “without permission” as meaning that if someone is doing something wrong, then he is financially responsible.

Disputed Property

There is also a concept in halachah (see Shach Choshen Mishpat 183:10) called “kim li k’hani poskim”—“I know that the halachah is in accordance with these poskim.” This position may be claimed by any person who is holding on to certain property or money, and can be invoked in almost any debate in the Rishonim.

The Maharsham (Volume IV #27) states that the muchzak (the one who holds the property) can claim kim li like the opinion that obligates payment. This would apply either to Reuven or to Shimon the Pokémon Go player. Thus, it would seem that the Pokémon Go player can always say that he holds the halachah is that he is exempt. The owner of the bicycle can say that he holds like the Chazon Ish and that he is exempt (because the player was not a complete oness).

What about any financial losses that are incurred by the Pokémon Go player due to his avatar being eaten by the Pokémon creature? It would seem that these fall under the parameters of grama—an indirect loss. The halachah discusses two types of indirect damage. There is an indirect form of damage called “garmi,” in which an indirect form of damage results that is viewed as a clear, present, and highly likely result. If Reuven were to rip up Shimon’s train ticket, for example, that is a garmi form of damage. If Reuven were to poison Shimon’s dog by placing a poisonous food next to him, this is considered grama, not garmi, as it may be that Shimon’s animal will not eat the food. Garmi damages are enforceable in a beis din. Grama damages are not. If the player had some financial interests in his Pokémon Go avatar, the damage would at most be grama and the other person would be exempt.

All this strictly refers to Pokémon Go players on foot. If they are driving a car or riding a bicycle, they would be completely liable. v

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Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com (and to Allen Klein) for collecting the following items:

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subject: Weekly Parsha from **Rabbi Berel Wein**

Pinchas

The count of the Jewish people that appears in this week's Torah reading occurs after a long string of unpleasant incidents and tragedies in this final period of their sojourn in the Sinai desert. The simple understanding of this sequence of events and subsequent count of the people is that after so many had died in the desert; Moshe had to have an accurate number of the Jewish people before their entry into the Land of Israel.

But on deeper reflection, it is possible to see a more subtle message that is very relevant to our times and circumstances. It is easy, almost understandable, for people – nations and individuals – to lose heart after a series of reverses and tragedies occur. There arises a feeling of helplessness, frustration and eventual surrender to the unpleasant realities that surrounded them.... and continue to surround them. There is an inner human voice that always whispers: "What is the use of going on and continuing to struggle, or even of living itself?"

Despondency reigns supreme in the human psyche. It is no accident that depression, unfortunately, is such a widespread clinical disease in the Western world today. For after all, life is complicated and laden with intractable problems and issues. We find it so much easier to memorialize the dead than to inspire and consecrate the living.

The Torah comes to concentrate once more on the numbers of the living; the generation that did not perish in the desert and would conquer and inherit its promised homeland, against all odds and many enemies. It is for that reason that Moshe counts the Jewish people now after all of the difficulties in the desert, in order to assert that the task is to concentrate on the future and not wallow in the misfortunes of the past.

The Jewish people, and in fact many nations of the world, invested greatly in memorializing the Holocaust and its victims. But even the recently departed great memorializer of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, told me in Miami Beach fifty years ago that the Holocaust and its memories, museums, literature and academic disciplines would be of value only if it helped build a stronger and more vital and committed Jewish people.

As important as memory is – and it certainly is very important – it alone would not guarantee Jewish survival in the future. After the Holocaust the task of the Jewish people in the Diaspora and in the nascent Jewish state of Israel was to somehow rebuild and revitalize itself; to disperse the clouds of pessimism which engulfed us and to infuse the Jewish people with a can-do spirit that would carry them forward.

We, like our ancestors in the desert, were reeling from the tragedy and destruction that surrounded us. Like they, we also wailed: "Is there no end to our dying?" But by counting on the will of the survivors of Israel – every one of whom counts and is counted – the mood changed and our future became brighter than ever imagined before. This is a profound lesson that the Torah teaches us in this week's parsha.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

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Hard Choices

Life consists of a constant series of hard choices that one is forced to make - and this is true of nations as well as of individuals. And, most of the problems of life are caused by the fact that these choices are almost never win – win situations but are rather choices where both are bad options. The Talmud ruefully advises us to choose the least bad alternative available when we are forced to make these choices.

This is because many of the issues upon which we are forced to decide and choose really have no permanent solution or innately correct answers. In effect we are always dealing with situations where no matter what our choice may be, there is always doubt and dissatisfaction that accompanies it.

Historians, academics, politicians and op-ed columnists, who are always blessed with perfect hindsight, are able to point out for us our past errors in judgment and mistaken policies. However, at the moment when those choices had to be made, in the absence of prophecy, no one could attest with certainty that the right choice was in fact being made. Therefore, the Talmud again gave us

perspective, if not even comfort, regarding this by stating: "A judge can only decide on the basis of the facts that his eyes witness and see."

Perfect, unerring and completely accurate decisions and choices are unfortunately not available to mortal humans. Life is very tricky for all of us. We are constantly faced with having to make hard decisions without really being able to determine what the ultimate consequences of our decision and choice will be.

The Talmud relates to us that when the great rabbi and leader of Israel, Yochanan ben Zakai, felt death approaching, he was concerned and wept. His disciples, who were gathered at his bedside, attempted to comfort him by pointing out his great merit as being the leader of Israel during the awful time of the destruction of the Second Temple. He in turn told them: "I do not know which path I will be led upon – whether to eternal life or not." Yochanan ben Zakai made one of the most fateful decisions in Jewish history when the Roman general and future emperor Vespasian gave him a choice of wishes that the general would fulfill.

The great and holy Rabbi Yochanan chose the preservation of and protection for the Torah academy located in the town of Yavneh. This choice, as it played itself out over the millennia of Jewish life, proved to be wise and the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people. However, Rabbi Yochanan was unable to know this at the time he made the choice shortly thereafter, at the time of his passing. He was always in doubt, uncertain as to which path he would now be led upon. The problem with the hard choices that we are always forced to make in life is that we are never quite sure that the choice that was made was really the correct one in terms of our legacy and mission. The world generally and the Jewish people particularly, are now faced with having to make a number of hard choices. The American election, the Mideast turmoil, the rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiments and actions, the future, if any, of diplomatic efforts here regarding the Palestinians, the reaction of traditional Judaism in all of its various factions and the sea change in values and lifestyle that now engulf us – all of these and many other issues present us with very difficult choices.

Certainly we can all see that the choices are basically not win – win situations. As such, we certainly have to tread softly and carefully and attempt to choose policies and people will be the least harmful to us and to our cause. Since the nature of the Jewish people is to be messianic and utopian, we always seem to be searching for the ultimately perfect solution and choice. Therefore we are often disappointed when we are left with only pragmatic and mediocre results.

We are doomed to have to continue to live with our doubtful choices and to somehow realize that this is the best that we can do under current circumstances and with our limited knowledge. We should be wary of those that promise easy solutions and perfect policies. The future will only guarantee that there will be hard choices in our lives.

Shabbat shalom Berel Wein

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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Pinchas

For the week ending 30 July 2016 / 24 Tammuz 5776

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

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Insights

Little Me

"And it shall be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he took vengeance for his G-d." (25:13)

Why wasn't Pinchas anointed with Aharon and his descendants long before his extraordinary zeal in avenging G-d's name? Why was it necessary for Pinchas to be rewarded with a "covenant of eternal priesthood" rather than having the kehuna as his right?

The mystical sources teach that the soul of Pinchas came from the same soul-source as Cain. Cain killed his brother Hevel. The Zohar says that any kohen who murders is disqualified from the kehuna forever, and thus Pinchas, through Cain, "forfeited" his right for his offspring. Cain lost the kehuna for Pinchas, and only Pinchas' extraordinary zeal earned the kehuna for himself and his descendants.

How did Pinchas' actions heal the damage that Cain's killing created?

The name "Cain" comes from the same root as kinyan, meaning "acquisition," as Chava, Cain's mother, said: "I have acquired a man with G-d" (Gen. 4:1). In Jewish thought, acquisition is synonymous with existence. We talk of G-d "acquiring Heaven and Earth." G-d's "acquisition" was the action by which he brought Heaven and Earth into existence.

In Cain's eyes he was the only acquisition in this world, its only existence. This is the root of all evil. For there can be no room for G-d in a world which is filled with "BIG ME." If the world is filled with the glory of ME, how can there be any other existence? BIG ME is the root of all atheism. BIG ME is the root of all jealousy. And ultimate jealousy leads ultimately to murder. For

BIG ME has no more effective means to remove jealousy than to remove the source of jealousy: little you.

However, the sense of self can have a positive side. Every single person is obliged to say to himself, "The world was created for me" (Sanhedrin 37). In some way we are supposed to look at the world as though we were the only kinyan in it. In the Book of Chronicles it says, "The heart of King Yehoshofat, (son of David) was raised up in the ways of G-d." A heart can be high with ego and evil, or it can be raised up with a zealousness to serve G-d.

When Pinchas took it upon himself to avenge the vengeance of G-d, even though he was not obliged to do so, he tapped into the positive side of Cain's unregenerate egocentricity.

For it is only when someone does something that they do not have to do can we recognize the paradox of the heart that is raised up to serve.

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OU Torah

Pinchas: Avoiding a Hateful Heart

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Love is an emotion. It is a feeling, often a very passionate one, that we have toward another person, creature, or object.

Our Torah speaks of the love we are to have for each other, for the stranger in our midst, and for the Almighty. Scripture alludes to the love a man and woman have for each other as a feeling akin to a divine flame, a passion as powerful as death itself, an emotion which cannot even be quenched by many waters (see Song of Songs 8:6-7).

Giving is an action. Sometimes it is prescribed action, such as charity to the poor. "Give, yes give to him, and let your heart not begrudge what you give to him." (Deuteronomy 15:10) Often the giving is voluntary and takes many forms: Giving of tangible gifts, or of time, of compassionate words, or of careful listening.

The question has been asked, "Do we give to those whom we love, or, perhaps, do we love those to whom we give?" What comes first? The love for one another, or the giving to him or her?

This question was asked by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in the first volume of his posthumously published writings, known as *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*. Rabbi Dessler was a prominent 20th century educator and thinker who was born in Eastern Europe, worked in England, and spent his last years in Israel.

The question is truly an ancient one, posed by many philosophers from both within and outside of the Jewish tradition. It is the question of whether feelings motivate actions, or whether actions stimulate feelings.

The American philosopher and psychologist, William James, had a definite answer to this question. He believed that first we act, and based on our actions, we feel. Act joyfully, dance and sing, and you will feel joy. Act despondent, sit in solitude and fret, and you will feel depressed. James' theory is known in textbooks as the James-Lange theory.

Within our own tradition, the medieval author of the *Sefer HaChinuch*, enunciated a similar belief centuries before James. He asserted, "Acharei hape'ulot nimshachim halevavot, the heart follows one's actions."

If it is true that feelings of love derive from loving and giving behaviors, then it must also be true that feelings of hatred derive from hateful and violent behaviors.

Thus, we can understand an otherwise puzzling passage in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Pinchas.

Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron the peace-loving High Priest, commits an action of zealotry. A Jewish man named Zimri parades his Midianite paramour, Kozbi, before the "eyes of Moses and the eyes of all the congregation of the children of Israel." (Numbers 25:6) Pinchas swiftly,

almost impulsively, grabs a spear and thrusts it through the two of them, killing them instantly. That episode is narrated at the very end of last week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak.

This week, we read of the Lord's response to Pinchas' action. He commends it, saying that Pinchas "has removed My wrath from upon the children of Israel." (ibid. 25:11) And the Almighty proceeds to reward Pinchas with "My covenant of peace." (ibid. 25:12)

In his commentary on this phrase, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (d. 1892), dean of the famed Yeshiva of Volozhin, expresses surprise at this reward. After all, Pinchas acted violently, militantly. Shouldn't his reward be a medal of war, a prize for zealotry and courage? Why a covenant of peace?

Rabbi Berlin, who is known by the acronym formed by the first letters of his long name as the *Netziv*, answers eloquently: "Because it is the nature of actions such as those of Pinchas, who killed another person by his own hands, to permanently leave behind strong feelings of hatred upon the heart of the perpetrator, therefore was the blessing of peace bestowed upon him so that he should always remain gentle and peace-loving and not develop into a cruel character."

Violence contaminates the soul, regardless of whether or not the violent acts are justified.

This is why soldiers, when they are debriefed after battle, need special counseling. They need to be able to put the actions that they performed, even for reasons of self-defense, behind them so that they do not develop permanent feelings of hatred and cruelty.

How well do I remember the words of Golda Meir, soon after the Six Day War, who said that she could forgive Israel's enemies for everything, but not for the fact that they made warriors out of Israel's sons. She knew that once a person serves as a soldier in war, even in defense of his country, he will likely struggle for the rest of his life to make sure that he does not remain a warrior at heart.

All of us may have been guilty even unintentionally at one time or another of some sort of cruelty to others. We must be sure that those cruel actions do not result in "cruel hearts." We must be sure that we do not let the influence of actions which we legitimately perform in extreme circumstances become a permanent part of our character.

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<http://www.torahmusings.com/2016/07/chess-in-jewish-law-2/>

OU Life

Chess in Jewish Law

Rabbi Gil Student

July 27, 2016

The cerebral game of chess has long captured rabbinic minds. References to the game can be found even in Rashi's writings (Kesuvas 61b sv. de-mitalela). However, its status within Jewish law is complex and debated. Four areas in particular have sparked discussion among halakhic authorities — Shabbos, testimony, vows and idolatry.

I. Shabbos

You would be wrong to take for granted the permissibility of playing chess on Shabbos. The issues raised include: making sounds, conducting business, non-Shabbos behavior.

Apparently, on old chess boards, metal pieces that knocked into each other made musical sounds which might be considered forbidden on Shabbos. However, *Shiltei Ha-Giborim* (Rif, Eruvin 35b nos. 2-3) permits this because the players do not intend to make music with these sounds. The *Rema* (*Shulchan Arukh*, Orach Chaim 338:5) follows the *Shiltei Ha-Giborim*. Note that the *Magen Avraham* (ad loc., no. 8) confirms that the *Rema* is discussing chess (but requires using a special Shabbos set).

The *Magen Avraham* quotes from a R. A. Sasson who argues that playing chess is similar to conducting business. He seems to mean that because chess was often played for money, even when you omit the prize the game is still

forbidden because of its usual practice. However, the Rema rules that chess is only forbidden when you play for money.

Many argue that chess is simply not appropriate for Shabbos. For example, the Shemiras Shabbos Ke-Hilkhasah (16:34) dismisses all arguments to forbid chess. However, earlier in the chapter (16:1), he says that this only applies to children. Adults should spend the day in spiritual-religious-pleasure. Similarly, R. Moshe Feinstein rules that chess is not technically forbidden but should be avoided because of *ve-dabeir davar*, by which I think he means that the game is not in the spirit of Shabbos.

Interestingly, the Chidah (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 338:1) suggests that the great rabbis who have played chess, even during the week, must have done so in order to recover from depression. It was their strategy to heal and return to their Torah study. Therefore, their precedents cannot support a general permissive ruling.

II. Vows

J.D. Eisenstein quotes literature surrounding a case of a man who vowed to stop playing chess but then regretted his vow. He asked for permission to annul his vow. The rabbi of Ancona replied that the questioner certainly took his vow to prevent wasting time. However, since chess is a game of skill and not chance, and it refreshes the spirit, he may annul his vow.

III. Testimony

Eisenstein also quotes a discussion about professional chess players. Professional gamblers are barred from testifying in a Jewish court (Shulchan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat 34:16). Do chess players constitute gamblers? He quotes R. Yoel ben Nassan Finklerly of Alexandria who says that since chess is a game of skill and wisdom, it is not considered gambling. Chess players are generally highly intelligent and sophisticated. Therefore, a professional chess player is an acceptable witness.

IV. Idolatry

A few years ago, we discussed whether owning a chessboard with a king that has a cross is permissible. While many say that Christianity is an acceptable religion for gentiles, all agree that it is forbidden for Jews. Therefore, we may not own Christian religious symbols. See there for an argument toward leniency.

It has since been brought to my attention that R. Asher Bush discusses this question in his *Sho'el Bi-Shlomo* (no. 60). He argues that since everyone knows that the chess piece is not connected to Christianity, there is no issue whatsoever and you may even display it in a place of honor in your home. He quotes R. Moshe Feinstein's ruling (Iggeros Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 1:69) that you may sell stamps with a cross for two reasons—they aren't made for religious purposes and people do not consider the stamps (religiously) important. R. Bush argues that the same logic applies to chess sets, particularly when the king is only one of many pieces.

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Parshat-Pinhas-When-is-war-justified-462030

Parshat Pinhas: When is war justified?

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

The Jerusalem Post

In last week's Torah portion, we read about the fervent attempts by the nations of Moab and Midian to harm The People of Israel. The Moabites feared the Israelites' power and understood that they could not face them militarily. They understood that the nation's power stemmed from its spirituality, and therefore, they sent emissaries to Balaam the "prophet" to persuade him to curse The People of Israel. This attempt failed over and over again.

Ultimately, the Moabites succeeded in a different way: The People of Israel began forbidden relationships with Moabite women and was dragged into worshipping their god Baal Peor – a form of idolatry that symbolized the breach of all moral and humane barriers. According to tradition, the essence of worshipping Baal Peor was opening one's body before it and defecating. In

other words, the rule was to do the most abhorrent and disgusting act before their god and not let any normative boundary stop them. This was the highest degree of moral depravity.

In this week's portion, Pinhas, we find the addendum to the story. The People of Israel is commanded by God to take revenge upon the Midianites.

"Distress the Midianites, and you shall smite them. For they distress you with their plots which they contrived against you in the incident of Pe'or..." (Numbers 25:17-18)

Here we discover a new kind of war. From the Middle Ages to modern times, we find two kinds of war. One is war over a nation's territorial rights or other basic rights. The French Revolution came on the heels of individual rights being trampled on, and immediately following it, the nations of Europe fought France, which tried to conquer their lands. We can count hundreds of wars like these throughout history.

Another kind of war with which we are familiar is a religious war. Examples range from the Crusades to today's wars with Islamic State.

The People of Israel does not fight wars of religion or due to the morality of another nation. It does not deal with trying to "convert" other nations to its ways, as did the Crusaders of the past or the shahids of the present. The People of Israel fights for its basic right to live its moral and spiritual life as it sees fit, and rises up against nations that repeatedly attack it to harm its spiritual level. By rising up in this way, it demonstrates that its moral level is even more important than its materialistic or territorial rights.

Let us note the difference between Moab and Midian. The Moabites were those who initiated the consultation on how to harm the Israelites. The Moabites were those who drafted Balaam to the struggle. The illicit relationships were with the women of Moab. But the war that the Israelites declared was against Midian and not Moab. Why?

Our Sages explained that this was based on the difference between the Moabites' and the Midianites' motives. The Moabites were simply afraid, as the Torah describes:

"Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this assembly [The People of Israel] will eat up everything around us, as the ox eats up the greens of the field.'" (Numbers 22:4)

The Midianites, on the other hand, joined a battle that they should not have been involved with. The People of Israel's journey was no threat to them. They simply liked the idea of destroying the nation's lofty spiritual character. Their overriding goal was to bring about the failure of the nation that was spreading monotheism's defeat of idolatry and the breaching of basic human restrictions. We can therefore almost forgive a nation that acted out of actual fear for its sovereignty. But a nation whose sole purpose was deceitful cannot be forgiven. This distinction clarifies the message mentioned at the start. Wars between nations over territory and rights are wars that are somewhat understandable. When faced with such a war, we fight back. But we do not declare all-out war to the point of "Distress the Midianites, and you shall smite them" unless there is a real attempt to harm our moral and spiritual character.

The foundation maintaining The People of Israel for over 3,000 years is its essence as a beacon of moral and spiritual light for the entire world, and most of all – for itself. Without this foundation, we cannot exist.

The writer is the rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

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Rav Kook Torah

Our Prayers for the New Month

Shabbat Mevarchim

On the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, the new Hebrew month, we announce the new month with a special prayer, called Birkat HaChodesh. We pray that the coming month will be a time of good health, peace, and blessing.

The introduction to Birkat HaChodesh is copied from an ancient prayer composed by third-century scholar Abba Arikha ('Rav'), founder of the legendary yeshiva of Sura. Here is the text of Rav's prayer, as recorded in the Talmud:

"May it be Your will, the Eternal our God, to grant us long life, a life of peace, a life of good, a life of blessing, a life of sustenance, a life of vigor of the bones, a life in which there is fear of sin, a life free from shame and embarrassment, a life of riches and honor, a life in which we may be filled with love of Torah and awe of Heaven, a life in which You will fulfill all of our hearts' desires for good." (Berakhot 16b)

While the prayer does mention love of Torah and awe of Heaven, most of the requests appear to refer to the material aspects of life - sustenance and physical vigor, riches and honor. Were these wishes foremost in the thoughts and prayers of this great scholar?

The True Meaning of Rav's Prayer

Rav Kook taught that Rav's prayer should not be understood superficially. Its focus is not on material blessings, but spiritual goals. Each request relates to some quality of spiritual growth and fulfilling our mission in life.

"May it be Your will... to grant us long life" - a long life does not mean long in years, but long in content and accomplishments. This is a preamble for the requests that follow.

"A life of peace" - this refers, not to peaceful relations with others, but to our own inner peace and harmony. We should not be stymied by internal qualities - flawed character traits, confusion, intellectual blunders - which undermine our efforts towards spiritual growth.

"A life of good" - no, this is not a request for good times and affluence. This is a spiritual request, a prayer that all external factors which affect us, should influence us in good directions and positive ways.

"A life of blessing" - not blessings that we receive, but blessings that we give. May we bring blessings to the world through our actions - helping the needy, consoling the broken-hearted, and providing moral leadership and direction.

"A life of sustenance" - a prayer that all our needs be met - whether physical, psychological, or spiritual.

"A life of vigor of the bones" (chilutz atzamat). In a Talmudic discussion in Yevamot 102b, Rabbi Elazar made a surprising remark: "This is the best blessing of all." Physical vigor and energy are important in life; but is this the most important blessing that one can ask for?

Rav Kook explained that chilutz atzamat refers to our mindset and outlook. We pray that we should be willing and eager to undertake our spiritual mission, our special service of God. We should not feel that avodat Hashem is a burden. This is the ultimate blessing, for the goal of all blessings is the path itself - service of God. As the Sages wrote, we should seek "God's mitzvot, and not the reward of His mitzvot."

"A life free from shame and embarrassment" - no one is perfect; we all have shortcomings and weaknesses, an obvious source of embarrassment. But our lives - the choices we make and the actions we take - they should be free from shame, a reflection of our better qualities. We should be able to look at our lives with pride and satisfaction.

"A life of riches and honor" - sometimes wealth can change a person, undermining his integrity, befuddling his values, blinding him to his true goals. Therefore we ask that our wealth be bound with true honor, namely, our spiritual values and goals.

And finally, Rav asked for "a life in which You will fulfill all of our hearts' desires for good." Why tack on at the end, "for good"? Sometimes people wish for things - private benefits, material gains - which they imagine will be good. We pray that our hearts' desires will be for that which is truly good, complementing the ultimate goal and the greatest good.

(Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. II, pp. 121-123)

See also: Teachers Armed with Spiritual Might