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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYEITZE - 5772

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What kind of man was Jacob? This is the question that cries out to us in episode after episode of his life.

The first time we hear a description of him he is called ish tam: a simple, quiet, plain, straightforward man. But that is exactly what he seems not to be.

We see him taking Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. We see him taking Esau's blessing, in borrowed clothes, taking advantage of their father's blindness.

These are troubling episodes. We can read them midrashically. The midrash makes Jacob all-good and Esau all-bad. It rereads the biblical text to make it consistent with the highest standards of the moral life. There is much to be said for this approach.

Alternatively we could say that in these cases the end justifies the means. In the case of the birthright, Jacob might have been testing Esau to see if he really cared about it. Since he gave it away so readily, Jacob might be right in concluding that it should go to one who valued it. In the case of the blessing, Jacob was obeying his mother, who had received a Divine oracle saying that "the older shall serve the younger." Yet the text remains disturbing. Isaac says to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau says, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob [=supplanter]? He has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Such accusations are not levelled against any other biblical hero.

Nor does the story end there. In this week's parasha a similar deceit is practiced on him. After his wedding night, he discovers that he has married Leah, not, as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Laban.

"What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you?"

Why then have you deceived me?" (Gen. 29: 25)

Laban replies:

"It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn." (Gen. 29: 26)

It's hard not to see this as precise measure-for-measure retribution. The younger Jacob pretended to be the older Esau. Now the elder Leah has been disguised as the younger Rachel. A fundamental principle of biblical morality is at work here: As you do, so shall you be done to. Yet the web of deception continues. After Rachel has given birth to Joseph, Jacob wants to return home. He has been with Laban long enough. Laban urges him to stay and tells him to name his price. Jacob then embarks on an extraordinary course of action. He tells Laban he wants no wages at all. Let Laban remove every spotted or streaked lamb from the flock, and every streaked or spotted goat. Jacob will then keep, as his hire, any new born spotted or streaked animals. It is an offer that speaks simultaneously to Laban's greed and his ignorance. He seems to be getting Jacob's labour for almost nothing. He is demanding no wages. And the chance of unspotted animals giving birth to spotted offspring seems remote.

Jacob knows better. In charge of the flocks he goes through an elaborate procedure involving peeled branches of poplar, almond and plane trees, which he places with their drinking water. The result is that they do in fact produce streaked and spotted offspring.

How this happened has intrigued not only the commentators – who mostly assume that it was a miracle, G-d's way of assuring Jacob's welfare – but also scientists. Some argue that Jacob must have had an understanding of genetics. Two unspotted sheep can produce spotted offspring. Jacob had doubtless noticed this in his many years of tending Laban's flocks.

Others have suggested that prenatal nutrition can have an epigenetic effect – that is, it can cause a certain gene to be expressed which might not have been otherwise. Had the peeled branches of poplar, almond and plane trees been added to the water the sheep drank, they might have affected the Agouti gene that determines the colour of fur in sheep and mice.[1]

However it happened, the result was dramatic. Jacob became rich: In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys. (Gen. 30: 43)

Inevitably, Laban and his sons felt cheated. Jacob sensed their displeasure, and – having taken counsel with his wives and being advised to leave by G-d himself – departs while Laban is away sheep-shearing. Laban eventually discovers that Jacob has left, and pursues him for seven days, catching up with him in the mountains of Gilead. The text is fraught with accusation and counteraccusation. Laban and Jacob both feel cheated. They both believe that the flocks and herds are rightfully theirs. They both regard themselves as the victim of the other's deceitfulness. The end result is that Jacob finds himself forced to run away from Laban as he was earlier forced to run away from Esau, in both cases in fear of his life.

So the question returns. What kind of man was Jacob? He seems anything but an ish tam, a straightforward man. And surely this is not the way for a religious role model to behave – in such a way that first his father, then his brother, then his father-in-law, accuse him of deceit. What kind of story is the Torah telling us in the way it narrates the life of Jacob?

One way of approaching an answer is to look at a specific character – often a hare, or in African-American tradition, "Brer rabbit" – in the folktales of oppressed people. Henry Louis Gates, the American literary critic, has argued that such figures represent "the creative way the slave

community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as human beings created in the image of G-d." They have "a fragile body but a deceptively strong mind." Using their intelligence to outwit their stronger opponents, they are able to deconstruct and subvert, in small ways, the hierarchy of dominance favouring the rich and the strong. They represent the momentary freedom of the unfree, a protest against the random injustices of the world.[2]

That, it seems to me, is what Jacob represents in this, the early phase of his life. He enters the world as the younger of two twins. His brother is strong, ruddy, hairy, a skilful hunter, a man of the open country. He is quiet, a scholar. Then he must confront the fact that his father loves his brother more than him. Then he finds himself at the mercy of Laban, a possessive, exploitative and deceptive figure who takes advantage of his vulnerability. Jacob is the man who – as almost all of us do at some time or other – finds that life is unfair.

What Jacob shows, by his sheer quick-wittedness, is that the strength of the strong can also be their weakness. So it is when Esau comes in exhausted from the hunt, and is willing impetuously to trade his birthright for some soup. So it is when the blind Isaac is prepared to bless the son who will bring him venison to eat. So it is when Laban hears the prospect of getting Jacob's labour for free. Every strength has its Achilles' heel, its weakness, and this can be used by the weak to gain victory over the strong.

Jacob represents the refusal of the weak to accept the hierarchy created by the strong. His acts are a form of defiance, an insistence on the dignity of the weak (vis-a-vis Esau), the less loved (by Isaac), and the refugee (in Laban's house). In this sense he is one element of what, historically, it has been like to be a Jew.

But the Jacob we see in these chapters is not the figure whom, ultimately, we are called on to emulate. We can see why. Jacob wins his battles with Esau and Laban but only at the cost of eventually having to flee in fear of his life. Quick-wittedness is only a temporary solution.

It is only later, after his wrestling match with the angel, that he receives a new name – that is, a new identity – as Israel, "because you have struggled with G-d and with men and have overcome." As Israel he is unafraid to contend with people face-to-face. He no longer needs to outwit them by clever but ultimately futile stratagems. His children will eventually become the people whose dignity lies in the unbreakable covenant they make with G-d.

Yet we can see something of Jacob's early life in one of the most remarkable features of Jewish history. For almost two thousand years Jews were looked down on as pariahs, yet they refused to internalise that image, just as Jacob refused to accept the hierarchies of power or affection that condemned him to be a mere second-best. They, like Jacob, relied not on physical strength or material wealth but on qualities of the mind. In the end, though, Jacob must become Israel. For it is not the quick-witted victor but the hero of moral courage who stands tall in the eyes of humanity and G-d.

[1] Joshua Backon, "Jacob and the spotted sheep: the role of prenatal nutrition on epigenetics of fur color," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No.4, 2008.

[1]Henry Louis Gates, *Black literature and literary theory*, New York, Methuen, 1984, 81-104.

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PARSHAT VAYETZE

Is it acceptable for one to doubt a divine promise? Certainly, if God makes a promise, we'd expect Him to keep it! Why then does Yaakov Avinu vow to worship God only IF (and when) God fulfills His promise to return him to the Promised Land? [See 28:20-22.] Furthermore, why should Yaakov make a "neder" (vow) at all? After all, neither Avraham nor Yitzchak ever made any sort of conditional vow after receiving their divine promises! Why is Yaakov's behavior different? In this week's shiur, as we study God's "hitgalut" (revelation) to Yaakov at Bet-El, we attempt to explain why.

INTRODUCTION Our shiurim thus far in Sefer Breishit have discussed the 'bechira' process, i.e. how (and why) God chooses the Avot to become the forefathers of His special nation. We have shown how an additional element of this process unfolds with each time that God appeared (and spoke) to Avraham & Yitzchak. Now, at the beginning of Parshat Vayetze, God's appears for the first time to Yaakov Avinu (see 28:10-17), promising him what sounds like the very same thing that He promised Avraham and Yitzchak. Nonetheless, Yaakov's reaction to this 'hitgalut' [revelation] differs drastically from that of his predecessors. To understand why, we must first consider Yaakov's predicament before God appears to him at Bet-El.

SOMETHING TO LOSE SLEEP OVER Recall from last week's shiur that the Avot themselves were not quite sure exactly WHEN or HOW this 'bechira' process would finally end. In Parshat Toldot it did become clear that the process would continue for at least one more generation: i.e. either Yaakov OR Esav would be chosen, but not both. Therefore, after the incident of the 'stolen blessing', Yitzchak blesses Yaakov that God should grant him with "birkat Avraham", i.e. he (to the exclusion of Esav) should become the chosen son (see 28:3-4). Despite his father's blessing, Yaakov may have had ample reason to doubt this. First of all, only the day before, his father had planned to give the primary blessing to his older brother Esav. Secondly, Yaakov's parents had just sent him AWAY from Eretz Canaan - to flee from Esav and look for a wife (see 27:43- 28:2). Now if Yaakov is truly the chosen son, then it should be forbidden for him to leave Eretz Canaan, just as his father Yitzchak was prohibited to leave. [Recall that during the famine, God did not allow Yitzchak to go down to Egypt (see 26:1-3). Likewise, when Yitzchak was getting married, Eliezer traveled to Padan Aram to bring Rivka back - Yitzchak himself was not allowed to go.]

Furthermore, when Yishmael and the children of Ketura were rejected from the 'bechira' process, they were sent away to the EAST (see 25:6). Now, Yaakov himself is being sent away to the EAST (see 29:1), while Esav, his rival brother, remains in Eretz Canaan!

Finally, even though his father had blessed him 'that God should chose him', nevertheless, Yaakov realizes that it is up to God alone to make that final decision, and not his father.

For all or any of these reasons, it is easy to understand why Yaakov may have needed some 'divine reassurance' before embarking on his journey to Padan Aram! With these points in mind, we can begin our study of God's 'hitgalut' [revelation] to Yaakov at Bet-El to better appreciate the reason for his special reaction.

YAAKOV HAS A DREAM As you review 28:10-15, note how Yaakov's dream begins with a vision [of God's angels ascending and descending a ladder /28:12] - followed by a direct message from God (28:13- 15). Hence, we should expect for that divine message to relate to both that vision and Yaakov's current situation. With this in consideration, let's discuss God's message to Yaakov - one pasuk at a time: "I am the Lord, the God of Avraham and Yitzchak, the land upon which you are lying; I am giving to you and your offspring" (28:13)

As this is the first time that Hashem speaks to Yaakov, it may have made more sense for God to introduce Himself as the Creator of the Heavens & Earth? But there's a simple reason why he doesn't.

DIVINE IDENTIFICATION & 'BECHIRA' CONFIRMATION Even though God had never spoken to Yaakov directly, it would only be logical to assume that he was very aware of God's existence as well as the various promises He had made to his father and grandfather. [Note especially 17:7-12 and 18:19!] Therefore, when God now appears to him at Bet El, the very first thing God must do is 'identify' Himself in a manner that is meaningful to Yaakov - i.e. as the God of his fathers. Then, God immediately informs Yaakov that he is indeed the 'chosen' son, using the almost identical wording that He had told Avraham: "... the land ['aretz'] upon which you are lying I have given to you and your offspring ['zera']. And your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out [in all four directions]. and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (see 28:13-14).

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Note the use of the key words - 'zera' (offspring) and 'aretz' (the Land). These are certainly typical of God's earlier blessings of 'bechira' to Avraham and Yitzchak (see 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8 & 26:3), and thus confirm Yaakov's 'bechira'. Note as well the key phrase emphasizing the purpose of God's nation - 'to be a blessing for other nations! [The significance of the phrase 'afar ha-aretz' [dust of the earth] will be discussed in Part II of this week's shiur.]

DIVINE RE-ASSURANCE While the first two psukim of this 'hitgalut' sound very familiar, the third and final pasuk introduces an entirely new element: "And behold, I will be with you, and I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this Land..." (28:15).

This 'extra' promise clearly relates to our earlier discussion of Yaakov's questionable situation. God must allay his fears by assuring him that EVEN THOUGH he must now leave Eretz Canaan, He will remain with him, take care of his needs, and ultimately bring him back - BECAUSE he indeed is the 'chosen' son.

YAAKOV'S REACTION [and REALIZATION] Upon awakening from this dream, Yaakov not only recognizes the uniqueness of this site, but also makes an interesting statement: "And Yaakov awoke and stated: 'Indeed God is in this place, but I did not know'. Then in awe he stated: 'This [site] is none other than a BET ELOKIM [a house of God], and this is the gate of heaven" (28:16-17).

Yaakov's conclusion re: the uniqueness of this site is obviously based on the fact that He just appeared to him. Furthermore, his conclusion that "v'zeh sha'ar ha-shamayim" - this is the gateway to heaven - is clearly based on his vision of angels ascending and descending the ladder. However, this doesn't appear to be any obvious reason for Yaakov to conclude that this place is a 'bet Elokim' - a house of (or for) God! After all, there was nothing in his vision to suggest that he saw a 'house' of any sort. The simplest answer would be to connect the two halves of Yaakov's statement. Namely, the very fact that this site is a 'gateway to heaven' renders it an appropriate place for a 'House of God'. However, Yaakov refers to the site first as 'Bet Elokim' and only afterward "sha'ar ha-shamayim". Furthermore, a careful reading of the pasuk shows that these two qualities stand on their own: "This is none other than Bet Elokim, AND this is sha'ar ha-shamayim." The fact that Yaakov divides his comment into two distinct sections suggests that he has reached two unrelated conclusions. Did Yaakov see some sort of 'bet Elokim' in his dream, or is he 'predicting' that one day a 'bet Elokim' will be built here? At this point in the narrative, it remains difficult to reach any definite conclusion. However, a careful study of what Yaakov does next will clarify the deeper meaning of his statement. "And Yaakov rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, and set it up for a pillar ['matzeyva'], and poured oil upon the top of it. Then he called the name of that place Bet-el [even though the original name of this city was Luz]." (28:18-19) Why does Yaakov erect a "matzeyva", pour oil on it, and name this site Bet-el? In these actions, Yaakov is acting in a manner very different than his forefathers. Recall that after God had spoken to Avraham and Yitzchak, they both reacted by building a "mizbeyach" (an altar / see 12:7 & 26:24-25) - but neither Avraham nor Yitzchak ever put up a 'pillar'! Nor did Avraham or Yitzchak ever name cities in Israel!

As before, at this point in the narrative, it remains difficult to reach any definite conclusion concerning why Yaakov is doing so many different things. However, a careful study of what Yaakov does next will clarify the purpose of all of his actions.

YAAKOV'S NEDER After taking these actions (in 28:18-19), Yaakov makes a vow. Note the wording of his promise and how he concludes his vow: "And Yaakov then made a vow saying: IF God remains with me and protects me... And I return safely to my father's house... => Then this stone, which I have set up as a matzeyva, will be a bet Elokim - a House for God - and from all that You give me I will set aside one-tenth" (see 28:20-22).

By following the 'if' & 'then' clauses of his vow, it becomes rather clear why Yaakov had set up this pillar (in 28:18) - it was simply in preparation for his vow that he plans to make (see 28:22), as that pillar will serve as the cornerstone of a House for God that Yaakov now promises to establish upon his return. To symbolically designate this site, his preparation (in 28:18-19) included anointing the pillar with oil; and as a statement of his intention - Yaakov names the site Bet-El - which basically means that this site will be a 'House for God'. In other words, all of Yaakov's actions in 28:18-19 are in preparation for his vow. Now we must return to our original question, i.e. what was it in Yaakov's dream that prompted him to make this 'neder' [vow]? To answer this question, we must return to re-examine Yaakov's immediate reaction to his dream.

A PREDICTION - or A RESOLUTION! Recall the difficulty that we encountered when trying to understand Yaakov's statement (after awakening from his dream) that 'this site is none other than the House of God' (in 28:17) -

for there was nothing in his vision suggesting that he saw God's house, nor any obvious reason from him to predict its future existence at that site. But now that we have seen Yaakov's ensuing 'neder' - his earlier statement of 'ein ze ki im bet Elokim' (28:17) becomes most significant - for now we see that Yaakov was not making a prediction - rather he was stating his resolve! In other words, Yaakov's reaction to his dream was not merely a statement of what he saw and felt, but rather a declaration of his future intention - to build a House for God - and specifically at this site. This now explains everything that Yaakov does after awakening from his vision. 1) He states his resolve to build a 'bet Elokim' at this site (based on what he saw /see 28:16-17), then: 2) He sets a 'marker' to remember this precise location (upon his return /see 28:18); then 3) He anoints that pillar with oil (see 28:18), symbolically designating its future purpose (compare Bamidbar 7:1 - noting how the Mishkan was also anointed with oil); then: 4) He names the site 'Bet El', once again, reflecting his intention to return one day and build a House for God (28:19); and finally 5) Makes his vow to build this 'Bet Elokim' upon his successful return from Charan (see 28:20-22)

Even though we can now explain what Yaakov does, we still need an explanation for why he makes this resolution. In other words, we must try to figure out what was it that Yaakov saw (or heard) in that vision that prompted his sudden resolve to build a House for God. Secondly, we must also explain why Yaakov makes his resolution so 'conditional'. To answer these questions, we must return once again to consider Yaakov's current predicament, in contrast to the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak.

WHY YAAKOV IS DIFFERENT In the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak, being 'chosen' was much more than a 'one-way' relationship. After being told by God he was chosen, Avraham responded by building a "mizbeyach" and 'calling out in God's name' (see 12:6-8, 13:4). Similarly, after God spoke to Yitzchak at Beer Sheva - reiterating the blessing, he too built a "mizbeyach" and called out in God's Name. This 'calling out in God's Name' - as Ramban explains - was how the Avot tried to 'make a name for God' by preaching his existence and by setting an example of the highest moral behavior (see Ramban on 12:8 and 26:5, see also Seforno on 26:5). This also foreshadowed the ultimate mission of God's special nation - acting as a model nation to make God's Name known to all mankind. Certainly, we would expect Yaakov to act in a similar manner. In fact, in this opening 'hitgalut' to Yaakov, in addition to the promise of 'zera v'aretz', God emphasizes the same key phrase: "...v'nivrachu b'cha - kol mishpachot ha'adama" - that through you (and your offspring) there will be a blessing to all nations - the same phrase that He had emphasized when He first spoke to both Avraham and Yitzchak! [To confirm this, see 12:2-3 and 26:3-4, and compare with 28:13-14!] Furthermore, when God explains His purpose for choosing Avraham and his offspring (see 18:18-19), we find precisely this phrase emphasized: "For Avraham will surely become a great nation ['goy gadol' - compare 12:2] - and through him all nations will be blessed. For I have known him in order [for the purpose] that he will command his children... and they will keep the way of God - to do 'tzedeq u'mishpat' [justice and righteousness] - in order to [fulfill the purpose] of what God had spoken about Avraham [that he would become a great nation]" (see 18:18-19) [See this phrase also in 22:18, after the Akeyda!]

God reiterates this point to each of the Avot, for the goal of "ve-nivrechu becha kol mishpachot ha-adama" reflects the ultimate purpose of this bechira process. In this sense, God's opening 'hitgalut' to Yaakov emphasizes not only his being the 'chosen son' [= 'bechira'], but also its purpose. Therefore, when Yaakov receives this blessing from God, he is immediately inspired to act in same manner as Yitzchak and Avraham. However, his present predicament does not allow him - for he is now running away (penniless) from his brother who wants to kill him! He cannot build a "mizbeyach" (he doesn't have anything to offer on it!); nor can he call out in God's Name (no one is around to listen!). Nevertheless, because he understands the deeper meaning of his 'bechira' - he immediately states his absolute resolve that when he returns to Eretz Canaan, and achieves a status where he too can 'make a Name for God' - he too will attempt to accomplish this goal. In fact, he is so inspired that he plans to elevate 'calling out in God's Name' a step further - by establishing a 'House for God'! [To see how a 'House for God' will make God's Name great, see Melachim Aleph 8:14-20, 8:40-42 & 10:1.]

WHY CONDITIONAL? Now that we have explained both what Yaakov does, and why he does it, we are left with one last question - If Yaakov is so inspired to build this House for God, why does he make this promise 'conditional'? Let's first explain this question. Recall that prefaces his promise to establish his 'matzeyva' as a 'Bet Elokim' with the condition: "If God will be with me, and take care of me, etc.". Why can't Yaakov simply state that he's going to do it - no matter what! To answer this question, let's examine the 'conditions' of Yaakov's 'neder' - to determine their underlying reason. "And Yaakov then made a vow saying: 1) IF God remains with me, 2)

and He protects me on this journey, on which I embark, 3) and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear. 4) And I return safely to my father's house, 5) and [or then?] Hashem will be my God. 6) And this stone, which I have set up as a monument, will be a Bet Elokim... (see 28:20-22).

IF OR WHEN Even though it is unclear where precisely the IF clause ends and the THEN clause begins (see Related Topics section), the first four clauses are clearly all conditions, for they are almost identical to God's re-assurance to Yaakov that He will take care of his needs (during his stay in Charan: "And behold, I will be with you (1), and I will protect you wherever you go (2) and bring you back to this Land (4)...") [See 28:15, see also Rashi on 28:20, where he 'matches' them up more precisely:] As indeed these 'conditions' are simply a repeat of God's re-assurances, then it could be that Yaakov may not be doubting God at all, nor setting any conditions! Rather, he is simply explaining why he has to wait - before he can build this 'Bet Elokim'. Recall, that the word "im" in Hebrew can also mean 'when' (and not exclusively 'if' / see Rashi on Shmot 22:24). In other words, Yaakov may simply be stating that: WHEN God fulfills His promises (in 28:15), then I will be in the position to build this Bet Elokim (and thus help 'make a Name for God'). Yaakov is not a 'doubter' - rather he's inspired to accomplish, but explains why he must wait until the 'time is right' before he can fulfill his stated goals.

You're probably asking - if so, why doesn't Yaakov actually build a Bet Elokim when he finally returns to Eretz Canaan? Well, that's not only a question for Parshat Vayishlach, that's what a good part of Parshat Va'yishlach is all about! And iy"h, that will be the topic of next week's shiur! Till then, shabbat shalom, menachem

Below - you'll find below some short discussions on additional topics relating to the above shiur

RELATED TOPICS ===== A. TWO PARTS OF YAAKOV'S NEDER A CONDITION OR A PROMISE?

Review 28:20-22 and take note of how the 'neder' divides into two parts: 1) a CONDITION - IF... ; followed by: 2) a PROMISE (i.e. the vow) - THEN...

It is unclear, however, where the IF clause ends and the THEN clause begins. Let's take a look: "And Yaakov then made a vow saying: 1) IF God remains with me, 2) and He protects me on this journey, on which I embark, 3) and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear. 4) And I return safely to my father's house, 5) and [or then?] Hashem will be my God. 6) And [or then?] this stone, which I have set up as a monument, will be a BET ELOKIM 7) and from all that You give me I will set aside one-tenth" (28:20-22).

The first four clauses are clearly part of the CONDITION, as they reflect precisely what God had just promised Yaakov in his dream several psukim earlier. [Compare with 28:15; see also Rashi.] Similarly, the last two clauses clearly describe what Yaakov vows to do once the conditions are met. They describe Yaakov's promise to establish a Bet Elokim at this site upon his return from Charan and offer a tithe of his possessions. However, the middle clause (5) - "and Hashem will be my God" - can go either way. Although it can refer to either a condition or promise, each option poses considerable difficulty. On the one hand, it doesn't appear to be a condition for two basic reasons: a) It does not reflect God's promise in 28:15 as do the other clauses. b) If this is indeed a condition, then it does not add anything to what Yaakov had already stated in his first clause - "If God will be with me".

On the other hand, it does not appear to be a vow, either. How could Yaakov possibly accept Hashem as his God only IF God fulfills His promises! Is Yaakov Avinu so 'spoiled' that he would accept God only if He is good to him?

The classical commentators tackle this question in their commentaries. Rashi and Rashbam explain that it is indeed a CONDITION. Rashi brilliantly solves the first problem raised above [(a)] by explaining this phrase as a reference to God's earlier promise to Avraham at brit mila - "lihiyot lecha le-Elokim" (see 17:7-8). Rashbam solves the second problem [(b)] by explaining this clause simply as a summary (or generalization) of the first three clauses. On the other hand, Ramban, Radak, and Seforno all explain this clause as the VOW. They all solve the problem raised above (that Yaakov appears to accept God only on condition) by explaining that Yaakov vows to INTENSIFY his relationship with God should (or actually WHEN) God fulfills His promise. Surely, Hashem will always remain Yaakov's God no matter what may happen. But Yaakov promises that if (or when) he returns 'home' he will dedicate his entire life to God's service. [I recommend that you see these "parshanim" inside.

Btw, Ramban adds an additional peirush, which he categorizes as 'sod', that explains the clause as neither a condition nor a vow; it is a STATEMENT OF FACT. Yaakov simply states that only when he returns home to Eretz Canaan will it (de facto) become possible 'for Hashem to become his God',

since one cannot develop the fullest relationship with God outside of the Land of Israel. (I've toned down Ramban's statement in translation - see it inside (28:21) for a bit of a shocker.) =====

B. BET-EL / A SPIRITUAL INTERSECTION In this week's Parsha we find the first biblical reference to the concept of 'Bet Elokim', a House of God. Though mentioned only once throughout Sefer Breishit, this concept constitutes one of the most fundamental religious principles in Chumash, as it presupposes the possibility of man's visiting the house as a means to improve his relationship with God. Yaakov's description of this site as both 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' and 'Bet Elokim' can help us understand the nature and purpose of the Bet ha-Mikdash and how it represents the potential heights of our relationship with God. The 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' aspect of the Mikdash, symbolized by the angels ascending and descending from Heaven, suggests the possibility of a 'vertical' relationship, a conceptual connecting point between Heaven and Earth. Despite God's transcendence, a connection, and thus a relationship, can be attained. In contrast, the 'Bet Elokim' aspect, a HOUSE on earth where Man can encounter God, implies the potential for a 'lateral' relationship. In this sense, the Mikdash serves as both a center for congregation as well as the means of dissemination. From this site, God's word and the recognition of His authority can be spread to all mankind. [See Yeshayahu 2:1-5! This centrality may be reflected by the unique phrase at Bet El - "yama ve-keydma, tzafona, ve-negba," which might symbolize this dissemination of God's word to all four corners of the earth.]

From God's perspective, so-to-speak, the 'shechina' descends to earth by way of 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' and radiates via 'Bet Elokim' (in the form of His Torah) to all of mankind. From man's perspective, we gather at the 'Bet Elokim' to serve God, and through the 'sha'ar ha-shamayim' we can climb the 'ladder' of holiness. =====

C. BET-EL & BET ELOKIM In God's first 'hitgalut' to Yaakov, we find some additional phrases that can help us appreciate why Yaakov decides that this site should become a Bet Elokim. Let's take another look at the second pasuk of this hitgalut: "And your offspring shall be like the AFAR HA-ARETZ, you shall spread out to the WEST, EAST, NORTH, and SOUTH (yama ve-kedma, tzafona, ve-negba), and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (28:14).

The first two phrases - "afar ha-aretz" and "east west north & south" - had been mentioned only ONCE before, i.e. when God affirmed Avraham's BECHIRA at BET-EL (after Lot's relocation in Sedom). Note the similarities: "And God said to Avram, after Lot had parted from him, Raise your eyes and look out... to the NORTH, SOUTH, EAST, & WEST, for I give you all the LAND which you see... I will make your offspring like the AFAR HA-ARETZ..." (13:14-16).

Based on our earlier comparison between this 'hitgalut' to Yaakov (28:14) and God's earlier 'hitgalut' to Avraham at BET EL (13:14-16), we may offer a deeper interpretation of these terms. As explained above, the two common phrases, 'afar ha-aretz' and 'yama ve-kedma...', suggest to Yaakov that he currently stands on the same site where Avraham Avinu built a MIZBEYACH and 'called out in God's Name'. This as well adds additional reason for Yaakov's resolve to make this site a BET ELOKIM. [See also Devarim 12:5-12, and note the expression used numerous times in Sefer Devarim to describe the Mikdash - "ha-MAKOM asher yivchar HASHEM leshakein SHMO sham".

Compare to the use of the word "ha'makom" in 28:10-22!]

However, God's hitgalut to Avraham in chapter 13, also took place in Bet-el (see 13:4, noting its context). Notice, how the Torah describes this site as Bet-el, even though Yaakov only named that city over a hundred years later. The reason why is simple, because the Torah realizes that Yaakov's dream took place near the same spot where Avraham built his mizbayach! And in any case, the thematic connection, based on the above shiur, is rather obvious.

===== FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note the emphasis and repetition of the word 'ha-Makom' in this Parsha - 28:11,16,17,19. Note the use of the term also in Parshat Lech Lecha, 13:14, at the Akeida - 22:4, and in Sefer Dvarim 12:5,11,14,18. 1. Try to explain the significance of this word specifically in the context of these parshiot. 2. Use this to explain Chazal's identification of this spot as the site of the Akeida on Har Ha-Moriah, and eventually the site of the Bet HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. 3. Read Ramban on 28:17 (including Rashi whom he quotes). Relate this Ramban and his machloket with Rashi to the above shiur.

B. Read Rashi on Breishit 2:7, and note the two explanations he cites from the Midrash on that pasuk - "vayitzer Hashem Elokim et ha-adam afar min ha-adama": a) 'afar' from Har Ha-Moriah b) 'afar' from the four corners of the earth.

How do these two opinions relate to our analysis in this week's shiur?

C. See if you can connect the last section of this shiur to two other well-known Midrashim: 1. Opposite "Yerushalayim shel mata" exists a

"Yerushalayim shel ma'ala" (Taanit 5a). [Relate this to the concept of "sha'ar ha-shamayim."] 2. Yerushalayim is known in the Midrash Tanchuma as "taburo (navel) shel olam" - the umbilicus of the world. [Relate this to the concept of Bet Elokim and the 'four directions'.]

D. Several related questions to think about which relate to next week's Parsha, as well: 1. Does Yaakov actually fulfill his 'neder' when he returns? 2. Is this "neder" fulfilled by Am Yisrael? If so, when? 3. Relate Yaakov's "galut" and his "neder" to the principle of "maase avot siman l'banim" and Jewish history.

Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com for collecting the following items:

From Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein
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Subject Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Jerusalem Post :: Friday, December 2, 2011
DEPARTURES :: Rabbi Berel Wein

It seems to me that the month after the holidays of Tishrei is always marked by the sad events of the deaths of notable people. This past month saw how the yeshiva world was struck by the deaths of Rabbi Nossou Zvi Finkel, the head of Yeshivat Mir in Jerusalem and Rabbi Dov Schwartzman, a leading Torah scholar and head of the Lakewood East educational institution.

There were other losses that also occurred both here in Israel and in the Diaspora. King Solomon's wry comment that "a generation comes and a generation leaves and the world remains eternally" is significantly true. The older generation of Torah leadership and scholarship is certainly passing from us. Who the new leaders will be is certainly not yet clear. But there is no doubt, as time inexorably marches forward, that many of the aged current leaders, may they continue to live and be well, will pass from the scene.

A new generation is coming and what shape that generation will take and who will be its acknowledged leaders is hidden from current wisdom and predictions. Though every generation claims to be the continuation of the one that preceded it – and to a certain extent this is naturally true – the reality is that every generation and its leadership must forge its own tools and methods in order to meet challenges that newly arise and were not present in previous times.

Even though human nature rarely changes and the problems of desire, violence and dishonesty are constants in the human story of all generations, the circumstances of life and living do change because of newly discovered means of technology, political upheaval, economic dislocation and new "isms" that constantly arise.

What was once thought to be a correct response to the challenges of the 1850's cannot in reality be seen to be helpful or successful one hundred fifty years later. That generation is gone. The new generation is arriving. The question is what will be the response of that new generation to its particular problems and challenges.

The Jewish world loves to hold on to ancient disputes and relive battles that were fought and decided long ago. The wars between the Zionists and anti-Zionists, between the proponents of Chasidut and its opponents, between the Bundists and the other Leftists, all seem to have been settled by events that have occurred over the past century. Yet the ideological wars continue as though they have true relevance to our situation. Now that there are six million Jews living in the State of Israel the debate, practical, theological or historical, as to whether that state should have come into existence originally is certainly moot and contributes nothing to guaranteeing the safety and existence of those six million Jews.

Since the majority of Orthodox Jewry consists of Chasidim and those who are descended from Chasidic stock it is pretty useless and self-defeating to continue that war which has been settled demographically over the past number of generations. The Left, especially the radical

Left, has been responsible for disaster after disaster – economic (look at Europe, the Soviet Union, Mao's China, etc.), social (the Gulag and the defeat of Communism) and diplomatic (the UN and all of the sham issues, conferences, and resolutions that it has fostered.)

Yet the Left persists, here in Israel and all over the world, with its pie in the sky demands and proposals, having apparently learned nothing from past failures and mistakes. It is so hard to let go of ideologies firmly held by previous generations in spite of the fact that they have proven to be wrong headed and unsuccessful and impractical. The old generation has passed but the old ideas somehow still hold sway. It is imperative that the new generation bring with it new ideas in the Jewish and general world. Practical plans for a better and wider system of Torah education, for stronger family life and realistic recognition of the human and physical problems involved in marriage and child raising, a coming together of practical steps to strengthen Torah knowledge and observance in Israel and the Diaspora, realistic relations with all types of Jews and Jewish organizations, all are challenges that will face the coming generation.

Hopefully, that generation will prove wiser and more successful in dealing with these challenges than its predecessors. The "world remains eternally" promises us that there never will be any easy escape from new challenges and difficulties. Every generation is judged by its responses to its diverse problems and challenges. The departure of the old, sad and sorrowful as it is, creates the opportunities for those who come after them. Such is the way of the world as ordained by the Master of all of us.
Shabat shalom.

From Shema Yisrael Torah Network <shemalist@shemayisrael.com>
To Peninim <peninim@shemayisrael.com>
Subject Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

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

He encountered the place and spent the night there...He took from the stones of the place which he arranged around his head, and lay down in that place. (28:11)

Yaakov Avinu left for Charan without any assurances. The road was dangerous His brother, Eisav, who had sworn to do him bodily harm, was after him. He was on the way to the home of Lavan, the corrupt swindler, to a house filled with idols. One wonders what motivated him to go to Charan. Did Hashem promise him safe passage? No! Hashem was allowing him to go to Charan, but had made no promises. Yaakov was basically on his "own," or as much on his own that anyone ever is. One is never on his own - only in his mind. Yet, Yaakov moved on: Be'er Sheva; the Negev; Midbar Yehudah; Shomron; Beit Shaan; the Lower Galil; the Golan Heights. He finally reached Charan - not a word from Heaven - as of yet. Indeed, he stopped at Har HaMoriah, the place of the future Bais HaMikdash, prayed, and continued on. He received no messages from Above. In fact, as the Midrash notes, Yaakov had no intention of stopping there. It was Heaven that delayed him. Yaakov was a man on a mission - a singular mission: arrive in Charan; go to Lavan and marry into the family. He had been blessed by Yitzchak Avinu. The sooner he executed his mission, the sooner the blessings would take effect.

When Yaakov arrived at Charan, he realized that he had passed the place where his father and grandfather had prayed, but he had not. He now returned through the treacherous road, with its challenges and obstacles, to pray to Hashem, to follow the family tradition. He was filled with regrets, with enough remorse to attempt the return trip. Hashem provided him with kefitzas ha'derech, a "quick" way of return. Otherwise, he would not have returned. After all, he had made a mistake. Yes, it would cost him time and he would confront danger, but he had to correct his error.

We, too, have situations in which we realize that we have erred, and should go back. It remains on our minds, in our hearts. No more. We are not prepared to take that return step. We regret. We feel bad. We know we should return, but we do not return. That "one step" is so difficult. One must make up his mind - not vacillate back and forth - before it is too late. The opportunity is lost. That one step, that "follow through" on our decision to return, is so difficult. Without that commitment, we remain hanging in the balance, wishful losers, dreaming of what could be, but never will. When Yaakov made his decision to return, Hashem took over, and he received the blessings. Hashem always takes over. Regrettably, we are not always prepared to make that "one step" commitment.

In his sefer, Nitzotzos, Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita, relates a compelling story concerning a Jewish prisoner incarcerated in one of America's correctional institutions. A rabbi, who served as a volunteer chaplain at a prison near his community, visited the Jewish prisoners prior to Rosh Hashanah. After explaining the significance of the Yom Ha'Din, Day of Judgment, he added that one who accepts upon himself a kabalah tovah, a good deed, to fulfill a mitzvah that seemed to "slip by" in the past year - in short, to begin the process of change - this acquiescence will quite possibly help to bring about a positive Heavenly verdict on the Yom Ha'Din.

When the rabbi concluded his lesson, he asked all of the men to sit quietly for five minutes and meditate concerning what they would like to do differently in the coming year. Which mitzvah would they add to their repertoire of mitzvos, which good deed? What would they change in their lives? We must bear in mind that none of these inmates was observant, or, for the most part, ever had been. This was a brand new experience for them. Even a simple mitzvah was considered a major endeavor for them.

After the five minutes were up, most of the group disbanded. One inmate approached the rabbi and asked to speak with him: "Rabbi, my name is Carl, and I have decided to become Shabbos observant, but I am not really sure what this means and how to go about it." The rabbi immediately explained that Shabbos is a difficult mitzvah to observe. It entails many halachos, with complex stringencies. Perhaps he would like to select something less compelling. What about Tzitzis, Tefillin, davening, learning a little? Carl was adamant: "I made up my mind. That is it. I have made a sincere pledge to observe Shabbos."

The rabbi agreed to bring him a volume in English detailing the laws of Shabbos. It was now up to Carl. The ball was in his court. One month later, the rabbi returned for his monthly visit and was surprised that Carl was not in attendance. The inmates explained to the rabbi that when Carl had received the Hilchos Shabbos book, he became totally engrossed in it. He was aware of how little he knew, and since he had promised to keep Shabbos, he refused to do anything. Unaware of what was or what was not muktzah, forbidden to move on Shabbos, he touched nothing. He sat in his cell doing absolutely nothing all Shabbos. His friends fed him, because he refused to touch a dish, lest it be muktzah. After two Shabboses, the warden summoned Carl to his office - not to be heard from again. Apparently, due to prison overcrowding, Carl was permitted to leave wearing an electronic monitoring device. Interestingly, out of the 120,000 prisoners in that state's prison system, only four from their prison were allowed to leave. Carl was one of those four fortunate individuals.

This was too much for the rabbi to digest. Carl had observed two Shabboses, and he was immediately freed from prison. The rabbi sought out Carl and found him in a small apartment, diligently studying Hilchos Shabbos. It did not take long before Shabbos led to other mitzvos, and Carl became fully observant. His name was changed to Reb Yehudah, as he became an accepted member of the Orthodox Jewish community.

How did he do it? What was Carl's recipe for success? He was determined. He made up his mind to do something - and he did it. Nothing was going to get in his way. Determination, perseverance, singlemindedness, focus - these are all qualities we have inherited from

the Patriarch Yaakov. When one decides to go forward, his determination guides him, until Hashem embraces him and carries him for the rest of the journey to success.

Reuven went out in the day of the wheat harvest, and he found dudaim in the field...Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's dudaim." But, she said to her, "Is it a small thing that you have taken my husband? And to take my son's dudaim as well?" And Rachel said, "Therefore he shall be with you tonight in exchange for your son's dudaim." (30:14,15)

There is a reason that one must learn Torah from a rebbe and that, without the interpretation of the commentators, the Torah remains a closed book. We often come across instances, attitudes, actions, that seem strange, atypical and questionable. We are struck by glaring reactions, which are obvious to one who is seeking a way to question the Torah. There is no shortage of bonafide commentators who elucidate and not only make sense of the circumstances, but also illuminate for us a perspective which indicates that this was specifically the only approach to ameliorate a potentially volatile situation. The above pesukim, detailing Rachel Imeinu's encounter with Leah Imeinu and their dialogue concerning the dudaim, present a prime example of a passage in the Torah that begs explanation.

Throughout her short conversation with Rachel, Leah seems to have forgotten exactly how it transpired that she became Yaakov Avinu's wife in the first place. She apparently ignored the fact that Rachel helped her in Lavan's ruse. Rachel gave her the predetermined simanim, signs, so that she would not be humiliated when she was wed to the great tzadik. It is one thing to ignore the past, but, she added insult to injury when she said, "Is it no small thing that you have taken my husband?" What is most difficult to understand is that Leah is viewed as the paradigm of those who properly express gratitude. After all, it was Leah who named her fourth son Yehudah, which is derived from Odeh l'Hashem, "I thank Hashem."

Clearly, undercurrents of tension exist between Rachel and Leah. Indeed, Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon views Leah's retort as a condemnation against Rachel. "Is it not enough that you have taken my husband?" Chizkuni goes further when he adds that Leah was qualifying her status as Yaakov's first wife. Indeed, Rachel was the rival wife. Sforno even wonders how Rachel could have married Yaakov, once he was married to Leah. The various commentators all point out that Leah was acting in a manner atypical of her nature and reputation. Did she suddenly forget that her present position as Matriarch was due only to Rachel's kindheartedness? How are we to understand this?

In his sefer, Liyvas Chein, Horav Reuven Cohen, Shlita, cites the sefer, Galia Razia, which is quoted by Midrash Talpios, that offers an esoteric explanation of the course of events. Satan saw that Yosef HaTzadik's birth was imminent and that the entire world would be beholden to him. This is taught in the pasuk, V'Yosef hu ha'shalit, "And Yosef is the ruler" (Bereishis 42:6). This concerned Satan, since he feared that Yosef, the son of his archenemy, Yaakov, would surely starve his legions. Thus, when Rachel said, Havah, "Give me children," Satan said, Havah, "Come, let us be cunning," as in, Havah nischakmah lo, "Come, let us outsmart it." (Shemos 1:10). Satan felt that he must do something to prevent Yaakov from producing havah, "Give me children," Havah being the gimatriya, numerical equivalent, of twelve, which is the number of tribes Yaakov was destined to father. This is why Satan was bent on pursuing Yosef, even before he had been born. He had to prevent his birth.

When Satan saw Rachel asking Yaakov to help her conceive, he saw an opportunity to take her down. A woman of her spiritual caliber should have relied totally on Hashem. Asking her husband to intercede was a slight taint on her middas bitachon, attribute of trust in Hashem. Satan immediately went to work aligning himself for participation in Yosef's birth. If he could somehow become a partner in Yaakov and Rachel's efforts to give birth to Yosef, Satan would be in. Yosef would now have to sustain his legions. After all, they were family.

How did he do this? First, he attempted to divest Rachel of all bitachon, trust, in Hashem. To do this, he "allowed" Reuven to discover the dudaim. He then convinced Rachel to ask Leah for her son's dudaim, which resulted in an argument between the two sisters. During the course of the argument, harsh words were spoken. As a result, Rachel was punished and she gave birth to only two of Yaakov's twelve sons.

From the Galia Razia, we understand a deeper insight into the conversation that took place between Rachel and Leah. It was fed by the fires of strife stoked by Satan. Otherwise, it never would have occurred. It was a maasei Satan, action of the Satan, to assure that his legions would be fed when Yosef became the sovereign in Egypt. Satan was able to meddle in Yaakov's affairs due to a slight taint in Rachel's trust in Hashem.

This parshah is not about what we might see as a compelling argument between two sisters. It was deeper. It represents an important chapter in the story of good and evil and the eternity of the Jewish People.

I believe that this is an important lesson to take with us on the journey called life. Often, occurrences take place that seem nonsensical, and, at times, frightening. There does not appear to be rhyme or reason for these occurrences. A Jew must believe that there is a powerful reason for everything Hashem does not have to share His reason with us. I am reminded of the saying of the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, which puts this all into perspective: "I would not want to believe in a G-d Whose actions always made sense to me." After all, that is why He is our G-d, and we are His subjects.

Va'ani Tefillah

Ha'meshubach, v'ha'mefoar, v'ha'misnasei mi'yemos olam.

Who is praised, glorified and elevated since days of old.

The Malbim distinguishes between two words which describe honor: kavod and pe'er. An elderly man is given kavod, honor, because of his age. His metzius, essence, demands respect. Pe'er, glory, is the esteem one gives to a chacham, wise man, sage, whose personal attributes cause him to stand out, and thus, be worthy of accolade. Horav Chaim Friedlander, zl, employs this idea in explaining the tefillah. We praise Hashem concerning His control of teva, nature, maintaining the world on a natural course. In addition, we glorify Him for those activities which transcend the realm of nature. This is what is meant by ha'mefoar, (He is) glorified. We then add v'ha'misnasei (and Who is) "elevated," to emphasize that with all of the glorification that we mere mortals express, Hashem is elevated and even greater, for we cannot possibly aptly venerate Hashem. His eminence is far beyond our comprehension.

Sponsored in loving memory of RABBI SAMUEL STONE Harav Yeshayahu ben Nachman z"l niftar 9 Kislev 5747

By his children and grandchildren, Birdie & Lenny Frank & Family

From Rabbi Yissocher Frand ryfrand@torah.org & genesis@torah.org
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Subject Rabbi Frand on Parsha

Rabbi Yissocher Frand Parshas Vayeitzei

The Twelve Stones Become One: Inverted Symbolism?

In Parshas Vayetzei, Yaakov took "from the rocks of the place". Rav Yehuda teaches in the Medrash that Yaakov took 12 stones, symbolic of the Almighty's decree that the Jewish people would be founded based on a family consisting of 12 Tribes. Yaakov said to himself, "My grandfather Avraham was not able to fulfill this decree; my father Yitzchak was not able to fulfill this decree. If these 12 stones that I am placing under my head will merge into a single stone, I will take it as a Divine Sign that I will be able to fulfill this decree." In the morning, when Yaakov saw that the 12 stones had indeed merged into one, he knew that he would be the progenitor of a single nation emerging from a family of 12 sons.

Rav Simcha Schepps, z"l, asks a question on this incident. It would have been more logical to request a symbolic sign that he would be the father of a 12 tribe nation by taking a single stone and having it turn into 12 stones by the next morning. Yaakov's symbolism seems counter-intuitive. Twelve stones joining to form one stone appears to symbolize just the reverse of the sign he was looking for.

Rav Simcha Schepps answers his question by citing a second Medrash. When G-d told Avraham "I will make you into a great nation"

[Bereshis 12:2] Avraham asked Him (according to the Medrash) "but you already have 70 nations who are descended from Noach, what will be so special about another nation?" The Almighty answered Avraham -- "The nation that will descend from you is the nation about whom it will be said "For which is such a great nation?" (ki mi goy gadol) [Devorim 4:7] - that is the nation that will emerge from you."

What is the meaning of "goy gadol" (literally, big nation)? The biggest "goy gadol" in the world today is the Chinese. There are more Chinese in the world than any other people. The second largest nationality is the Indians. There are approximately 12 million Jews in the world. Never have we ever been the "goy gadol". So what is the interpretation of the aforementioned Medrash? What is the nature of this peculiar dialog between Avraham and the Almighty?

The answer is that there is a special connotation to the word "gadol". "Gadol" does not mean 'big' as in numerically large. Rav Dessler points out that the interpretation of "gadol" is revealed to us by its first appearance in the Torah [Bereshis 1:16] "es haMaor haGadol" (the great light, referring to the sun). "Gadol" means the ability to give to others. The sun is not called "gadol" because it is so big. The sun is called "gadol" because it provides light and heat for the entire universe. Likewise, when Moshe Rabbeinu tells G-d "You have begun to show "Gadlecha" to your servant" [Devorim 3:24] what does "Gadlecha" mean? Rashi explains in Parshas V'Etchanan "this refers to the Attribute of your Goodness" (zu midas Tuvecha). The Almighty is the ultimate Giver.

Similarly, when we praise G-d in Shmoneh Esrei in the expression "haKel haGadol" the word Gadol does not mean "big", it means He is the Master of Kindness and Goodness. Another similarity is the meaning of "and Moshe became a Gadol and went out to see his brethren's suffering" [Shmos 2:11]. Since Moshe was a "gadol" he wanted to become aware first hand of how his brethren were suffering and see how he might be able to help them.

The technical definition of "gadol" is the capacity to do for others, to help others, to be concerned about others. When we talk about an "Adam Gadol" (a person who is a gadol), we are not speaking merely about erudition. It is not merely defining someone who knows the entire Torah. Every Gadol who we can think of was a person that was always concerned about the community. That is the definition of a Gadol.

Now we understand the dialog between Avraham and G-d. There are plenty of nations in the world. There are 2 billion Chinese and a billion Indians. However, G-d promised Avraham that he would make him into a nation that is "gadol", meaning a nation of people that care about others and have the capacity to give.

So too Yaakov Avinu says, "If I take 12 stones and they become one, this symbolizes a nation that has unity amongst themselves." If there is unity between people (achdus), the members of this nation are not just concerned about themselves but they are concerned about others as well. When people are only into themselves, there is disunity. There is no achdus.

Yaakov knew that the appropriate sign that he would be the progenitor of the "Goy Gadol" promised to Avraham is for him to take 12 stones that would turn into one, demonstrating this property of unity and the capacity for caring for one another.

An Unprecedented Thank-You

When Leah gave birth to and named her fourth son, the pasuk says: "And she became pregnant once more and she gave birth to a son and she said 'This time I will thank Hashem' therefore she called his name

Yehudah..." [Bereshis 29:35]. The Gemara teaches [Kiddushin 7b] that Leah was the first person in the history of the world to thank the Almighty.

This is a very perplexing Gemara. How can this be? Noach emerged from the Teyva and offered sacrifices. Were they not offerings of thanksgiving? When Avraham Avinu "lifted up his hands to Kel Elyon" following his victory in the war between the 4 Kings and the 5 Kings, was that not thanks? What does the Gemara in Kiddushin mean by saying that from the day G-d created His world there was no person who expressed thanksgiving to the Almighty until Leah did it upon the birth of her fourth son?

It is inconceivable that none of the patriarchs said "Hoda-ah" (thanksgiving to the Almighty)!

The Mir Mashgiach, Rav Yeruchem Levovitz, points out a very interesting insight into human behavior. If Reuven does Shimon a big favor and then Shimon says to Reuven, "I can't thank you enough" and is very effusive with his thanks, Reuven may respond, "Think nothing of it."

We look at this conversation and we think superficially "Reuven is a good guy and so is Shimon." Shimon thanked Reuven profusely and Reuven said, "Think nothing of it!"

Rav Yeruchem teaches that both Reuven and Shimon have a hidden agenda here. Shimon does not want to be beholden to Reuven> Therefore, he thanks him profusely. He buys him Shabbos flowers. He sends him a candy basket. Why? Shimon wants to relieve himself of the duty to be beholden to Reuven for the favor he received from him. On the other hand, Reuven's attitude is "This guy owes me big time." So he tells Shimon, "Think nothing of it. Do not say another word!" Why? Reuven does not want Shimon to pay off his obligation to to acknowledge the favor. Reuven wants Shimon to remember it every time he sees him. The hidden dynamics are that people who are indebted do not want to feel indebted and those who have done favors want to have those favors remembered forever. They want to remain in control of the person they helped. This is what often goes on in human relationships.

Certainly, Noah expressed thanksgiving and so did Avraham and the other Patriarchs. They each gave thanks. However, when Leah came and said, "This time I will thank Hashem..." and therefore something unprecedented occurred when Leah called her son Yehudah. By giving the boy a name that perpetuates the phenomenon of her need to Thank Hashem for him, she indicated that she never wanted to lose that sense of expressing gratitude to the Almighty. Every time she would address her son, she would bring to mind the great debt she owed to the Creator of the World for granting her this additional child.

Leah's thank-you was not a onetime expression of thanks. It was the first ongoing constant expression of "thank-you" to G-d in the history of humankind.

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Rabbi Mayer Twersky Appreciating Our Blessings

"Vayeitsei Yaakov meBe'er Sheva vayelech Charana"

Rashi comments, quoting Chazal, that the Torah, seemingly gratuitously, accentuates Yaakov's leaving Be'er Sheva to teach an important lesson. When a Yaakov leaves a city, the splendor, radiance, and glory of the city also depart.

Why does the Torah frame this important lesson negatively? Why not depict the luster of the tzaddik by teaching that when a tzaddik arrives in a city it becomes filled with splendor, radiance, and glory?

The answer to these questions highlights a tragic human tendency. Of course, when a tzaddik arrives, his arrival and continued presence bring splendor, radiance, and glory. But we tend not to appreciate that wonderful beracha - at any rate, not fully appreciate it. Only when vayeitsei Yaakov, when the tzaddik leaves, does one fully realize what he had. It is tragic to first fully realize what one had after losing it. If only one had appreciated the tzaddik while he was living locally, one could have benefited so much more - seek him out, learn from him, get close to him, etc. When appreciation is retrospective, none of this is possible.

The lesson is clear. We must make a concerted effort to appreciate the berachos the Rebbono Shel Olam bestows upon us while we have them and can take full advantage. The berachos of Hakadosh Baruch Hu are endless - tzaddikim in our midst, family, health, parnassa, etc. We need to step back and appreciate in order to feel gratitude and in order to take full advantage.

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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parsha Parables - Parshas Vayeitsey 5772 Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky Stories & Anecdotes that Illuminate the Weekly Torah Portion and Holidays 9 Shevat 5771, Friday, January 14, 2011

*Dedicated in memory of Cantor Samuel Ganz ob"m by the Weissman
and Ganz families*

I'll Be Waiting

Yaakov is running from his brother Esav. After a 14 year respite in the Yeshiva of Sheim V'ever he traveled to Charan to the family of his mother, but first, the Torah tells us that he rests. And he dreams. Yaakov dreams the famous dream depicted in murals and paintings of angels ascending and descending a ladder that begins in an earthly abode and ends in Heaven.

The Torah tells us about his vision: "And behold, the Lord was standing over him, and He said, "I am the Lord, the G-d of Abraham your father, and the G-d of Isaac; the land upon which you are lying to you I will give it and to your seed. And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out westward and eastward and northward and southward; and through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth and through your seed. And behold, I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land, for I will not forsake you until I have done what I have spoken concerning you." (Genesis 28:14-16).

Simple question. Hashem promises that he will give Yaakov the land of Israel. He also says the he will guard him on the way. Fine. But what does the Almighty mean, when He says, "and I will return you to this land, for I will not forsake you until I have done what I have spoken concerning you."

What does that have to do with returning him to the land? Hashem can guard Yaakov wherever he is and He can give him the land wherever he is as well. After all, I know quite a number of real estate magnates who own property all over the country. They don't live or return to the land that they own.

The Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, Rabbi Nossan Zvi Finkel zt'l, passed away early November.

Rav Finkel grew up in Chicago and attended Ida Crown Jewish Academy, a Modern Orthodox day school. Post high-school he ended up studying in the Mir, a Yeshiva in Jerusalem that was headed by a cousin. It was there that he rose to Torah greatness and ultimately became the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir and one of the great Torah leaders and visionaries of our generation.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Yechiel Spero, a Rebbe at Baltimore's Talmudic Academy and the author of the inspiring "Touched by a Story" series, wrote a beautiful tribute in the Yated Ne'eman on the day of his passing. In it he tells a wonderful story which I have adapted, using bits of his eloquent language.

On that sad morning in November, a woman who knows Rabbi Spero, called him absolutely distraught over Rabbi Finkel's passing. Here is why: Her son, Moshe, had struggled mightily in high school and soon fell in with a terrible crowd. Before long, he headed into a downward spiral and there seemed to be no bottom. After a terribly difficult period of time, he started to pull out of it. Showing signs of growth, he tried to break free from his friends and their influences, but it became harder and harder. Finally, he decided that he must get out of the country. On a pipe dream, he headed to Israel and to the Mir Yeshiva.

He was up front and honest with the Rosh Yeshiva. He could barely read a Rashi. But the Rosh Yeshiva believed in him. He sensed the sincerity, the desire in his heart and his neshamah and he accepted the young man into the Mir.

Thrilled that he had a second chance, Moshe took the opportunity, and flourished. Before long, he developed into a full fledged ben Torah. But after this amazing year away from home was up, he began to worry. How was he going to deal with his old friends when he returned? They would certainly mock him and try to lure him back to his troublesome ways.

Moshe decided that the only protection would be a bracha from the Rosh Yeshiva, to be strong. With Rabbi Finkel's blessing reverberating in his heart, he was confident that he would be able to conquer any challenge that came his way. His flight was leaving a few hours after Yom Kippur ended. And so, immediately after Maariv, Moshe tried to approach the Rosh Yeshiva, to say good bye, but the Rosh Yeshiva, weakened from Parkinson was being protected by older students who served as his attendants. They were trying to whisk him back to his home to finally eat. Moshe rushed to his Rebbe's home and waited there.

However, when the attendants came to the house and spotted Moshe they were livid. The look in their eyes shouted, "How dare you bother the Rosh Yeshiva even before he got a chance to eat after Yom Kippur?! You know that the rosh yeshiva's frail health called for immediate rest and food."

Moshe was elated. He apologized over and over that he had overstepped his bounds, but explained how he desperately needed the bracha. He ran out of the house heading to his apartment where he would quickly pack and catch a taxi to the airport. Suddenly, he heard someone calling his name. He turned around and saw one of the older students calling him back. The Rosh Yeshiva was calling for him. Panting, Moshe switched gears and ran back anxious to hear what the Rosh Yeshiva wanted.

The Rosh Yeshiva was laying in his bed, unable to move. Moshe leaned in close to hear what Rav Nosson Tzvi had to say.

The Rosh Yeshiva held Moshe's hand and in a barely audible whisper, he exerted, "I will be waiting for you."

The woman on the phone sobbed. "Today my son is one of the Rebbes who teach Torah in the Mir."

The Message

Hashem made many promises and assurances to Yaakov, but the last one that he says is really the clincher. "I am not going to leave you until I bring you back here to the very spot where I am."

For one simple reason: He is telling Yaakov, the same statement that he tells us all. The statement and assurance that has sustained us through the most difficult times- I will see you back home. "I will be waiting for you."

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OU Torah

Rachel Teaches Us How to Pray From Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Safran

Why the two explanations for the name Rachel gave to her long-awaited first born son?

A beautiful young maiden shows a stranger an act of kindness. The stranger falls in love with the maiden and asks her father, his relation, for her hand. The maiden's father agrees – on the condition that he serve him for seven years. The stranger does so gladly, only to be tricked at the end of the seven years. Seven additional years later, he finally marries the beautiful maiden.

But the maiden has trouble conceiving. She prays to God. God rewards her prayer and she becomes pregnant. She names her child, Joseph.

Rachel, our young maiden, gave two explanations for the child's name.

The first, "God has taken away (from the root, asaf, to take away) my disgrace. The second, when she prayed that Jacob's twelfth and last son be born (from the root, yasaf, to add) to her.

Why the two explanations?

To teach us what it means to pray.

Masechet B'rachot teaches that if one enters a large walled city where danger is imminent, one should utter two tefilot, prayers: the first upon entering, and the second when leaving. Ben-Azai, however, requires four tefilot: two when entering, one asking God for safe entry and the other thanking Him for making one's safe entry possible; two more when exiting: one beseeching God for a safe exit and the other thanking Him for the safe exit, in addition to asking God for His continued protection and safekeeping:

"I thank you, God, that you brought me forth from this city in peace, and just as you have brought me forth in peace, so shall You lead me in peace, protect me, and save me from all enemies and obstacles in the way."

The last two tefilot, according to Ben-Azai, include a request (bakasha) for a safe exit plus an expression of gratitude for the safety already provided by God. But there is more. The gratitude (hodah) incorporates yet a further request (bakasha). It calls to mind a thank you note that includes a postscript, More! As the Mishnah concludes, "and give thanks for what is past and make supplication for the future." Ben-Azai does more than simply add another two tefilot. He teaches a core principle of tefilah.

According to the Tana Kamah, when entering a place of danger (krach) a prayer is recited for future safety and security. Ben-Azai adds to this a tefilah of gratitude for the past. Likewise upon leaving the krach, the Tana Kamah requires a tefilah to be said expressing thanks to God for His past help, while Ben-Azai adds a requirement asking for God's continued protection, acknowledging His present assistance while, at the same time, beseeching Him for His continued kindness.

Just as the reasons for prayer never end, tefilah never ends.

Perhaps this is what Chazal meant when they taught, "... were it that man would pray all day long." And even if we did pray all day long, the task would never be complete, because the very instant we "finished," the need begins anew.

"Even if our mouths were full of song as the sea, our tongues full of joyous song as its multitude of waves ... we still could never thank God for even one of the thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad, myriads of favors that He performed for us . . ."

When we recite the powerful Birkat Hashir of Nishmat on Shabbat and Yom Tov, we express praise and gratitude to God for all that He has done, while simultaneously affirming our continued dependence upon His mercy. "Even if our mouths were full of song as the sea, our tongues full of joyous song as its multitude of waves ... we still could never thank God for even one of the thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad, myriads of favors that He performed for us . . ."

Again, the lesson is clear – tefilah is never-ending. We can only pause long enough to realize how much more gratitude, praise, and requests are still due.

If prayer never ends, neither can it ever begin. Rambam's view is that tefilah is Biblically ordained and therefore has no set time. Biblically defined, prayer is “service of the heart”, and this avodah sh'balev can never cease, nor can it be limited by a preordained temporal framework. Ideally, avodah sh'balev should be spontaneous, continually inspired by our awareness of our blessings. To try to contain such spirit by time would cause it to burst.

Consider the Shmo-neh Esrei. We first ask, Who is this God whose door we knock at three times a day? He is kadosh. Once we recognize who He is, we may then ask Him for all that we need – personally, communally, and nationally; bakasha.

Now what? Thank you – modim anachnu lach.

But then why Sim Shalom at the end of Hodah? Again, we thank God, express gratitude and then simultaneously repeat our needs and requests! “Grant peace, goodness, blessing...and compassion upon us and upon all Israel . . . and may it be good in your sight to bless your people Israel.” P.S. send more!

Are we not rude to be so demanding? Yes! But that is pre-cisely the point. How could we ever take leave of God without realizing how much more we need. The very act of expressing gratitude to God (hodah) must include ever more supplication (bakasha). In short, hodah leads to bakasha, and bakasha leads to more hodah. It is a never-ending process.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that “genuine prayer is an event in which man surpasses himself. . . . Its beginning lies on this side of the word, but the end lies beyond all words.” This side of the word is the request, the need, the bakasha. Beyond all words is the never-ceasing praise.

Ben-Azai teaches that prayer is not simply an appreciation of the past, nor merely a hope for the future, nor even a programmed mastery of Divine kindness and protection. Prayer is, ultimately, the inspired recognition of God's mercy and simultaneous outpouring of song, praise, joy.

Prayer is our never-ending dance of hodah and bakasha. One leads to the other which leads to the other which leads to the other. And in dancing, we become more than dancers. We become as God would have us.

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From Jeffrey Gross <jgross@torah.org>
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Weekly Halacha
by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Overnight Mail on Friday for Shabbos

Question: Is it permissible to send a letter or a package on Friday with specific instructions to deliver it on Shabbos?

Discussion: Amirah l'akum, giving instructions to a non-Jew to perform a Shabbos Labor which would be forbidden for a Jew to do on Shabbos, is prohibited.¹ It makes no difference whether the Jew's command is given on Shabbos or before Shabbos.² Accordingly, it should be forbidden to instruct a non-Jew on Friday to deliver an overnight package on Shabbos, since there are several prohibitions involved in delivering mail on Shabbos.³

When necessary, however, there is room for leniency. There are some poskim⁴ who hold that only a direct command to a non-Jew is forbidden; instructing a non-Jew to instruct another non-Jew —amirah

l'amirah—is permitted. Not all poskim agree with this leniency. Mishnah Berurah⁵ rules that one can rely on this view only to avoid a major financial loss (hefsed gadol). Other poskim rule that one may rely on this view only in a case of great need (tzorech gadol).⁶ It follows, therefore, that one is permitted to send an overnight letter to be delivered on Shabbos in case of great loss or great need, since the command to deliver the item is not given directly to the delivery man but rather to another non-Jew.⁷

There are several other arguments for permitting one to have a letter delivered on Shabbos:

* Firstly, the Chasam Sofer⁸ rules that even those who prohibit instructing a non-Jew to instruct another non-Jew would permit it if the Jew's instructions to the first non-Jew were given before Shabbos.⁹

* Secondly, some poskim hold that if the second non-Jew is not aware that he is doing a melachah for a Jew, then it is clearly permitted for the Jew to instruct a non-Jew to tell another non-Jew to do a melachah.¹⁰

* Thirdly, some poskim¹¹ argue that mailmen do not work for the sender but rather for the government Postal Service (or a private company), which has an interest in mail being delivered. They are not delivering the mail because the Jew asked them to do so, but because they are employees of the Service. They are not considered, therefore, as doing something for the Jew. Mail delivery is similar to garbage collection in which the garbage men are not working for the homeowner but rather for the city government.¹²

All these reasons are sufficient to permit a letter to be sent with instructions to deliver it on Shabbos, even when the situation is not necessarily one of averting a major loss or filling a great need. Obviously, if there is no need or urgency, one should not rely on the above arguments.¹³

Question: What may the recipient do when an overnight letter arrives on Shabbos?

Discussion: Most of the time a letter sent overnight will contain one or several muktzeh items, such as money, bills, important documents related to business activity, etc. It is, therefore, forbidden to take the letter directly out of the hands of the delivery person. But even in the event that the recipient knows that there are no muktzeh items in the package, it is still debatable whether or not the recipient is permitted to take the letter directly out of the delivery man's hands, and it is strongly recommended that one not do so, for the following reasons:

* Several poskim are of the opinion that a sealed envelope which cannot be opened on Shabbos is muktzeh, since it is not a utensil and it has no other use.¹⁴ A minority opinion holds that it is not muktzeh since it can be used as a bookmark.¹⁵

* An overnight letter that was delivered on Shabbos was probably outside of the techum Shabbos before the onset of Shabbos. Some poskim hold that a letter that originated from outside the techum Shabbos is muktzeh. Other poskim disagree.¹⁶

* When any letter arrives on Shabbos, the recipient should not take it directly from the mailman's hands. Rather, he should allow the mailman to place the letter in the mailbox or in the house. The reason for this is that we do not want the Jew to inadvertently carry the letter into the house, an act which may be Biblically forbidden.¹⁷ Possibly, however, if there is an eiruv, one may take the letter directly from the mailman's hands.¹⁸

1 This is a Rabbinic prohibition. According to a minority opinion, it is considered a Biblical prohibition; see Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 243:7.

2 O.C. 307:2.

3 See Chelkas Yaakov 1:65.

4 Chavos Yair 53.

5 307:24, quoting the Sefer ha-Chayim.

6 Maharsham 2:136, quoting the Shvus Yaakov 2:42.

7 Maharsham 2:136, and in Da'as Torah 247:1; Az Nidberu 3:36.

8 O.C. 60.

9 See Beir Halachah 307:2, who quotes this Chasam Sofer and comments that from the Rashba it seems that this is not so, that amirah l'amirah is

forbidden even during the week. But see Zichron Yosef 97 (quoted in Machazeh Eliyahu 37) who explains that there is no contradiction between the Rashba and the ruling of the Chasam Sofer, and that amirah l'amirah before the onset of Shabbos is permitted.

- 10 Mishneh Sachir 77 quoting Maharshag. See also Chasam Sofer, C.M. 185.
- 11 Peri Megadim 247:3 according to the explanation of Machazeh Eliyahu 37.
- 12 Possibly, this argument could be advanced to include employees of a private company as well.
- 13 See Minchas Yitzchak 6:18, who is hesitant about permitting this, although he concedes that many people are lenient.
- 14 Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:21-5; 22:5; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (see Shalmei Yehudah 12, note 21). See Hebrew Notes, pg. 570-571, for further elaboration.
- 15 Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Shulchan Shelomo 308:4-3).
- 16 See Mishnah Berurah 307:56 for the various views. Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:21-5; 22-5, rules stringently.
- 17 Mishnah Berurah 307:56.
- 18 See Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 307:66.

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By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Grave Issues about Graven Images By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

When reading the parsha in which Rochel "stole" her father's idols, I thought it appropriate for us to study:

Miriam recently asked me these two questions regarding avodah zarah:

- 1) I received some figurines from a museum shop which resemble various Egyptian gods. May I keep them to demonstrate at the Seder what silly gods the Egyptians worshipped?
- 2) My non-observant, but very respectful, father has a rather eclectic collection of various art objects -- including a four-foot-tall bronze statue of some Hindu figure. Do I have any obligation to say or do anything?
Zev, a chess enthusiast, asked me the following:
3) "I just received a present of a very nicely carved chess set. Unfortunately, the king has a cross. May I keep the set as is, or must I break off the cross on the king?"

Jack, an archeology student, sends me an e-mail:

- 4) "As part of my studies, I will be joining a dig. What happens if we find an idol? Even though it is not worshiped today, would the mitzvah of destroying it still be applicable? Also, in examining the object, one has to gaze on and familiarize himself with the piece. Does this violate the prohibition of gazing at avodah zarah?"
Each of these actual shaylos that I was asked revolves around the question of whether a Jew may own an item that has idolatrous overtones, even though he has no idolatrous intention. Is this lack of intent sufficient to avoid any Torah violations?

As we will see, there are several potential shaylos that we must analyze to determine the halacha:

- I. May a Jew look at an icon?
- II. Does it make a difference whether it is still worshipped?
- III. May a Jew own an icon that represents an idol, even if it was never worshipped?
- IV. If owning this icon infringes on no other prohibitions, does it violate maris ayin, doing something that arouses suspicion?

In Parshas Eikev, the Torah commands: "Burn their carved gods in fire. Do not desire and obtain the silver or gold that is upon them, lest you become ensnared by it, for it is repugnant to Hashem your G-d. Nor shall you bring this abomination into your house; rather, you should ban it. Abhor it and revile it, for it is banned."ⁱ

This pasuk includes the following mitzvot:

1. Burn their carved gods in fire commands us to destroy avodah zarah.ⁱⁱ

2. Do not desire and obtain the silver or gold that is upon them prohibits benefit even from the decorations on an idol.ⁱⁱⁱ One may not own or sell idols, even if one thinks that they are the silliest things on earth, since he gains financially or in other ways.

3. Nor shall you bring this abomination into your house bans bringing an idol into your house and also forbids benefiting from idolatry,^{iv} since this is considered "bringing" the idol into your use and possession.

4. Furthermore, the Torah states al tifu el elilim, do not turn to idols.^v What is included in this proscription? Does it include looking at idols or images that represent idols?

The Sifra quotes two interpretations of this verse. One prohibits studying idolatry, including its beliefs and how the idol is worshipped. A second approach understands the verse to forbid even looking at idols.^{vii} The poskim rule that both approaches are accepted halacha: the Torah thus prohibits studying idolatrous practices and beliefs, as well as looking at icons.^{viii} (The Rambam states that one receives malkus for violating this prohibition.^{ix} Therefore, someone who violates either interpretation of this mitzvah is halachically invalidated for providing testimony, even if he has no idolatrous intent.)

DOES THAT MEAN THAT EVEN GLANCING AT AN IDOL IS A TORAH VIOLATION?

The Magen Avraham^x explains that the Torah prohibits only gazing at an idol, but does not prohibit glancing at it: seeing it is not prohibited, but intentionally looking at it is.

THE ICON OR ONLY THE IDOL?

Is it prohibited to look at articles that merely represent the actual idol, even though they are not themselves worshipped (icons), or is the prohibition limited to idols that are themselves worshipped? The answer to this question depends on how one understands the following passage of Gemara.

One may not look at the image itself, even on weekdays, because one thereby violates 'Do not turn to idols.' How do we derive this law from this verse? Rav Chanin explained, 'do not face figures created by man.'^{xi} This unclear passage implies that one may not look at any image, even one not worshipped.

On the other hand, elsewhere, the Gemara praises the Talmudic scholar Rabbi Menachem ben Sima'ie as a holy man, because he never looked at the images that one finds on coins.^{xii} This implies that an especially holy person does not look at likenesses, but a person who observes halacha without stringencies may do so. Thus, we are faced with a seeming inconsistency: one Gemara statement prohibits looking at any image, the other implies that one may (although it is meritorious to avoid it).

The rishonim suggest many different approaches to explain the Gemara in Shabbos. Here are two differing approaches that resolve the above quandary in very different ways:

1. First opinion: Some contend that the prohibition of looking at an image applies only to one that was manufactured for worship, and the image on a coin is not worshipped. According to this opinion, although the Gemara seems to derive that one may not look at any portrait or image whatsoever, it really means to limit the prohibition to actual idols. Nevertheless, it is praiseworthy not to look at any portraits or images at all.^{xiii}

2. Second opinion: Others understand that one may not look at any image whatsoever.^{xiv} If this approach is correct, why does the Gemara in Avodah Zarah imply that Rabbi Menachem ben Sima'ie's acts are meritorious, but not required, when the Gemara in Shabbos prevents looking at any image?

To answer this question, some authorities explain that although it is prohibited to look at any image, this applies only when one's attention is diverted to the image. Since coins are in common use all the time, glancing at them is not considered a diversion.^{xv}

EGYPTIAN FIGURINES

Whether one may own a replica of an ancient Egyptian icon depends on the above-quoted dispute among the rishonim. According to the first opinion quoted above, since these icons were meant for educational purposes, rather than to encourage worship, it is technically permitted to look at them (although it is meritorious to refrain). On the other hand, according to the second opinion, even looking at these pieces violates the Torah's mitzvah, since only items as common as coins are excluded. Certainly, owning these items is problematic.

How does the Shulchan Aruch adjudicate this question?

Surprising as it may seem, the two statements of Shulchan Aruch appear to contradict one another. In Orach Chayim^{xvi} he cites the above-mentioned Gemara in Shabbos in a way that implies that he prohibits looking at any image at all. On the other hand, in the laws on idolatry, he limits the prohibition to looking at bona fide, worshipped idols. We should also note that there he cites a different

reason to prohibit looking at idols: enjoying the artwork is considered benefiting from idolatry.xvii

However, the major commentators on the Shulchan Aruch in both places note that the accepted practice is to prohibit only icons manufactured for worship.xviii

COLLECTING ICON STAMPS

A stamp dealer-collector asked Rav Moshe Feinstein whether he could own, buy and sell stamps that contain crosses and other idolatrous images. Rav Moshe ruled that since stamps are a common item, like coins, one may own or sell their images, and may also look at them. Rav Moshe mentions that it is meritorious not to, presumably for the same reason that Rabbi Menachem ben Sima'ie of the Gemara avoided looking at coins.xix

ZEV'S CHESS SET

According to the reasons we have applied so far, Zev may be able to keep his fancy carved chess set. No one worships the cross on the king, and one could, perhaps, argue that this is familiar enough that no one is led astray by these pieces. As mentioned above, it is meritorious not to have any images at all, and certainly not to have anything that is reminiscent of idolatry. Thus, there is good reason for the custom to break off the cross of such chess pieces.

Miriam's Dad's Hindu statue involves a more serious halachic problem. Firstly, if this image was manufactured for worship, all opinions prohibit looking at it and having any enjoyment from it. Furthermore, if it was once worshipped, then several other Torah violations are involved, including that of having an avodah zarah in one's house and benefiting from avodah zarah (because he enjoys looking at the artwork). In addition, there is a mitzvah to destroy it.

SHOULD WE ASSUME THAT THIS STATUE WAS WORSHIPPED?

Are we required to assume that the Hindu statue was worshipped? After all, it looks as if it was created as a collector's item, not for worship. The answer is that if this statue was manufactured in a place where images of this nature are worshipped, he must assume that this icon is a bona fide idol.xx

IS IT MARIS AYIN?

In addition to the halachic problem of looking at these idols, the Gemara raises an additional factor to take into consideration: Is there concern that someone might suspect that the owner worships them.xxi

Are we, today, still concerned that someone might worship idols?

The answer to this question goes back to understanding the basics of maris ayin. Doesn't the concept of maris ayin conflict with the mitzvah of judging people favorably? If everyone always judged others favorably, there would never be a reason for maris ayin. Yet, we see that the Torah is concerned that someone might suspect a Torah Jew of violating a mitzvah and judge him unfavorably. Indeed, although people are required to judge us favorably, we are also not permitted to do something that others may misinterpret as violating halacha. Therefore, a person's actions must be above suspicion. In other words, a person should not rely on his sterling reputation to allow him to do something that might be misinterpreted.

However, if circumstances dictate that people will assume that nothing wrong was done, there is no violation of maris ayin. (I have written a different article entirely on the subject of maris ayin in which I discussed these details.) Indeed, even in cases where there was maris ayin at the time of the Gemara, the prohibition is rescinded in places and times when the concern no longer exists.

Concerning maris ayin and the prohibition of avodah zarah, the poskim conclude that if no one worships these icons anymore anywhere in the world, one need not be concerned about suspicion that they are being worshipped.xxii As long as these idols are worshipped somewhere, one must be concerned about maris ayin. Thus, it makes a difference whether this particular idol is still worshipped somewhere in the world. Since, unfortunately, Hinduism is still being practiced in the world, one may not own an idol that they might worship, because of the prohibition of maris ayin, even if no other prohibition to its ownership exists. On the other hand, since no one worships the ancient Egyptian idols any more, it is not maris ayin to own these figurines.

TEACHING ANCIENT RELIGIONS

I mentioned above that the Sifra rules that studying idolatry, including the religious beliefs and how the idol is worshipped, is prohibited min hatorah as part of the mitzvah of al tifnu el elilim, do not turn to idols.

Does this include studying ancient religions or archeology? Does this prohibit reading mythology as a form of literature?

In Nisan 5740 (1960), Rav Yehudah Parnes, a prominent Rosh Yeshivah, asked Rav Moshe Feinstein a shaylah regarding an observant public school teacher, whose required ancient history curriculum included teaching the beliefs of ancient Greece and Rome. Rav Parnes inquired whether the fact that these religions are not accorded respect in the modern world validates studying and teaching their

beliefs. Do we therefore permit teaching these religions, since one is pointing out how invalid they are, or is this teaching and studying still prohibited?

Rav Moshe rules that the prohibition of studying idolatry exists, regardless for what reason one studies the religion. This also prohibits reading mythology that includes idolatry, even as a study of ancient literature.

However, Rav Moshe contends that the Torah prohibits studying only what is authored by a proponent of the religion. One may study something written by someone who scoffed at the religion, just as we see that even the Torah sometimes describes the way idolaters worshipped in order to ridicule the practice. Rav Moshe rules that one may study these subjects only if the teacher derides their beliefs and does not have the students read texts written by those who believe in the idols.

Rav Moshe points out that the students may even benefit from this instruction, if they realize that, although most of the world's population once accepted these ridiculous beliefs, this does not demonstrate that they are true. Similarly, the fact that millions of people accept certain other false notions as true is not evidence of their veracity.xxiii Truth is not determined by democratic means!

In conclusion, in reference to our original questions, Miriam may save the Egyptian figurines, although it is praiseworthy to dispose of them, but her father may not hold onto his Hindu statue, even as art, or in order to mock it. Zev may keep his chess set. Jack is prohibited from gazing at an idol that he unearths, and furthermore he would be required to destroy such an idol. Since I presume this could get him into trouble with the authorities, he would have a different question – is he required to destroy the idol, knowing that he may get into legal trouble? This is a topic for a different time.

Our belief in Hashem is the most basic of mitzvos. Praiseworthy is he who stays far from idols and their modern substitutes and directs his heart to Hashem.

i Devarim 7:25-26 ii Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zarah 7:1. We should note that this mitzvah is also mentioned in Devarim 12:2. iii Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 428 iv Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zarah 7:2 v VaYikra 19:4 vi VaYikra 19:4 vii Yerushalmi, Avodah Zarah 3:1 viii Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zarah 2:2; Sefer HaMitzvos, Lo Saaseh #10; Chinuch #213 ix Sefer HaMitzvos, Lo Saaseh #10 x 307:23 xi Shabbos 149a xii Avodah Zarah 50a xiii Tosafos, Shabbos ad loc. xiv Rashi; Tosafos Rid xv Tosafos, Avodah Zarah 50a xvi 307:16 xvii Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 142:15, quoting Rabbeinu Yerucham xviii Shach; Magen Avraham xix Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:69 xx Rama, Yoreh Deah 141:3 and Shach ad loc. 17 xxi Avodah Zarah 43b xxii see Rama, Shach, and Gra, Yoreh Deah 141:3 xxiii Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:53