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Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
Tazria Parshas Hachodesh 5768

Mazal Tov to Rena & Alan Schnall on the upcoming marriage of Jeremy to Dena Gross
Mazal Tov to Betty & Steve Nissenfeld on Yossi's engagement to Yona Lebovic

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THE WORK OF HEAVEN Rabbi Berel Wein

The Talmud records for us that Rabi Yishmael met Rabbi Meir, who was one of the great disciples of Rabi Akiva. He asked Rabi Meir: "My son, what type of work do you do?" Rabi Meir responded by saying "I am a scribe." To which the great Rabi Yishmael responded: "My son, do your work carefully and diligently, for your work is the work of Heaven!"

The simple explanation of Rabi Yishmael's comment is that a scribe must be very careful while writing the scroll of the Torah or the scrolls for tefilin and mezuzot, for making a mistake in writing any of those items will perforce invalidate their use. Even a fly alighting on the wet ink and smudging the letter will invalidate it.

But on a deeper level, Rabi Yishmael was telling not only Rabi Meir but all of us as well, that everything that we do in life requires care and attention – all work and behavior of a Jew on this earth is judged through the prism of advancing the work of Heaven. That is the criterion to which we are held to – does our action and behavior in all of our walks of life advance the work of Heaven or unfortunately retard or nullify it.

Judaism places great emphasis on the seemingly small and mundane activities of life. Everything in life is included in the category called "the work of Heaven." As a consequence of this, it is obvious that everything and everyone has importance and requires attention and diligence.

In the Torah portions of these weeks the Torah describes for us 'negaim' – types of spiritual plagues that had physical manifestations that rendered an uncleanness to arise. The Torah describes for us in great detail these types of 'negaim.' They came in three areas of a person's life. Firstly, in one's own body and person. Then in the structure of one's house. And finally, in the clothing that one wore.

Although the underlying explanations and root causes of 'negaim' have remained mysterious to us, even after the comments and explanations of the Talmud and the great rabbinic commentators of all of the ages are factored in, the obvious lesson here is that these three areas of life one's are the crucial points of danger in life. They are the areas most susceptible to 'negaim' – to spiritual and behavioral plagues that negate our other good deeds and darken our lives.

Personal behavior and good self-image are the keys to a Torah personality. Wisdom, patience, tolerance and a great deal of love are necessary to build a good family relationship and to bind the generations together in harmony and mutual respect. Our public persona, what others think of us defines us as well. The rabbis of the Talmud always emphasized: "What do the other creatures of God have to say about this person?" He who is beloved and respected by one's fellow humans is also accorded that treatment by Heaven.

So how is the war against 'negaim' to be successfully conducted? By realizing that all that we do is truly the work of Heaven. Only then can we also begin to realize the great potential for good that lies within each and every one of us.

Rabi Yisrael Salanter explained that the great righteousness and holiness of Chanoch lay in the fact that the Talmud records for us that he was a shoemaker and that with every stitch that he made while creating shoes "he sang God's praises."

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter explained that the Talmud does not mean that he recited psalms or hymns of praise to God while he made shoes. It means that he made good shoes, that every stitch was perfect, that he gave his customers excellent quality for their money. He said someone who does

that sings God's praises for by so doing he advances the work of Heaven on this earth.

What people think as being their business or profession or work and not more than that is really the work of Heaven if they so will it to be. Therefore care and quality must be exercised in all areas of our life – in our personal behavior and psychological outlook, in our homes and families and in our dealings with the outside world. Only this attitude of care and concern, quality and wise considerations, can help us truly advance the work of Heaven.

Shabat shalom.

Weekly :: Parsha TAZRIA :: Rabbi Berel Wein

From the time of our father Avraham, circumcision has been the cornerstone of Jewish identity. We acknowledge this in our prayer after meals daily "we are grateful to You for your covenant that you have sealed into our flesh."

The rabbis of the Talmud indicated to us that the Jewish people accepted this commandment of circumcision willingly and happily and therefore it has persisted amongst Israel uninterruptedly for all of these many generations since the time of Avraham.

Though many claims of physical health benefits have been made over time for the efficacy of this procedure, the Jewish people have always viewed it as being the supreme symbol of personal Jewish identity and role.

Over the ages the enemies of the Jewish people have attempted to ban Jewish circumcision. The great classical Greeks considered it to be a mutilation of the body and, in that body worshipping culture, it was held to be repugnant and unacceptable.

Much more recently the "progressive, democratic, peace-loving" Soviet Union prevented Jewish circumcision. In all cases, from Antiochus to Gorbachev, there were Jews who risked all to fulfill the commandment of circumcision.

However, it bears note that the enemies of the Jews saw in Jewish circumcision a spiritual weapon that would help guarantee the Jews survival against the prevailing government, mores and culture.

As is often the case, our enemies are more astute in recognizing and identifying our true strengths than we Jews are ourselves.

The commandment of circumcision is that the procedure is to take place on the eighth day of the young boy's life. There are physical circumstances that can allow for a postponement of the actual circumcision but the obligation remains a personal responsibility upon the Jew throughout life.

For instance, the Talmud records that a person who is a hemophiliac obviously should not undergo a possible life-threatening procedure such as circumcision. However, even though that person has more than a legitimate excuse for remaining uncircumcised he is still considered to be uncircumcised according to halacha and is therefore excluded from those rituals that the Torah explicitly requires that only circumcised Jews may participate in.

This is a further indication of the stress and importance that the Torah places upon this commandment and how vital it is to the Jewish being and future.

It is therefore most understandable why the performance of this commandment occasions the necessity for a festive meal and a great gathering of friends and family.

It is not only the circumcision of that actual child that is being celebrated as much as it is a celebration of the ceremony itself - an affirmation of Jewish tradition and identity that is millennia old.

Over the centuries, Jews have paid with their lives for being circumcised but the ceremony itself is seen as an affirmation of life and holy commitment.

Physical health benefits have been ascribed to the procedure and its result. But, Jews perform this commandment out of belief, joy and conscience and not out of any other considerations. Shabat shalom.

TORAH WEEKLY :: Parshat Tazria
For the week ending 5 April 2008 / 29 Adar II 5768
from Ohr Somayach | www.ohr.edu
by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

OVERVIEW

The Torah commands a woman to bring a korban after the birth of a child. A son is to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. The Torah introduces the phenomenon of tzara'at (often mistranslated as leprosy) a miraculous affliction that attacks people, clothing and buildings to awaken a person to spiritual failures. A kohen must be consulted to determine whether a particular mark is tzara'at or not. The kohen isolates the sufferer for a week. If the malady remains unchanged, confinement continues for a second week, after which the kohen decides the person's status. The Torah describes the different forms of tzara'at. One whose tzara'at is confirmed wears torn clothing, does not cut his hair, and must alert others that he is ritually impure. He may not have normal contact with people. The phenomenon of tzara'at on clothing is described in detail.

INSIGHTS

A Rose By Any Other Name

“The kohen will look and behold - the blemish has not changed its color.” (lit. has not changed its ‘eye’) (13:55)

Give me one word in English for the French word ‘chic’. ‘Chic’ is something so quintessentially French that to translate it into English would require a truckload of adjectives.

The characteristics of a nation are evidenced in its language. In every language there are words that cannot be directly translated into any other language. To translate these words adequately usually requires a sentence.

There's a word in Yiddish (and Hebrew) - to fargin. To fargin means to feel pleasure at someone else's success without the slightest twinge of jealousy.

Happiness depends on the way we look at life. We can see our glass as half empty or half full. It all depends on how you use your eyes.

In this week's Torah portion there is a lengthy description of a spiritual disease called tzara'at. One of the shortcomings that brought on this affliction was the failure to fargin, a ‘narrowness’ of the eye, a ‘constriction’ of the vision.

When a person focuses on reality in the correct fashion, he realizes that there is nothing in this world that is mere coincidence; there is no slapdash extemporizing.

For example, let's say my next-door neighbor and I both buy lottery tickets. He buys No. 17756233/a/th/567 and I buy No. 17756233/a/th/568. Two weeks later I wake up and hear him shouting at the top of his voice “I won two million dollars! I won two million dollars!”

If my eyes are focused on reality correctly, immediately I should feel tremendous happiness for him, because I had no chance of winning the lottery at all. Even though I had the next ticket it could have been ticket number 00001 for all the difference it would have made.

Happiness is understanding that what G-d decrees for someone is that person's and always was his. There's no ‘coming close’ to what is allotted for someone else. To think otherwise is self-delusion. Realizing this is one of the secrets of happiness in this world.

Interestingly, the word in Hebrew for both the ‘blemish of tzara'at’ and the word for ‘pleasure’ have exactly the same letters. The blemish of tzara'at is called a nego. Pleasure in Hebrew is oneg. The only difference between these two words is where you put the letter ayin. Ayin in Hebrew means ‘eye’. If you put the ayin in the wrong place you end up with a spiritual disease - a nego. But if you put the ayin in the right place, if you put your eye in the right place, you have ‘pleasure’ - oneg. This is the pleasure that comes from farginning, the pleasure that comes from looking at the world through the lens of reality.

Sources: Mesillat Yesharim, Chidushei HaRim

Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum PARSHAS TAZRIA

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

The first eight pesukim of the parsha introduce the laws pertaining to a woman after childbirth. She was not permitted to visit the Bais Hamikdash for a set period of time following childbirth, after which she was to bring a korban, sacrifice. Once she had done this, she could reclaim her rights to visit the Sanctuary and be reinstated to eat kodoshim, consecrated flesh of a sacrifice. Indeed, this is expressed by the pasuk, “The Kohen shall atone for her (by offering the relevant sacrifice), and she shall be purified” (Vayikra 12:8).

The taharah, purification process, after childbirth is divided into three phases. For the first seven days, if she bore a boy—or fourteen days, if her child was a girl—she was neither to come into physical contact with her husband nor to eat Maaser Sheni, the second tithe of produce, which the owner was to eat in Yerushalayim. Forty days after a male birth or eighty days after a female birth, the yoledes, mother who gave birth, was permitted to partake of the Terumah, the primary tithe given to the Kohen. After this period, she was to bring the appropriate korban, and she was now permitted to enter the Sanctuary and eat kodoshim.

The Arizal compares the exodus from Egypt to the process following childbirth. Just as the pangs of a woman during childbirth become more intense as the moment of birth draws near, so did the plagues that devastated Egypt become more intense as the moment of liberation was quickly approaching. The Shem MiShmuel adds that this concept can be compared to the three-stage process of a woman's purification following childbirth. Just as a new mother must undergo three steps until she cleanses herself entirely, so, too, did Klal Yisrael experience three similar steps in the process of severing themselves from the spiritual contamination which characterized life in Egypt.

The Torah describes the Exodus in the following manner: “And it was when Pharaoh sent out the people” (Shemos 13:17). The Midrash teaches us that Pharaoh's “sending out” the people is a reference to his accompanying them out of the land. The Avnei Nezer explains that Pharaoh's “accompaniment” refers to the notion that Klal Yisrael “took” Pharaoh with them. In other words, they were not free of their Egyptian oppressors. Although they had left the land and were no longer under the whip of the taskmasters, they were still subject to the spiritual pollution that reigned in Egypt. The centuries of Egyptian culture and immorality were still entrenched in their national frame of mind. The dangers of Egypt were not left behind. They were still a critical reality which had to be addressed. Thus, the Egyptians pursued the Jews all the way to the Red Sea, at which point Hashem split the sea, drowning the Egyptians and finally liberating Klal Yisrael from their defilement.

The Shem MiShmuel views the seven days between the actual Exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea as parallel to the seven-day period during which a woman must wait for the purification process which allows her to eat Maaser Sheni and resume relations with her husband. During these seven days, for the woman—and, by extension, for Klal Yisrael—the tumah, ritual impurity, is in full force. Once the seven days have passed, similar to Klal Yisrael's passing through the Red Sea, the woman's tumah has decreased, and Klal Yisrael have shaken off much of their connection to Egypt, thereby improving their link to Hashem. Each member of Klal Yisrael became ready to develop his/her level of communion with Hashem as they all sang shirah, a song of praise, to the Almighty following the Egyptians demise. They also were now ready to eat the Heavenly bread, the Manna.

So ended the first stage in the process of the Jewish liberation from Egypt. They prepared themselves until Rosh Chodesh Sivan for the upcoming Revelation at Har Sinai, just like a woman following childbirth who waits out her forty days until she is permitted to eat Terumah. It was at this point that Klal Yisrael declared, “And all the things that G-d has said, we will do” (Shemos 24:3).

This declaration catapulted them into another realm, one of greater closeness to Hashem. Like the woman, who after forty days may now eat

Terumah, Klal Yisrael had risen closer to their goal as they moved further away from the spiritual filth of Egypt.

The nation would have to experience yet another stage before it could achieve its final state of redemption. On the fifth of Sivan, the people brought offerings on the Altar, and they made a covenant with Hashem in which some of the animal's blood was sprinkled on them and some on the Altar. This paralleled the korban which the woman brought to conclude her purification process. Just as now she could partake of the holiest foods because her offering had been brought, so, too, was Klal Yisrael ready for the ultimate accord, the greatest communion with G-d in the history of mankind - Mattan Torah, the Giving of the Torah.

The Kohen shall look at it again on the seventh day, and the affliction has not spread on the skin, then the Kohen shall declare him pure, it is a mispachas. (13:6)

There are sins, and there are "almost sins." When one sins, Hashem punishes him. What about when one "almost sins"? Is he "almost punished"? We see from the parsha, claims Horav David Shneuer, Shlita, that kimaat chatah, "almost sin," is punishable behavior. A person develops what appears to be a skin disease of questionable origin. He is isolated, after which the Kohen views the disease in question. If it has dimmed in color and not spread, it is nothing more than a mispachas, which is some sort of skin disease, but not tzaraas. Now the individual who had been isolated must immerse his garments, and then he is considered ritually clean. Why? What did he do? He had never been tamei, ritually unclean.

This teaches us that nothing "just happens," nor does it occur in a vacuum. Plagues are a therapeutic punishment for one who sins inadvertently. This individual who had been isolated did something inappropriate. Perhaps, he is unaware of his deed or—quite possibly—he did not really do anything wrong. He only "almost sinned." Even if he had repented, the mere fact that for a period of time he was in a state of spiritual flux, he is rendered tamei. The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh writes that a plague which causes a person to have his clothes immersed is a plague that requires the Kohen to pronounce the word, tahor, clean, on him. The Ramban writes that plagues are Hashem's communication that something is not right. The person's behavior may not yet be sinful, but it is pointing in that direction. Do something about it now.

We have to take this to heart. We may act in a manner unbecoming a Torah Jew. It is not a sin, but it is an "almost" sin. It is not full-fledged lashon hora, but it is avak, the dust of lashon hora. It is a semblance of the real sin, enough for which to be chastised, in order to keep him from fully transgressing. It certainly makes a difference what spiritual plane one occupies; sin is relative, as is the "dust." This gives us an entirely new perspective on sin and punishment. At times, we find it difficult to introspect in order to find out what we did wrong. Now we see that we are held accountable for those areas in which we have almost sinned, when we have acted inappropriately, but not sinfully. Hashem protects us by sending a little "reminder," a message that we are traveling in the wrong direction. Turn back before it is too late.

If a tzaraas affliction will be in a person, he shall be brought to the Kohen. (13:9)

Chazal teach us that tzaraas, commonly mistranslated as leprosy, is really the physical manifestation of a spiritual malady, a punishment designed to teach the perpetrator that he has sinned in a certain area which requires atonement. The primary cause of tzaraas is slanderous speech, lashon hora. The spiritual malaise of lashon hora has been with us since the serpent convinced Chavah to eat of the Eitz Hadaas, Tree of Knowledge. Furthermore, in the Talmud Bava Basra 164b, Chazal state: "Most people fall prey to the sin of theft, while a minority stumble in the sin of immoral behavior, but everyone sins with lashon hora." Clearly, this is not a problem that has recently surfaced. It has been around for quite some time, and its tentacles ensnare everyone in one way or another.

In the Talmud Shabbos 155b, Chazal comment: "There is no creature poorer than a dog and none as rich as a pig." Clearly, Chazal are not concerned about the animal's economic portfolio. The commentators explain that people revile a dog which is a stray, who has no owner. No one cares about its needs, and no one feeds it. A pig, however, eats out of

the dung heap. It always finds a satisfying meal wherever it is. While this is understandable, why did Chazal have to search for a paradigm of poverty and wealth in the animal world? What are they trying to teach us? The Gaon, zl, m'Vilna, explains that Hashem gave us all of the mitzvos at Har Sinai. All mitzvos originate from the same Heavenly Source - Hashem. Why is it then that some mitzvos have more "mazel," luck, are more fortunate than others? Certain prohibitions are accepted across the board by all observant Jews, while some prohibitions just do not "make it." For instance, in the area of maachalos asuros, forbidden foods, the archetype is pork. Everybody is meticulous in observance of this prohibition. No one even remotely thinks of eating pork in any way, shape, or form. It goes so far that if a Jew is suspected of eating chazir, pork, he is considered to be an anathema of the lowest order.

Nonetheless, we do not realize that the sin of speaking lashon hora is much more serious and its transgression is a much graver offense. Yet, people laugh at one who gives them mussar, rebukes them, for speaking lashon hora. In other words, chazir, which is a sin of lesser weight in comparison with lashon hora, is given much greater "respect" and viewed in a much more negative light than lashon hora, which is a much more serious breach of observance.

This, explains the Gaon, is what Chazal were lamenting. Although the Torah takes an extremely dim view of sins of the "tongue", to the point that Chazal in the Talmud Pesachim 118A say, "One who speaks lashon hora is worthy of being thrown to the dogs," since he is just like them., nonetheless, this prohibitive commandment is considered "poor" compared to the negative commandment concerning eating pork. People tend to ignore and humiliate the sin of lashon hora, while these same people take great care in observing the prohibition against eating pork. No, lashon hora is not something new. Even in the time of the Talmud, it was considered a formidable-unavoidable-transgression.

For some reason, the fear factor that once seemed to work as a deterrent no longer has the same effect. The inspirations and the shmuessen, ethical discourses, the stories of faith and episodes of punishment, do not hinder this generation from refraining to engage in slanderous speech. There is always an excuse to speak. In addition, because we are living in a democracy, the very notion that there is something that we are not permitted to say just does not sit very well with contemporary society. Of course, the Torah is immutable and the laws that were given to us on Har Sinai are as effective today as they were then - regardless of contemporary society's failings or progressiveness. The problem still exists: people do not seem to take the prohibition against lashon hora seriously.

One who is concerned about the cleanliness of his mouth should first and foremost be aware of the causes of lashon hora, what catalyzes this spiritual deficiency that manifests itself in the way in which one speaks and what he expresses. For some reason, studying the halachos concerning lashon hora no longer seems to provide us with a strong enough deterrent. Acting passively by locking oneself in the house and never speaking to anybody might prove to be a temporary panacea, but it will not cure the disease. The ability to speak is what distinguishes man from animal. It is certainly not a skill which one wishes to defer. The Torah is not commanding that we be silent, only astute and proper in what we say. It all reverts back to an examination of the causes of our need to speak lashon hora.

Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita, suggests looking no further than oneself for one of the primary catalysts of lashon hora: personal deficiencies. Rather than correct our own shortcomings, we look for our neighbor's inadequacies. It does not remove our faults, but it makes us feel better to know that someone else also has imperfections. Rav Reis cites the Shalah HaKadosh, who interprets this idea in the pasuk: V'tameh, tamei yikra, "He is to call out: Contaminated, contaminated!" (Vayikra13:45) Explained homiletically, this means that he who is himself contaminated tends to label others contaminated. The one who is tahor, ritually clean, does not have to be hypercritical of others. He does not have to look for another person's failings. Indeed, it is as Chazal posit, Kol ha'posel - b'mumo posel, "He who finds fault - finds fault in an area of his own shortcoming." It is usually the individual who is bothered by his own insufficiencies that finds fault in others. Therefore, if we work on ourselves and rectify our

own faults, we will have no problem with others. This is especially true when the person who speaks lashon hora realizes that by slandering others, he is really issuing a public declaration that he manifests this same failing. Rav Reis derives a powerful lesson from the first incident of slanderous speech in the Torah: the episode involving the serpent, the prime example of the holech rachil, tale-bearer. The serpent was very crafty, applying his acumen to ensnare, defame and destroy others. He had to be involved in everything. Therefore, it agitated him that—according to his deduction—the first couple was forbidden to eat of the Eitz Hadaas. This bothered him, because he did not know why Hashem had restricted the fruit of this tree from their diet. He was going to make them sin. Adam and Chavah ate from the tree and were subject to the consequences of their misdeed. Why was the serpent punished? He did not eat, nor had he ever been commanded not to eat. Hashem placed the restraint only on Adam and Chavah. Furthermore, it almost seems as if his punishment was the most stringent of all of them.

The serpent's punishment was twofold: He would always eat dirt; and he lost his legs. The serpent would no longer walk; he would slither on the ground, his face in the earth. How are we to understand all of this, and what is its lesson for us?

Man's position in the world is defined by his erect physical stance, standing on two feet, head up, face forward—in contrast to the animal who walks on all fours and whose face points to the ground. In the scheme of the world, man certainly has a more honorable, eminent position than the animal. While man may stand “taller” because he faces up, the animal has its legs to give it “height,” to give it stature. The serpent attempted to go beyond its G-d-given position, to elevate itself by putting man down. It was, therefore, punished with the loss of its legs, to decrease its stature, to lower its position to the ground. From then on, it has slithered across the ground.

Slithering across the ground, biting at man's heel, surreptitiously ensnaring man, all of this defines the nachash, serpent, and, by extension, the slanderer and talebearer. They have no legs to stand on. They creep across the ground and, at the very first opportunity; their heads are crushed into the ground. This is what ultimately happens to the talebearer. Sooner or later he is discovered, and when the proper time comes along, he is crushed to the ground. The slanderer has no real friends, only those who fear his evil tongue. At the first opportunity, they will desert him like a snake. When they see what the slanderer does to the people, they begin to wonder: “When will I be his next victim?” It is only through meticulous care concerning what comes out of our mouths that we will be able to maintain friendships and continue to exhibit respect of others.

If flesh will have an inflammation on its skin, (13:18)

If a person will have a burn from fire on his skin (13:24)

Rashi teaches us that the signs of impurity for shechin, inflammation of the skin, and michveh, burn of the skin, are identical. Why then did the Torah differentiate between them? He explains that it is to teach us that they do not combine with one another. For instance, if there developed half a gris, a type of large bean, which is considered the minimum size for an affliction to cause impurity of baheres, impure spot, in the shechin where it healed, and a half gris of baheres in the michveh, where it healed, they are not to be considered as one full gris of baheres. The combined afflictions do not cause impurity.

We wonder why these two measurements are not cumulative. After all, their signs are the same, and the rule is that objects which have the same shiurim, measurements, and characteristics do combine to complement one measurement. Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, renders a response that goes to the root of Heavenly response to our actions.

The popular contemporary belief is that some things “just happen.” The Torah Jew does not believe in this misconception. We affirm in our belief in Hashem that there is no such thing as coincidence; everything occurs for a reason. “One does not stub his finger in this world unless it has been preordained in Heaven,” is a Rabbinic maxim that bespeaks this notion. Therefore, we are acutely aware that the plague on this person's skin did not “just happen.” It is a Heavenly message, conveying to the individual that something is not right. He has deviated and must alter his course before the plague begins to grow and ultimately claim much more than a

small patch of skin. Furthermore, where the plague occurs, its size as well as its intensity, tells us something about the individual's behavior, pointing to the area that must be rectified. One area can focus on the evil tongue, while a fiery plague can allude to unbridled passion, with the list going on. We firmly believe that Hashem is meticulous in His punishment. Therefore, He does not punish a person one iota more than he deserves. Likewise, His “message” to him will be succinct and to the point - no overkill. Thus, the size of the punishment is a tell-tale sign of the intensity of the misdemeanor. If there is a chatzi shiur, half-measure, it is a clear indication that the person's sin is one of a half-measure. In other words, he has not yet crossed the boundary of irreversible sin. He has deviated and acted inappropriately, warranting Hashem's warning, but he has not committed a full shiur of sin. If there are two half-measures, it indicates that this individual has doubly incurred Hashem's anger, but it does not mean that it went so far as a real sin. Since a complete transgression did not occur, this man should not be held liable for what he did not do. Hashem's ways are just, righteous and perfect. A person receives retribution only for what he has actually done. This is one situation in which a half and a half do not add up to a whole.

Va'ani Tefillah

Hashem melech olam va'ed, avdu goyim meiartzo.

G-d is king at all times, even nations lost from His earth.

The commentators question the connection between the end of this pasuk and its beginning. What is the relationship between Hashem's monarchy extending forever and the nations that will ultimately be lost from the earth? Rashi explains simply that Hashem's reign will endure once the nations on the earth have been addressed. The Shevet Sofer distinguishes between Hashem's monarchy and the kingdom of mortal kings. The power of the average king rests in the size of his kingdom, in the number of people over whom he rules. Without a nation, he is no king. Not so Hashem, Who is Melech, King, forever, even if avdu goyim meiartzo, “the nations are lost from the earth.” His kingdom is not based on a nation. Rather, the nation derives its significance from its connection to Him.

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, explains that Hashem is King, and He rules over the world at all times. The earth is His earth; not only the individual, but all of the nations of the earth are insignificant in comparison to Hashem. One day, the Kingdom of Hashem will be universally recognized, and all of the earth will become artzo, His earth, in the true sense of the word. At that time, the national differences which plague society will disappear, because we will all be under the rule of the one Supreme Sovereign.

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Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Parshas Hachodesh & Tazria: Pure Creativity

The very first Rashi of the Torah teaches that the Torah should have begun with, “Hachodesh hazeh lochem”, which gives the Jewish people the obligation to establish its calendar, as it is the first mitzvah that was given to the Jewish nation. The Torah, which is our constitution, should have begun with the laws for the entire people, as opposed to the three mitzvos found in Sefer Braishis that were given to individuals. A more profound way to understand this Rashi is that just as maaseh Braishis (creation) is such a phenomenal event that it is most difficult to describe and appreciate its magnitude, similarly “Hachodesh hazeh lochem”, the first mitzvah, is a type of Braishis, a new creation (Rav Chaim Freidlander, Sifsei Chaim, p. 259).

The concept of an individual or a nation enslaving another was nothing new with the Egyptian servitude of Am Yisroel. However, we were not only freed, transformed into free individuals, and elevated to the status of aristocrats, but “Hachodesh hazeh lochem” teaches we were also sanctified by Hashem at that moment, a made into a new creation. As in Braishis (2:7) where Hashem blew into the nostrils of man a living soul, here at

their emancipation Hashem endowed the former slaves with kedusha, enabling them to sanctify and hallow themselves and their environment.

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi teaches in Pesachim (118a) that Psalm 136, known as Hallel Hagadol, which speaks of Hashem's creation and rulership of the world contains twenty six verses of "ki l'olam chasdo - for His kindness endures forever" corresponding to the twenty six generations from creation until the revelation at Sinai. The emphasis being on His kindness, as G-d sustained the world not because of the merit or deservedness of man, but only because of His munificence and kindness. Now, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, with hachodesh hazeh, a new world order was introduced. Hashem sanctified the Jewish people who were given the capacity to sanctify both time and objects (Shemos Rabbah 15:24). Mekadesh Yisroel vehazemanim, the bracha of Kiddush and every shemoneh esrei of the yomim tovim, highlights our capacity to sanctify time; when man takes parchment, quill, and ink for the purpose of writing a sefer Torah, upon completion man has created kedusha. The world was no longer completely on the receiving end but man now influences the events that emanate from on High by his actions. Parshas Hachodesh places the Jew on the pedestal of mekadesh - one who creates and endows kedusha.

Parshas Tazria with its many laws related to negaim (commonly translated as leprosy) demonstrates a further and additional Divine endowment to man. The law regarding tzaraas is that if a baheres, a variation of a white patch on the skin, preceded the presence of white hair, the area and individual are pronounced tamei - impure. If the white hair preceded the patch he is tahor - pure. If we don't know which came first, the Talmud (Bava Metzia 86a) tells us of a most remarkable and unusual debate on the matter. Hashem and his heavenly yeshiva disagreed on this case with Hashem ruling that the individual was tahor and the angels siding with the opinion that he is tamei. It was decided that the tie-breaking vote and opinion to be followed would be that of Rabbah bar Nachmeini, the recognized leading rabbinic authority on negaim in his day. The question reached Rabbah while he was in the throgs of death. His last two words on this earth were, "Tahor tahor". A heavenly voice proclaimed, "How fortunate you are, Rabbah bar Nachmeini, that your body is pure and your soul departed in purity."

It is most fascinating to note that the Rambam (Hilchos Tumas Tzaraas, 2:8) rules tamei in the above case. The Kesef Mishna explains this based upon the verse in Devarim (30:12), "Lo bashomayim he - it is not in Heaven", which is understood earlier in Bava Metzia (59b) to mean that the Jewish people were given the capacity to expound and interpret Torah Shebal Peh - the oral law. Prophecy, and even Heavenly voices, are not to be relied upon for psak halacha, but rather the due diligence of talmedei chachamim using the formula given to them to interpret Jewish law (the Chasam Sofer understands that since Rabbah bar Nachmeini's decision was only made known through a bask kol (Heavenly voice) it was not to be relied upon). Wow! Man is not only a mekadeish, one who sanctifies himself and his environment by his performance of mitzvos. He is also a mechadeish - one who is invited to interpret and apply Torah law. Of course this permissibility was granted to the Sanhedrin, the judicial body both legislative and representative of the Jewish nation.

"Hachodesh hazeh lochem" is really a second Braishis, a new creation, namely the Jewish nation. Rashi understands the first passuk in the Torah - "Braishis bara" - to be charged with the meaning of why Hashem created the world: Braishis - for raishis, i.e. the Jewish people who are called raishis, and Braishis, for the Torah called that is raishis. Now in Shemos (12) we have the implementation of Braishis. The Jewish people are enhancing and giving fruition, purpose, and meaning to creation. Hashem creates the physical material and the Jew endows it with holiness. He takes string and affixes it to a garment over which he recites "asher kidshanu bmitzvosov - who has sanctified us with his commandments", and we in turn sanctify our environment with this and all other performances of mitzvos. Furthermore, our ruling in Halacha validates Braishis, the world being created for Torah.

The two-Torah experience this Shabbos - Tazria and Hachodesh - not only sheds additional light on Yetzias Mitzrayim as a second Braishis, but also

compliments and charges each member of Klal Yisroel to realize how important they are.

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h a a r e t z

Portion of the Week / Spring's blessing

By Benjamin Lau

This week's Torah reading opens with a reference to the ritual impurity of mothers of newborns. Nowadays, we do not fully understand the concepts of ritual purity and impurity, which are not equivalent to "good" and "bad." They are categorical concepts defining our relationship with ourselves, our society, our God. To understand this matter, Rabbi Saadia Gaon ("Emunot vedayot," section 3) is helpful: "Ritual impurity and purity enable us to realize our inferiority and that of our mortal bodies." In other words, when we are categorically defined as ritually impure, we become more aware of ourselves. Knowledge of our impurity reminds us of our mortality.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevy notes the connection between awareness of our ritual impurity and our awareness of death: "For death is the body's total negation" ("The Kuzari," section 2). When ritual impurity diminishes our status, we recall our mortality and temporal existence. Most of the cases of such impurity in the Torah meet that definition: That generated by a dead body is the "greatest of all ritual impurities." Lepers (in the biblical sense), considered ritually impure, are linked through their social isolation to the death experience. However, the impurity of new mothers is different. Childbirth brings a new life into the world, ostensibly adding ritual purity - rather than the opposite. Yet there is another side to the birth experience. It separates the mother from the fetus that developed in her womb.

Midrashic literature compares the fetus' emergence from the womb to our emergence from our homes (Midrash Rabbah, Parashat Tazria, section 14): "Rabbi Eliezer says: 'Just as a house has doors, so does a woman, as it is written, "Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb"' (Job 3:10). Rabbi Joshua says: 'Just as a house has keys, so does a woman, as it is written, "and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb"' (Genesis 30:22). Rabbi Akiva says: 'Just as a house has hinges, so does a woman, as it is written, "she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her"' (1 Samuel 4:19). [The Hebrew word tzirim means labor pains, but can also be translated as hinges.]

Birth is portrayed as equivalent to our emergence from our homes. For nine months, we are safe and warm in our "homes," comfortably curling up in our mother's womb. When we are born, we enter into a wide world that offers us an abundance of things, but also threatens our security and well-being. During pregnancy, mothers can hear their fetuses' heartbeat and feel a bond with them. Childbirth, when we emerge as individual human beings into the world, severs our tie with our mother and reminds us of the death experience. The outside world is full of life but the inside is hollow. A woman who has experienced childbirth passes from a state of completeness to one where she must make peace with her child's departure; although very happy, she experiences a sense of loss, symbolized by the severance of the umbilical cord. The ritual impurity generated by childbirth is a categorical definition expressing and physically representing those mixed emotions.

Beautiful things

Just as leaving the womb signifies our emergence into the world, with all its challenges, spring heralds our emergence from winter's confinement into summer's wide expanses. The Hebrew month of Nissan, which begins on Sunday, transfers us to springtime. The Talmud teaches us that when we go outside in Nissan and perceive blossoming fruit trees, we must recite the "Birkat ha'ilanot" (the Blessing of the Trees). The blessing has a unique phrasing that differs from that of others: "Blessed are you, O God, king of the universe, who has provided his world with all its needs, and has created there beautiful beings and beautiful trees, which all mortals enjoy."

In many of the blessings we recite, we express our wonder of nature's beauty. On hearing thunder in winter, we bless the Creator of the Universe for "his power and courage." On seeing one of the world's wonders, we bless God "for everything he made during the seven days of creation."

These blessings articulate our immediate response to the aesthetic experience we are enjoying. In contrast, the Blessing of the Trees connects the tree's blossoms with things not usually associated with them. It includes the phrase "who has provided his world with all its needs," reminding us to thank God for all the beautiful things he has created. What do these phrases have to do with tree blossoms?

Winter strongly reminds us of the death experience. The fact that nature is seemingly dormant in winter makes us think of our mortality and transience; the trees' nakedness undermines our confidence in our world's vitality. Spring bursts forth, dispelling this gloomy feeling, as the world's rebirth inspires happy feelings. The trees' blossoming strongly impacts human society.

On seeing how exquisite our world is, we feel optimistic. The Blessing of the Trees takes us beyond the mere pleasure of seeing a blossoming tree to another level of happiness. The blossoming tree also symbolizes our own renewal. Yet Jewish law imposes a condition on this blessing. The Talmud instructs us that those who emerge from their homes in Nissan and see trees must recite the Blessing of the Trees. Our sages specify that we cannot bless the trees while still confined to our homes or backyards, even if trees are blossoming in the backyard. Rather, to recite the blessing, we must go out into the field. Our emergence from our homes represents our changed mood. No longer confined to our home's four walls, we are no longer isolated, focusing solely on ourselves and our private world. We must emerge into the wide world. Springtime's mood is the necessary condition for celebrating Passover, which heralds the beginning of the holidays linked to our nationhood.

Rav Kook List

Tazria: Rabbi Abba Arrives in Babylonia

Babylonia did not become the world center of Torah overnight. Nonetheless, the defining moment of this process - the exile of the Torah and the relocation of the leading Jewish community to Babylonia - may be pinpointed to a particular event: the arrival of Rabbi Abba Aricha (175-247) from the Land of Israel in 219 CE. Rabbi Abba was the preeminent scholar of his time, known to all by the simple appellation 'Rav' (the rabbi). With Rav's arrival and the establishment of his yeshiva in Sura, Babylonia emerged as the center of Torah scholarship [see Gitin 6a, Ketubot 111a].

The Talmud in Shabbat 108a gives an intriguing account of this historical event:

"Samuel of Nehardea and Karna were sitting on the banks of the Malka river when they saw the waters rising and becoming muddied. Samuel said to his student Karna: a great man has arrived from the West [the Land of Israel]; he has a stomach ailment and the waters are rising in his honor. Go and test his wine."

The Talmud describes how Karna met Rav and asked him three questions. How do we know that Tefillin (phylacteries) may only be written on parchment from a ritually-pure animal? How do we know that blood is red? And how do we know which part of the body should be circumcised? Rav successfully passed this peculiar test, and responded by giving Karna a caustic 'blessing': May a horn (karna) sprout from your eye. What is the meaning of this bizarre exchange?

Uplifting yet Murky

The waters in Babylonia did not rise just in Rav's honor. This was a sign of Babylonia's rising fortunes and its emergence as the leading center of Torah learning. At the same time, the waters were murky, a sign that this historic event involved great sadness to the nation. It meant the waning of the Jewish community in Israel and the bolstering of the community in Babylonia. Rav's personal illness was a reflection of his inner pain and sorrow at the necessity for deepening the exile.

What was the meaning of the peculiar test that the Babylonian rabbis set for Rav? They realized that Rav was pained by the exile of Torah from the Land of Israel - and yet Rav was the very vehicle by which this was occurring! Rav's life was the fulfillment of this great yet bitter vision, a historical event both uplifting and murky, containing elements of national

aspiration and collective suffering. Only a great soul could unite such terrible contradictions. Therefore Samuel told his disciple: go test this scholar.

Three Questions

All three of Karna's questions hinted at the centrality of the Land of Israel for the Jewish people. It is interesting to note that it is precisely in the sayings of the Babylonian scholars and their Talmud that we find statements praising the sanctity of the Land of Israel and the importance of living there. The ideology of the Babylonian rabbis was to negate and belittle the Diaspora, despite whatever advantages, material or spiritual, it held.

The first question posed to the scholar leaving Israel was piercing in its appropriateness. How do we know that Tefillin may only be written on parchment from a ritually-pure animal? Parchment from other animals may be just as suitable for writing on; but the holiness of the Tefillin cannot bind with impure material. So too, the holiness of the Torah cannot properly rest in a Jewish community residing in an impure land. Perhaps some great necessity required Rav to leave Israel for Babylonia, but there should be no doubt as to the Holy Land's spiritual advantage over the impure land of exile.

What about Karna's second question - from where do we know that blood is red? This question was meant to measure Rav's love for the Land of Israel. Besides the spiritual qualities of the Land of Israel and its intrinsic holiness, there is also the nation's natural devotion to its homeland - ties of blood built up through generations of self-sacrifice, defending against enemies attempting to take our land. This blood is a metaphor of our natural connection to the land - ties that cannot be severed by reason or rationale.

Connected to the Physical

Karna's final question dealt with the mitzvah of brit milah. We find that the Torah speaks of removing the orlah of the heart [Deut. 10:16] and the orlah of the ears [Jer. 6:10]. So where should circumcision be performed?

Rav replied that the Torah calls the fruit of a tree's first three years orlah [Lev. 19:23]. Just as that orlah refers to that which produces fruit, so too circumcision is performed in a place that produces fruit.

This question too is about our ties to the Land of Israel. One might think that brit milah is some sort of spiritual undertaking, such as removing the heart's orlah to deepen one's ethical sensitivity, or removing the ear's orlah so it can hear and absorb elevated messages. This type of spiritual growth, however, requires a foundation of brit milah in the flesh, influencing future generations - "in a place producing fruit."

So too, the special aspirations of the Jewish people must be based on the physical realm: the Land of Israel. Our foundations of holiness must be connected to the material, just as the soul only functions in this world while inside a physical body. Only after the brit is established in the physical realm is it possible to purge the other types of spiritual blockage, removing the orlah from the heart and ear.

With regard to the heart and the ear, the Torah uses the word orlah. But regarding trees, the Torah uses the same exact phrase as is used with circumcision - orlah - 'his/its orlah.' This, Rav explained, is the full expression of orlah, referring to one's most basic level of spiritual obstruction.

Two Types of Keren

At the end of this strange test, Rav had a sharp retort for his interviewer. "Your name is Karna? Then may a horn (karna) sprout from your eye."

What did Rav mean by this?

The Hebrew word keren has two meanings. It may refer to a ray of light, or it may refer to the horn of an animal. Thus a keren can enable the eye to see, or conversely, it can blind it.

Rav rejected the implied criticism that, by leaving the Land of Israel, he was weakening the connection of the Jewish people to their land. His true intention was to enlighten the Jews living in exile and elevate them with the Torah's holiness. Then they would be worthy of returning to the land of their fathers, to build it and be built through it with honor and holiness.

By way of analogy, Rav noted that while a keren should be a source of spiritual light, it can also be a physical horn, blinding instead of enlightening. So too, love for the Land of Israel should be a source of

inspiration and holiness, but it may be debased into greed for material gain and physical pleasure. Exile was necessary in order to elevate the nation's love for the land to a noble holiness. Then they will be ready for their redemption, to leave the land of darkness to the place of light, the Holy Land.

[Adapted from Ein Ayah vol. IV pp. 277-279]

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Tazria - Redemption of the Firstborn Donkey

Rabbi Asher Meir

While the firstborn of a kosher animal is sanctified, and the firstborn of most non-kosher animals have no sanctity whatsoever; the donkey has an intermediate status. It is not sanctified, but it must be redeemed. "And the firstborn of an ass shall you redeem with a sheep, and if you don't redeem it then break its neck; and all firstborn people of your sons, redeem (Shemot 13).

Kosher animals symbolize that aspect of our material nature which can be elevated to Divine service, whereas the non-kosher ones symbolize our lowest drives which need to be shunned and not cultivated.

The commandment to redeem the firstborn of a donkey hints that even among the impure and wicked, who seem to be ruled by their basest instincts and have no external signs of righteousness there are those who are pure at heart and can be redeemed. The donkey has neither cloven hooves nor chews its cud and hence has no signs of purity. In this case even the firstborn itself is not inherently holy but merely has a potential to be redeemed in the service of holiness; the firstborn donkey may be redeemed with a sheep but need not be.

However, truly wicked drives can't be in themselves good. They can be redeemed, that is transformed, into holiness, as symbolized by the redemption on the sheep; if this redemption is not performed, then they need to be utterly stamped out, symbolized by the breaking of the neck.

The ARI Z"l (Rav Yitzchak Luria) points out that at the beginning of the passage, we cited, the Torah refers specifically to the firstborn of Israel. In the continuation of the passage, where the redemption of the donkey is mentioned, this qualifier is absent. He explains that originally the sanctification did not apply to the "erev rav", the mixed multitude of non-Jews who left Egypt together with the children of Israel. However, eventually HaShem acceded to Moshe's wish to have them included as well. The mitzva of redeeming the firstborn of the donkey hints at this expansion, providing a way for even the "mixed multitude" to be redeemed, with, however, the caveat that their holiness is not inherent and, if the redemption does not take place, they will have no place in holiness at all. (Cited in Yedid Nefesh on Zohar Bo, II:41b. See also Igrot Rayah 555.) So this mitzva carries an immense promise but at the same time a grave warning to the wicked. Even if they seem to have no signs of goodness whatever, if they are good inside they can be redeemed; however, if this redemption does not take place then they are solely an obstacle to goodness.

Rabbi Asher Meir is the author of the book Meaning in Mitzvot, distributed by Feldheim. The book provides insights into the inner meaning of our daily practices, following the order of the 221 chapters of the Kitzur Shulchan Arukh.

TALMUDIGEST :: Nazir 16 - 22

For the week ending 5 April 2008 / 29 Adar II 5768

from Ohr Somayach | www.ohr.edu

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

A CONFLICT OF TESTIMONY - Nazir 20a

Two pairs of witnesses appear before the rabbinical court to testify regarding the number of nezirut periods a certain Jew has committed himself to. One pair claims that his vow was for two periods while the other claims that it was for five.

The ruling of Beit Shammai is that since there is a conflict in the testimony we do not accept the testimony of either pair and there is no obligation for any nezirut. Beit Hillel's position is that since there is a consensus

regarding a minimum of two periods there is an obligation to observe that number.

Tosefot raises the question as to why no consideration is given in this mishna to what the vow-maker himself says. If he remains silent when witnesses testify to five periods of nezirut his silence constitutes an admission and creates a commitment.

A number of answers are giving by Tosefot:

- 1) The accused vow-maker contradicts the testimony of both pairs, leaving us with no option other than relying on the witnesses.
- 2) He declares that he does not recall how much he committed himself to.
- 3) Both pairs came simultaneously so that his silence cannot be interpreted as consent since he sees no need to contradict witnesses who are already contradicting each other.

WHAT THE SAGES SAY

"If every nazir is considered a sinner why does the Torah use this term specifically in regard to the nazir who became ritually impure through contact with the dead? Because he piled one sin on the other."

Rabbi Elazar Hakapar - Nazir 19a

THE WEEKLY DAF :: Nazir 20 - 26

For the week ending 5 April 2008 / 29 Adar II 5768

from Ohr Somayach | www.ohr.edu

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

INNOCENT ACTS AND GUILTY INTENTIONS - Nazir 23a

If a woman made a vow to be a nezirah and, unaware that her husband cancelled her vow, drank wine or came into contact with the dead, she is not punished by lashes for violating the Torah command prohibiting a nazir from indulging in these activities. Even though her intention was to violate Torah law, for she assumed she was a nezirah, the fact is that her husband's cancellation rendered her actions free of sin.

There is no doubt, however, that her intention to do wrong is sinful. This is why the Torah states (Bamidbar 30:13) "her husband cancelled them (her vows) and Hashem will forgive her," to teach us that she must atone for her actions in order to gain forgiveness. When Rabbi Akiva reached this passage, he wept as he exclaimed: "If someone who intended to eat swine flesh and ended up eating the kosher meat of a lamb requires atonement and forgiveness, how much more so one who intended to eat swine flesh and ended up doing so!"

Rabbi Yehuda goes one step further: Such a woman may not be liable for lashes by Torah law, because she was in fact not a nezirah, but she is liable for makkat mardut, the lashes given for violating rabbinic law, because of her intention to sin. How many lashes are given under this category?

Tosefot (Nazir 20b) cites the gemara (Mesechta Makkot 22a) that although the Torah legislated a maximum of 39 lashes for the violation of a Torah law, there is no such limit for makkat mardut, whose literal translation is "lashes for rebellion." A Jew who refuses to perform a positive mitzvah like eating matza or sitting in a succah is given lashes until his rebellion is subdued and he consents to perform the mitzvah.

But, points out Tosefot, this lack of a limit upon the number of lashes may apply only to situations in which those blows are used as a way of inducing him to perform a mitzvah against which he has shown rebellion. In the case of the nezirah with evil intentions, she is being punished for something she has already done. Since these lashes are punishment of the past rather than coercion for the future, concludes Tosefot, it may very well be that the number of these rabbinically mandated lashes should not be more than those mandated by the Torah for violation of Torah law.

A "SIN" FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE - Nazir 23b

A sin committed for the sake of Heaven is equal to a mitzvah performed with an ulterior motive. This equation is made by Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak on the basis of a passage (Shoftim 5:24) comparing Yael—the woman who ended the Canaanite threat to Eretz Yisrael by slaying their general—to the Matriarchs. Although she utilized forbidden relations to weaken him and accomplish her mission, this action performed for Heaven's sake to save her people is granted credit equal to that of the

Matriarchs, whose mitzvah relationships with the Patriarchs had an element of an ulterior motive of personal pleasure.

Why did a married Jewess like Yael not allow herself to be slain rather than submit to the heathen Sisra, since adulterous relations require martyrdom? Tosefot here answers this question in the same manner that the gemara (Mesechta Sanhedrin 74b) explains why Esther did not sacrifice her life rather than submit to Achashverosh: Since the woman is the passive partner in such a forbidden relationship, martyrdom is not expected of her.

In Sanhedrin Tosefot takes a radically different approach. From the account of Yael's incident with Sisra in Sefer Shoftim, it appears that she was not at all coerced into relations as was Esther. Sisra was fleeing for his life after the destruction of his forces and hardly had time for such things. On the contrary, Tosefot adds, he only asked her to hide him from his pursuers, and it was she who took the initiative of seducing him in order to weaken him.

Tosefot does not say, however, why it was permissible for Yael to do what she did. The answer may be the same as the one given by Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (Responsa of Noda Biyehuda, Vol. II Yoreh Deah 161) for Esther taking the initiative in going to Achashverosh for relations upon Mordechai's command. Her justification was the rescue of the entire Jewish nation, and Yael's case can be seen as comparable.

Ed Note: included at the request of a long time subscriber

Shabbos Sermon - March 29, 2008
Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg

Sen. Obama ... Wright or Wrong

In light of recent events, I don't think it is unreasonable of me to expect that all of you who are members of Beth Tfiloh to wake up every morning and after saying the Modeh Ani prayer, thanking God for keeping you alive, you add a little prayer thanking God for bringing Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg into your lives. I know that for some of you who are not members that might sound a little smug and self-centered on my part. But in light of recent events, the members of Beth Tfiloh *should* express gratitude to God for my being their rabbi. After all, it's a lot better than having the Rev. Jeremiah Wright as your pastor ... as did the congregants at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ ... where Sen. Barack Obama was an active member!

The controversy that erupted over Rev. Wright's hate-filled, anti-American sermons not only put Sen. Obama in an awkward position, it put every member of a church or synagogue in an awkward position as well. Are you to be held responsible for what I say from the pulpit? And what happens if you disagree? And what are you to do? And is it possible, after being a member of a congregation for twenty years, you really don't know your rabbi, pastor or priest's position on some of the most challenging subjects of the day?

Sen. Obama knew that he had to respond to these questions, and he did it in an eloquent address. His speech on the subject - one which I stayed home to watch on television; something I hardly ever do - was truly thought provoking, something rare for a political speech. The talk covered a lot of territory and it answered many questions ... but it raised a few others.

What did Sen. Obama learn from his relationship with his pastor? Did he learn to refer to the United States as the "U.S. of KKK-A" as Rev. Wright did? Did he learn to refer to our country with the words, "God damn America" as Rev. Wright did? Did he learn to believe that the AIDS virus is part of a government plot to get rid of black people, as Rev. Wright claimed? The answer is: No, no no! Anyone who questions Sen. Obama's patriotism is wrong, wrong, wrong! Those sending around emails claiming that Sen. Obama is really a Muslim are wrong, wrong, wrong! Those who take some sort of perverted pleasure in underscoring that his middle name is Hussein should remember how we felt when Rev. Jesse Jackson referred to New York as "Hymie town." To hold Sen.

Obama accountable for everything his pastor said, to think that he believes everything his pastor says, would mean that you have to be held accountable for everything *I* say! And even I do not always feel comfortable doing that!

Unfortunately, Sen. Obama's otherwise eloquent speech did indicate that there is a certain 'something' that he did learn from his pastor. And that's a dangerous 'something' ... and the 'something' is: the concept of moral equivalence.

The phrase "moral equivalence" is not a new one. Some attribute it to William James who wrote an essay in 1910 entitled, "The Moral Equivalent of War." Others attribute its popularity to Jean Kilpatrick, who served as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during the Reagan administration. "Moral equivalence" has become a popular phrase in our time. What it means is: a blurring of differences, a blurring of all distinctions. It's like saying there is no difference between an ice cube and boiling water ... it's just a matter of degrees! It means that in every conflict, there is no real right and wrong ... it's just two sides of the same coin. Rev. James Wright showed this way of thinking when, in a sermon he delivered on Sept. 16, 2001, he said the United States had brought the death and destruction of 9/11 on itself. In his words, "It was chickens coming home to roost." And he went on to say, "We nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye ... we have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards." Do you understand what that means? That what Osama bin Laden did on 9/11 was no different than what the U.S. did to Japan. That what bin Laden did on 9/11 was no different than what Israel was doing to the Palestinians. And he said this while the bodies were still being pulled out of the wreckage of the Twin Towers.

That people in his church didn't find this offensive perhaps is not surprising, because others were saying much the same thing. Noam Chomsky and many other so-called 'enlightened thinkers' in America were saying the same things. We got what we deserve! *They* may be guilty but so are we! Leave it to the great thinker Woody Allen to express it best. In an interview in Der Spiegel, Germany's most important magazine, Mr. Allen dismissed the events of 9/11 in the following manner: "The history of the world is like: he kills me, I kill him ... only with different cosmetics and different castings. So in 2001, some fanatics killed some Americans and now some Americans are killing some Iraqis. And in my childhood, some Nazis killed Jews and now some Jewish people and some Palestinians are killing each other."

You see? It's all the same! A bestseller in Germany claims the actions of the Allies was no different than the atrocities of the Nazis. It's all morally equivalent! And you know what? There are some Jewish religious leaders who have fallen into this same trap of moral equivalence.

The Reconstructionist movement in Judaism is the smallest Jewish movement in America, but it has always been at the forefront of change. It was the first to have a Bat Mitzvah, the first to have women rabbis, the first to sanctify gay marriages. And here is another first: a few years back the Reconstructionist movement printed a new Haggadah which includes a reading on behalf of the "dispossessed" Palestinian people, a reading that was written by Raymonda Tawil, who had been arrested several times by Israeli authorities. She also happens to be the mother-in-law of Yassir Arafat. The editors of the Haggadah felt the reading was appropriate in the Haggadah because the plight of the Palestinians today is comparable to the plight of the Jews in Egypt in ancient times. That's like saying that what Churchill did and what Hitler did is the same. Indeed, that's exactly what Mahatma Gandhi said! It's a moral equivalency that is dangerous and downright wrong. The plight of the Palestinians is a sad and tragic one. But let it be remembered that the plight of the Palestinians took place because in 1947 the Arabs refused a two state solution that would have given both the Jews and the Palestinians a homeland. And let's keep in mind that it is Palestinians who are responsible for the most despicable terrorist attacks. They are the ones who blow up the buses and stores and schools, killing countless innocent Israeli citizens. And while Israel's treatment of the Palestinians has at times been harsh, it's been

much more benevolent than any other occupied nation has ever exhibited and it is disgraceful to cast it as equivalent to how the Egyptians treated the Jews. And to this day, while Israel seeks to make peace with the Palestinians, 86% of the Palestinian people were in favor of the recent terrorist attack that killed eight Yeshiva students in Jerusalem ... 86%! Don't put them in my Haggadah! Their story is not the moral equivalent to our people's story.

Moral equivalency is wrong, and it is dangerous. And that is why we have the Jewish dietary laws found in this morning's Torah portion. There are few things that underscore the uniqueness of the Jewish people than our laws of *kashrut* ... certain animals you can eat, and certain animals you can't eat.

Sen. Barack Obama fell into the trap of his pastor and mentor in expressing a moral equivalence in his speech when he said, "I can no more disown [Rev. Wright] than I can my white grandmother." That's a moral equivalency that holds no water! His grandmother expressed a fear of black men who passed by her on the street; something that Jesse Jackson has said he understands. Rev. Wright accused the U.S. of being guilty of, amongst other things, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and giving drugs to blacks, and spreading AIDS through the black community. That's morally equivalent? Is it morally equivalent to compare what your grandmother says in private to what a religious leader says in public ... to a cheering crowd?

And you know what else Sen. Obama? Your pastor and your grandmother are not morally equivalent! How does it go ... you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family! Well, that's very true. We don't get too many grandmothers during the course of a lifetime. We don't get too many members of a family during the course of a lifetime. When it comes to family, "It is what it is!" You can't throw a member of your family out with the trash, even if their *talk* is trash! But when it comes to your rabbi, pastor, minister or priest ... you can vote with your feet. There are lots of others who can feel that slot. They're not the same!

And it's not the same to claim, as Sen. Obama has done, that Rev. Wright is like "An old uncle who says things I don't always agree with." That's a moral equivalency that doesn't hold water. We all may have had a crazy uncle who said the most outrageous things, but everyone in the family knew he was crazy and no one took him seriously. No one is saying that Rev. Wright is crazy ... he was the minister of 8000 members, and people took very seriously his hate-filled words that were being passed on to a new generation that should know better, that must know better. Rev. Wright is not a crazy man. Rev. Wright is a dangerous man; because he is not just someone's crazy uncle ... he is thousands of peoples Reverend.

In our Torah portion this morning we read of the tragic sudden death of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron the High Priest. They were killed while performing the Temple service. They were reverent, serving the Lord, and yet what they did found disfavor in the eyes of God. And what was it that they did? From the Torah it doesn't seem as if they did much ... they brought an "eish zarah" – a strange fire – to the altar. What was so strange about the fire they brought? Not much ... according to some sages the only thing that made it strange was the fact that it was not from the altar. According to other sages the only thing that made it strange was the fact that they hadn't been commanded to do it. Okay! But what's so terrible about this? What was so terrible was that they were leaders in the Temple, and everyone was watching what they were doing. And even the slightest incorrect step could not be allowed ... could not go unpunished, because everyone else would feel free to do the same. A religious leader has a special responsibility, a religious leader has to be

held to a higher standard, because his behavior influences others and he must answer to a higher authority.

And here is another place where Barack Obama fell into the trap of moral equivalency. In speaking of Rev. Wright, he said, "Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely – just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed." Sure, religious leaders of every persuasion have said foolish things, stupid things, controversial things, with which their congregants have disagreed. And I'm sure that is true of the member of Beth Tfiloh! I know some of you have disagreed with my positions on President Bush and Christian evangelicals and intermarriage and many other things. It is impossible for an entire congregation to agree with everything their spiritual leader says. Indeed, truth to tell, I've disagreed with some of the things I've said! But let me tell you something ... nothing I – or any other religious leader I know - said is comparable to what Rev. Wright has said! It's one thing to disagree with the positions of your spiritual leader. It is quite another to have a spiritual leader like Rev. Wright who preaches hatred, racism and disloyalty. It is Rev. Wright who calls Louis Farrakhan "a 20th and 21st century grant." That's the Farrakhan who has called Jews "bloodsuckers" and Judaism a "gutter religion." It is Rev. Wright who traveled with Farrakhan to Libya in 1985 to visit Col Qadahfi; this at a time when Qadahfi was considered the chief financier of international terrorism, including the Munich Olympics massacre ... this at a time when America had banned Libyan oil imports and branded Libya a "rogue state." It is Rev. Wright who used his church bulletin to reproduce articles from Hamas, a sworn enemy of Israel and the U.S. I can't speak for priests or pastors, but I can tell you that I don't know of a single rabbi who ever stood in the pulpit and delivered a sermon proclaiming: "God damn America!" as Rev. Wright did. No rabbi would say it, and no congregation, no synagogue would tolerate it! We Jews have known from persecution! No ... our American experience cannot be compared to the slavery and lynching, the pain and degradation of the black experience. But nothing was handed to us on a silver platter. Many of us American Jews share an experience no different than that of the man Mark Steyn wrote of in the New York Sun. He was born and raised in Siberia until the Cossacks came and ravaged his village. His family came to the U.S. and he grew up in the poverty of New York's Lower East Side. He made it big, but he still suffered slights as a Jew. When he married a Park Avenue heiress, she was expelled from the Social Register. And in the '30's her sister moved in with a Nazi diplomat and proudly flaunted a diamond swastika to him. But that didn't stop Irving Berlin from proudly and unashamedly writing, "God bless America, land that I love ..."

I am sure Barack Obama, who spent his childhood in Indonesia and ended up a graduate of Harvard, shares those sentiments as well. Is it not asking too much to not only expect every political leader in our country to feel the same, but every religious leader as well.

Barack Obama represents the American experience at its best ... Rev. Wright at its worst. Barack Obama should be worshipping at a religious institution like ours. When members from the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago are asked what their pastor preached that morning, they have to say, "God damn America." If anyone asks you what Rabbi Wohlberg preached this morning, you can tell them, "Oh, just ... God bless America!"

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