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The Mikve of Israel

by Rabbi Dr. Guy Matalon

The tractate of *Yoma* ends with a very interesting *mishna* that is worth examining in depth. It states the following:

Rabbi Akiva says: “Fortunate are you O Israel! Before whom do you purify yourself? Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven, as it is said, ‘I shall sprinkle upon you pure water and you shall be purified.’ (Ezekiel 36:26) And it is also said, ‘The *mikve* of Israel is G-d.’ (Jeremiah 17:13). Just as a *mikve* purifies the impure, the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel.” (*Yoma* 8:9; 85b)

According to the *Meshech Chochma*, on *Yom Kippur* when we fast, abstain from wearing leather shoes and take on other changes in behavior so as to show our intent to repent for our transgressions, our connection to G-d is restored to its “factory setting” so to speak. Our factory setting is spiritual, and the image that is given here is water. As we turn from earth to water — from focusing on physicality to spirituality — we connect to the ultimate source of life (hence portrayed here as water as the basis for all life). The drop of water that represents our soul connects to the great purifying ocean that is G-d in the metaphor, and through this connection our “drop of water” is renewed, rejuvenated and purified. For the *Meshech Chochma*, the first question of Rabbi Akiva as to who is doing the purification points to water uniting with its source. The soul reconnecting with its Creator.

The process of the purification should not be seen as total immersion here. This source repeatedly emphasizes that it is the *coming into contact* alone that facilitates and completes the process. The idea is based upon a concept in the laws of *mikva’ot*. The idea can be understood as follows: For a *mikve* to be kosher it requires a natural water source, and tap water

won’t do. Many *mikva’ot* have two parts: a cistern of rain water (a natural water source), and another pool filled with tap water. The halachic concept of “*hashaka*” teaches that as long as there is a connection between the cistern and the pool, the *mikve* will be kosher. It is enough for the two bodies of water to touch through a pipe for example to render the “impure” water “pure”. *Yom Kippur* is the “pipe” that allows us to connect our soul to G-d, and that fleeting moment of touching the “Divine *mikve*” purifies our souls.

Another way to understand the metaphor of G-d as a *mikve* is offered by Rabbi Yoshiahu ben Yosef Pinto, known as the *Riaf* (1565-1648), found in *Ein Ya’akov*. The *Riaf* explains that in the same way that a *mikve* purifies different types of people who are impure, G-d purifies all. As the *mishna* under discussion teaches, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria holds that *Yom Kippur* brings atonement only for transgressions we commit against G-d. For transgressions against other people, however, *Yom Kippur* does not atone without the “victim” being appeased. *Yom Kippur* is not enough. According to the *Riaf*, just as some levels of impurity required immersion and a sacrifice, the *mikve* indeed provided a certain level of purity even though a sacrifice was not yet brought to the Temple. Hence, even if we did not yet take the opportunity to reach out to those against whom we transgressed, G-d does nevertheless purify us to some degree. Although two acts are required for complete atonement and purification, they are independent.

Yom Kippur is a time for rebirth and reconnection to G-d, and by virtue of our connection — through fasting, praying, and contemplating our past, present and future actions — we are purified. May the purification bring us back to our true nature as servants of G-d.

Bereishet

WHAT IS FAITH?

“In the beginning...” (1:1)

Rashi: “The entire Universe belongs to G-d. He created it....”

The whole Torah is predicated on a belief that there is a G-d and that He created the universe *ex nihilo*. But belief can be a delicate thing.

There were two young Jewish boys, Yankele and Shloime, who sat on the bench of the *cheder* in a small *shtetl* in Poland. In 1941, those two little Jewish boys were herded into a cattle car that took them and so many other innocent victims to Auschwitz.

By some miracle, they both made it through the War. Yankele carried on in the tradition of our forefathers and built a home of Torah Judaism.

Shloime’s Judaism, however, got left on Ellis Island. As soon as he got of the boat, he dropped everything.

Many years later, the two met on Fifth Avenue.

“Shloime, is that you?” asked Yankele, barely recognizing his childhood friend.

“Yes, Yankele, it’s me.”

“But Shloime, what happened to you? I can hardly recognize you. You don’t seem Jewish anymore!”

“Yankele, don’t be so hard on me. When I got to Auschwitz and I saw what was going on there, I couldn’t believe anymore. I lost my faith in Auschwitz.”

“Shloime, you know, the exact opposite happened to me. When we sat on the same bench in *cheder* and we learned the Torah portion of the “warnings” about all the terrible punishments that the Jewish People would suffer if we don’t keep the Torah, I thought to myself: “Come on... This stuff isn’t for real. They’re just telling us this to keep us observant.”

“Shloime – when I got to Auschwitz, I saw it was all true. I found my faith in Auschwitz...”

Faith is a delicate thing.

Two people can experience exactly the same physical

PARSHA OVERVIEW

BEREISHET

In the beginning, G-d creates the entire universe, including time itself, out of nothingness. This process of creation continues for six days. On the seventh day, G-d rests, bringing into existence the spiritual universe of Shabbat, which returns to us every seven days. Adam and Chava — the Human pair — are placed in the Garden of Eden. Chava is enticed by the serpent to eat from the forbidden fruit of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” and in turn gives the fruit to Adam. By absorbing “sin,” Adam and Chava render themselves incapable of remaining in the spiritual paradise of Eden and are banished. Death and hard work (both physical and spiritual) now enter the world, together with pain bearing and raising children. Now begins the struggle to correct the sin of Adam and Chava, which will be the main subject of world history. Cain and Hevel, the first two children of Adam and Chava, bring offerings to G-d. Hevel gives the finest of his flock, and his offering is accepted, but Cain gives inferior produce and his offering is rejected. In the ensuing quarrel, Cain kills Hevel and is condemned to wander the earth. The Torah traces the genealogy of the other children of Adam and Chava, and the descendants of Cain, until the birth of Noach. After the death of Sheith, Mankind descends into evil, and G-d decides that He will blot out Man in a flood which will deluge the world. However, one man, Noach, finds favor with G-d.

NOACH

It is ten generations since the creation of the first human. Adam’s descendants have corrupted the world with immorality, idolatry and robbery, and G-d resolves to bring a flood which will destroy all the earth’s inhabitants except for

the righteous Noach, his family and sufficient animals to repopulate the earth. G-d instructs Noach to build an ark. After forty days and nights, the flood covers even the tops of the highest mountains. After 150 days the water starts to recede. On the 17th day of the 7th month, the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat. Noach sends out a raven and then a dove to ascertain if the waters have abated. The dove returns. A week later Noach again sends the dove, which returns the same evening with an olive leaf in its beak. After another seven days Noach sends the dove once more; the dove does not return. G-d tells Noach and his family to leave the ark. Noach brings offerings to G-d from the animals which were carried in the ark for this purpose. G-d vows never again to flood the entire world and designates the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. Noach and his descendants are now permitted to slaughter and eat meat, unlike Adam. G-d commands the Seven Universal Laws: The prohibition against idolatry, adultery, theft, blasphemy, murder, eating meat torn from a live animal, and the obligation to set up a legal system. The world’s climate is established as we know it today. Noach plants a vineyard and becomes intoxicated from its produce. Ham, one of Noach’s sons, delights in seeing his father drunk and uncovered. Shem and Yafet, however, manage to cover their father without looking at his nakedness, by walking backwards. For this incident, Canaan is cursed to be a slave. The Torah lists the offspring of Noach’s three sons from whom the seventy nations of the world are descended. The Torah records the incident of the Tower of Babel, which results in G-d fragmenting communication into many languages and the dispersal of the nations throughout the world. The Parsha concludes with the genealogy of Noach to Avram.

reality and draw totally opposite conclusions.

The Rambam's *Sefer Hamitzvot* begins with the mitzvah "to believe that there is a G-d". In other places, he uses a slightly different phrase: "to know there is a G-d."

Why does he use both words, to *believe* and to *know*? Aren't they the same thing?

Also, how can you have a mitzvah to believe? If you believe, you don't need a mitzvah, and if you don't believe, all the *mitzvot* in the world aren't going to make you believe.

Emuna, faith, has two parts. We have to be intellectually assured that there is a G-d. But that won't affect our life in any way unless we translate that intellectual knowledge into an emotional reality.

For example, let's say you're an angry person. Not just that you get angry now and then, but you have a problem with anger. You can honestly believe that it's a very bad thing to be an angry person, but you will carry on being that angry person until the day you die unless you're prepared to change yourself; to work on that character trait called "anger".

Faith is the same. We could sit through any of the excel-

lent classes that demonstrate that intellectually a belief in G-d is the most logical interpretation of the world as we see it, but that knowledge won't affect our lives until it becomes part of our emotional reality. A person can listen to a historical verification of the Torah and still drive off to the nearest McDonald's.

Faith is not just intellectual. It is a personality trait. And like all traits it can be strengthened or weakened.

The Path of the Just (by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) says that the first duty of a person is "to clarify" and also "to make true" his obligations in this world. This means that we must live the truth of what we have previously clarified intellectually.

Similarly every day we say in the *Aleinu* prayer, "And you should know today and return it to your heart that G-d is the only G-d..."

It's not enough to know intellectually there is a G-d. We must return this knowledge to our heart to make, "In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth" part of the emotional reality in which we live.

Noach

SO FAR SO GOOD

"And Noach came... to the Ark because of the Flood" (7:7)

There once was a man who jumped off the Empire State Building in New York City. As he was plummeting past the 50th floor, someone opened his window and shouted to him, "Are you okay?" "So far, so good!" he yelled back.

It's human nature to assume that things will carry on the way they are now indefinitely. We seem to be blind to a fairly frequently recurring phenomenon called "catastrophe". In the year 79 CE the inhabitants of Roman Pompeii were happily going about their lives when they found themselves smothered with boiling ash and pumice from their neighboring volcano, Vesuvius, which had lain dormant for hundreds of years.

"Noach was also among those of little faith. He believed and didn't believe that the Flood would happen, and he didn't actually enter the Ark until the waters forced him in." (Rashi)

This Rashi appears difficult to understand.

The Torah calls Noach, "A perfectly righteous man". He spent 120 years of self-sacrifice building the Ark, ignoring the taunts and jibes of his generation. How does he qualify to be "among those of little faith?"

Noach believed that G-d was extremely long-suffering and would certainly forgive his generation. He didn't believe that G-d would actually bring such a terrible punishment to the Earth. This was the flaw in his faith.

On the other hand, Mordechai was on a high level of faith. When he learned of the king's decree "to eradicate, to kill and to destroy all the Jews" he believed that it would happen despite G-d's promise to Avraham, Yitzchak, and to Yaakov to safeguard their descendants. So he gathered all the Jews together, and fasted, and cried out to G-d to save them and reverse the evil decree.

It was precisely because Mordechai believed that a catastrophe was possible that it was averted. Noach, however — of "little faith" — didn't really believe that such a calamity was possible. Therefore he failed to take the necessary steps to avert it. It is for this reason that the flood is referred to as "the waters of Noach." (Yishayahu 44:9)

Complacency is still a dangerous thing. We must constantly strengthen ourselves in prayer and good deeds to avert a calamitous change in our situation. One trembles to think what could happen if hundreds of millions of Israel's "neighbors" decided one day to go into their kitchens and take out a carving knife and march on this little land called Israel.

We never know where G-d's patience with us might end. We must constantly try to avert through our prayers and our actions that possibility of a calamity.

It's all too easy to think, "So far, so good!"

• Based on Rabbi Shimshon Pincus

YEVAMOT 2 - 29

Rav Yosef, said, “Even the Tana who is of the opinion to not learn from “semuchin” (juxtaposed ideas) in the rest of the Torah — in Sefer Devarim, however, he agrees that semuchin are a legitimate method to learn something new.”

What’s the difference between Sefer Devarim and the rest of the Torah? There are two opinions in Shas as to how the Torah was “given”: all at once, or a scroll at a time (Gittin 60a). If the Torah was given and told to the Jewish People all at once, then it would be permitted to learn *semuchin* everywhere throughout the Torah. If not, however, it is not — with the exception of Sefer Devarim which was all given and told to the Jewish People by Moshe all at one time at the end of the 40 years in the desert. Since it has the nature of “one unit”, so to speak, it is fair to learn *semuchin* in this section, since unlike the other parts of the Torah it was all told and given together. (Maharitz Chiyut)

• Yevamot 4a

Our Sages taught in a beraita, “The same passage in the Torah commands to keep Shabbat and to show respect to the Beit Hamikdash Sanctuary (Lev. 19:30), in order to teach that just as Shabbat observance is forever, so too we must show respect to the site of the Beit Hamikdash even after the building has been destroyed.”

• Yevamot 6b

Rabbi Yosef said in the name of Rebbie, “One should not pour out water from his well even if he doesn’t need the water since others may have a need for it.”

• Yevamot 11b

Our Rabbis taught, “Even though Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued about... (a number of matters regarding permitted and forbidden marriages)... they did not refrain from marrying the offspring of the different opinion, to teach their dearness and friendship for each other, to fulfill the verse ‘Love truth and peace’ (Zech. 8:19).”

Although it would seem that if one side prohibited what the other permitted, there can be only one truth, and it would seem that their familial consolidation does not fulfill love of “truth”. However, the words of both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel all have the same “Source” — as being the words of the living G-d (Mesechta Chagiga 3b) — and both opposing opinions are the truth. Therefore, the verse written in the book of the Prophet Zecharia instructs that “peace” should be preserved despite the difference of opinion — because both of the rulings are true (Maharsha).

• Yevamot 14b

Rabbi Levi said, “The penalty for cheating the public by using incorrect weights and measures when selling to them is greater than that for forbidden intimate relations, because one can repent for the latter transgression but one cannot repent for the former transgression.

One who cheats in sales cannot fully repent since he is not always aware of identity of the victims and does not always remember whom he cheated. Therefore he cannot return to all the people he cheated the amount he cheated them out of, and also seek their appeasement, in order to do complete *teshuva* (Rashi).

• Yevamot 21a

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YEVAMOT 2 - 29

The Sage Ulah said in the name of Rabbi Elazar, “Before Shlomo came, the Torah was like a vessel without a handle — until Shlomo came and made a handle for it.”

The *gemara* on our *daf* is searching for a written source to prohibit marrying “*shniyot*”. These are certain relatives that are not forbidden by the Torah, but are nevertheless close enough relatives to warrant forbidding their marriage according to Rabbinical decree. An example is not to marry one’s mother’s mother. The reference to “Shlomo” in the *gemara* is to King Shlomo, the author of Sefer Kohelet. A verse there states, “And more than this, Kohelet was wise, he also taught knowledge to the people; he listened and sought out, he established many proverbs (12:9).”

The word in the verse for “listen” — “*izein*” — can also mean “a handle”. King Shlomo “made a handle” which the people could hold and help them keep the *mitzvot* of the Torah and not transgress them. A vessel without a handle is more likely to be “broken” than one with a handle. King Shlomo’s “handle” was that he taught the Torah with much insight and examples. He enacted Rabbinical decrees and greatly emphasized the importance of listening to the teachings of the Rabbis who made such decrees to protect the Torah from being transgressed. Rav Yehuda states in our *gemara* that one of these decrees King Shlomo made was to ban “*shniyot*” — “secondary relatives” — in order that Torah law should not come to be “broken” (Rashi).

• *Yevamot 21a*

Our Rabbis taught in a beraita: “Converts to Judaism will not be accepted in the days of the Mashiach; similarly, converts were not accepted in the days of King David or in the days of King Solomon.”

The basis for this teaching is presented in the *gemara* by Rabbi Elazar, based on his understanding of a verse in the Prophet Yishayahu 54:15. The most logical reasoning for not accepting converts in times of Israel’s glory — such as in the days of Mashiach — is a concern that the person is converting with an ulterior motive to join the Jewish People only because they have power and authority, and would not be converting as a “righteous convert” (Rashi).

Tosefot asks how, in light of our *gemara*, are we to understand the statement elsewhere in our *masechta* (79a) that 150,000 people converted in the days of King David? Tosefot answers that these people “converted” to Jewish practices “by themselves”. They called themselves Jews although they were not formally accepted. This is similar, says Tosefot, to many who “converted by themselves” when the Jewish People rose to a position of strength and great influence in the time of Mordechai and Esther after the miracle of Purim.

• *Yevamot 24b*

Rava said, “A person is related to himself and cannot establish himself (through his testimony) as a rasha (evil person who is obligated).”

Relatives cannot testify for or against one another as we learn elsewhere in *Shas*, and no one is a closer relative than a person to himself! However, this lack of ability to cause self-incrimination only applies to physical punishments, such as receiving lashes or capital punishment by the Beit Din religious court, or to monetary penalties that only the courts can impose, or for making the person unfit to be a witness. However, if one admits in his “testimony” that he owes another person money for some reason, his word is accepted by the Beit Din (as learned from a verse specific to this situation of admission of monetary obligation), and the person is found “guilty” to pay the debt based on his own words. (Rashi and Tosefot)

• *Yevamot 25b*

Bereishet

1. Why does the Torah start with the account of Creation?
2. What happened to the light that was created on the first day?
3. Why isn't the word "good" associated with the second day?
4. How was the wood of the trees supposed to taste?
5. On which day were the sun and moon created?
6. G-d blessed the birds to be fruitful and to multiply. Why did He not do so for the beasts?
7. In whose likeness was man fashioned?
8. What kind of food did Adam eat?
9. Why is "the sixth day" written with the definite article "the"?
10. At the end of the sixth day what was the world still lacking?
11. Why was man made from dust gathered from the entire earth?
12. How is man superior to the animals?
13. Why was it not good that man be alone?
14. Where do we learn that one must not add to a commandment from G-d?
15. What does it mean that Adam and Chava "knew that they were naked?"
16. Why did Hevel choose to be a shepherd?
17. What was the marital practice of the generation who lived before the flood?
18. What did Tuval-Cain invent?
19. Why did Chanoch die at a young age?
20. What was the sign that Shem was born with great propensity for righteousness?

Answers to Bereishet's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 1:1 - So that when the nations accuse us of stealing *Eretz Canaan* from the Canaanites, we can respond that G-d, as Creator, has the right to give the land to whomever He sees fit, and He gave *Eretz Canaan* to us.
2. 1:4 - G-d saw that the wicked would be unworthy of it so He hid it for the righteous.
3. 1:7 - Because the work with the water wasn't completed until the third day. Anything that is incomplete is not "good."
4. 1:11 - The wood was to have the taste of the fruit.
5. 1:14 - They were created on the first day and suspended in the firmament on the fourth day.
6. 1:22 - He did not want the serpent, who was to be cursed, to receive a blessing.
7. 1:26 - In the likeness of the angels.
8. 1:30 - Vegetation.
9. 1:31 - "The" in Hebrew is the letter *hey*, which has a numerical value of five. G-d created the world on the condition that it will endure only if the Jewish People accept the Five Books of the Torah.
10. 2:2 - Rest.
11. 2:7 - So that wherever he might die, the earth would receive his body.
12. 2:7 - He was given understanding and speech.
13. 2:18 - If he were alone, he would appear to be a god. The creation of woman emphasized man's dependence.
14. 3:3 - From Chava. G-d commanded not to eat from the tree, but she added not to touch it. Because she added to the command she eventually came to transgress it.
15. 3:7 - They had been given one commandment and they had stripped themselves of it.
16. 4:2 - Since the ground had been cursed he refrained from cultivating it.
17. 4:19 - They married two wives, one with whom to have children. The other one was given a potion which prevented her from bearing children.
18. 4:22 - Murder weapons.
19. 5:22 - Though he was righteous, he was easily influenced; therefore G-d took him before his time to protect him from sinning.
20. 5:32 - He was born already circumcised.

Noach

1. Parshat Noach begins by describing Noach as “perfectly righteous.” Yet later in the parsha, G-d says to Noach “For I have seen that you are righteous” but not “perfectly” righteous. Why not?
2. What sin sealed the fate of the flood generation?
3. Why did G-d tell Noach to build an ark, as opposed to saving him via some other method?
4. The ark had three levels. What function did each level serve?
5. What indication do we have that Noach was familiar with the Torah?
6. Why did G-d postpone bringing the flood for seven days?
7. The flood began “in the second month.” What is the second month?
8. Why did the first water of the flood come down as light rain?
9. What did people say that threatened Noach, and what did G-d do to protect him?
10. What grouping of creatures escaped the punishment of the flood?
11. How deeply was the ark submerged in the water?
12. What did the olive branch symbolize?
13. When did humans receive permission to eat meat?
14. What prohibition was given along with the permission to eat meat?
15. Why does the command to “be fruitful and multiply” directly follow the prohibition of murder?
16. Name two generations in which the rainbow never appeared.
17. Why did Noach curse Canaan specifically? Give two reasons.
18. Why does the Torah call Nimrod a mighty hunter?
19. The sin of the generation of the dispersion was greater than the sin of the generation of the flood. Why was the punishment of the former less severe?
20. Why was Sarah also called Yiscah?

Answers to Noach’s Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 7:1 - Because one should not tell the entire praise of a person in his presence.
2. 6:13 - Robbery.
3. 6:14 - So that people would see Noach building the ark and ask him what he was doing. When Noach would answer, “G-d is bringing a flood,” it might encourage some people to repent.
4. 6:16 - The top level housed the people, the middle level housed the animals, and the bottom level, the refuse.
5. 7:2 - G-d told him to take into the ark seven of each kosher-type animal, and two of each non-kosher type. “Kosher” and “non-kosher” are Torah concepts.
6. 7:4 - To allow seven days to mourn the death of Mesushelach.
7. 7:11 - Rabbi Eliezar says Marcheshvan; Rabbi Yehuda says Iyar.
8. 7:12 - To give the generation a chance to repent.
9. 7:13,15 - People said, “If we see him going into the ark, we’ll smash it!” G-d surrounded it with bears and lions to kill any attackers.
10. 7:22 - The fish.
11. 8:4 - Eleven *amot*.
12. 8:11 - Nothing. It was a leaf, not a branch. (The olive leaf symbolized that it’s better to eat food “bitter like an olive” but which comes directly from G-d, rather than sweet food provided by humans.)
13. 9:3 - After the flood.
14. 9:4 - The prohibition of eating a limb cut from a living animal.
15. 9:7 - To equate one who purposely abstains from having children to one who commits murder.
16. 9:12 - The generation of King Chizkiyahu and the generation of Shimon bar Yochai.
17. 9:22,24 - Because Canaan is the one who revealed Noach’s disgrace to Ham. And because Ham stopped Noach from fathering a fourth son. Thus, Noach cursed Ham’s fourth son, Canaan.
18. 10:9 - He used words to ensnare the minds of people, persuading them to rebel against G-d.
19. 11:9 - They lived together peacefully.
20. 11:29 - The word “Yiscah” is related to the Hebrew word “to see.” Sarah was called Yiscah because she could “see” the future via prophecy. Also, because of her beauty, everyone would gaze at her.

YOM KIPPUR BLAST

From: Leon

Dear Rabbi,

The shofar is blown on Rosh Hashana in order to recall our merits before G-d on the Day of Judgment. In fact, I think it's blown something like 100 times. But why is the shofar blown on Yom Kippur? Or more accurately, why is it blown after the neila service, already after the day is over?

Dear Leon,

There are different customs about how to blow the shofar after *neila*. According to the Ashkenazi custom, one long *tekia* blast is blown after the last kaddish. According to the Sefardim and Chasidim, 10 shofar sounds are blown during the kaddish, followed by the long *tekia* after the kaddish.

There are a number of reasons for the sounding of the shofar at the conclusion of Yom Kippur:

1. It is a memorial to the Jubilee year in which slaves were set free and lands were returned to their original owners; this commenced with the shofar being blown after Yom Kippur.

2. It is intended to confuse and confound Satan who attempts to make his final accusations upon the conclusion of the Day of Atonement.

3. It signals the victory over Satan's accusations and rejoicing over our resulting atonement.

4. As on Rosh Hashana, it recalls the merit of the binding of Isaac at this final sealing of the Divine decree.

5. It recalls the atonement of the Jewish People upon Moshe's descent from Mount Sinai on Yom Kippur, which was accompanied by the blowing of the shofar.

6. It signifies the return of the Divine Presence to the Heavenly realm, which was also accompanied by the shofar.

7. It formally announces the end of the fast and onset of night, enabling the people to eat.

8. It lends a holiday ambience to the meal which breaks the fast and should be conducted in a festive manner.

A BEAUTIFUL SUCCA

From: Melissa

Dear Rabbi,

I know it's a mitzvah to build the succa, which in our home the men and boys usually do, but it's usually the women and girls who do the decorating. Is the decorating of the succa also a mitzvah?

Dear Melissa,

The Sages taught regarding the verse, "This is my G-d and I shall worship Him with beauty" that one is to beautify oneself before Him in the performance of *mitzvot*. And not only must one be adorned with *mitzvot*, but those *mitzvot* themselves must be beautified, as the Sages taught, "Make for Him a beautiful succa, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful *tzitzit*, a beautifully written Torah scroll ...in a beautiful covering".

So not only should a succa be beautifully decorated, but all the *mitzvot* should be performed with regard for esthetic beauty in accordance with the above teaching on the verse, "This is my G-d and I shall worship Him with beau-

ty". Nevertheless, it is especially true of the mitzvah of succa which is accompanied by the taking of the four species, about which it says explicitly in the Torah, "And you shall take for yourselves the fruit of a *beautiful tree*..."

Therefore we are obligated to show regard for the succa and not bring any unseemly objects into it, or do anything unseemly or mundane while in it. Rather one should decorate it as beautifully as possible where practical, with pictures and decorations, hanging fruits, wines, flowers and ornaments, elegant curtains, lovely utensils, handsome tables and chairs, attractive lighting, rugs, etc.

In this regard, it is important to know that any objects designated and used to beautify and adorn the actual succa roof or walls may not be used for any other purpose during the duration of the holiday. They may not be removed from their use as decorations, and even if they fall down, they may not be put to any use. Therefore, even fruits or wines that were used as decorations may not be consumed until after the holiday. What's more, if they fall on Shabbat or Yom Tov, they are *muktze* and may not be handled. However, if one affixes them on condition that they may be used during the holiday, the condition works.

Plants vs. Zombies

A deeper look at the four species

BY RABBI RICHARD JACOBS

Glance through the window of any shul on Succot. Anyone unfamiliar with the mitzvah of the four species may well wonder as he observes the congregation waving shrubbery and fruit in the air or parading around the room holding the greenery aloft: “What planet are we from?”

There’s no doubt about it. The mitzvah of the four species — *lulav*, *etrog*, *hadass* (myrtle) and *aravot* (willow) — is one of the more curious of the commandments.

It is well known that each of the four species symbolizes a different segment of the Jewish People. The quality of taste (*ta’am* – which also means reason) represents Torah learning, and the quality of smell represents good deeds and the doing of *mitzvot* (a fragrance spreads the same way the reputation of someone who does good deeds does). Thus the *etrog* (with both taste and smell) denotes the *tzaddik* (righteous person) with both Torah learning and good deeds; the *lulav* (with taste — the date fruit —but no scent) represents a learned person without good deeds; the *hadass* (with its strong aroma and no taste) indicates one whose actions are good but is unlearned); and the *aravot* signify someone who is neither learned nor possesses good deeds.

We can make several interesting inferences from this symbolism, and the fact that the mitzvah requires the bringing together of all four species. Firstly, no matter what one’s level of knowledge or observance, they can have an integral role to play in *Klal Yisrael*. Secondly, while all four species need to be brought together to actually perform the mitzvah, only three are bound up together, whereas the *etrog* is kept separate except at the time of fulfilling the mitzvah. This indicates that while it is important for *tzaddikim* to interact with the other members of the Jewish People, this should be while they are involved in a mitzvah.

There is an interesting law common to all four species which the *gemara* first discusses regarding the *lulav*. A *lulav* that is dry is invalid for the mitzvah. What is considered dry

is the subject of discussion, with the two prevailing opinions being when it crumbles under the fingernail (Tosefot) and after a period of twelve months (Ritva). Why is a dry *lulav* invalid? The *gemara* explains that there is comparison to the *etrog* which the Torah describes as “*hadar*” (with splendor). This means that just as the *etrog* needs to be splendorous, so too must the *lulav*, and a withered *lulav* is not *hadar*. Rashi further explains that a dry *lulav* would not fulfill the requirement of “This is my G-d and I will glorify Him” (Shemot 15:2), whereas Ra’avad says “The dead cannot praise G-d” (Tehillim 115:17), and rules that a dry *lulav* is invalid because it is like it is dead.

Interestingly the word *lulav* (*lamed, vav, lamed, beit*) has the same *gematria* (numerical value) as the Hebrew word for “life” – “*chayim*” (*chet, yud, yud, mem*); 68. The *lulav* itself symbolizes life.

If so, we may well ask, why is it only when the *lulav* is dry that it is invalid? Surely this should be the case from the moment that it is cut from the palm tree.

As any horticulturalist could tell us, as long as the *lulav* is still moist and not completely dry it is possible to put it in water and revive it. Plants sometimes even grow new roots (e.g. houseplants grown from cuttings). The *lulav* is therefore not considered dead until it is completely dry and impossible to return to its moist state.

This imparts two essential lessons for all of us. Firstly, we need to remain “moist” and connected to Torah, which is often compared to water (the origin of the expression “the water of life”). Secondly, we should never give up on any member of the Jewish People no matter how far removed he is from his heritage. If he would only soak in the “water of Torah and *mitzvot*” then he – like a plant – will flourish and “grow new roots”!

• Based on ideas in *Torah L’Da’at*

SUCCOT Q&A ?

1. According to the Torah, what three basic requirements define a material as valid for use as a succah roof?
2. If the succah causes discomfort (e.g., it's too cold) to the extent that under similar conditions you would leave your very own house, you are exempt from the mitzvah. Why?
3. What two things are forbidden to do outside of the succah all seven days of the festival?
4. What is the absolute minimum number of meals a person is required to eat in the succah during the seven-day holiday?
5. Besides referring to the tree and its fruit, what does the word "etrog" mean literally?
6. What is the minimum length of a lulav?
7. What is the maximum percentage a person is required to add to the purchase price of his etrog in order to obtain an etrog of greater beauty?
8. On the Shabbat that occurs during Succot, we read the Book of Kohelet, in which King Solomon refers to himself as "Kohelet." Why is King Solomon called Kohelet?
9. What prohibition could a person transgress simply by sitting in the succah on the eighth day of Succot?
10. We hold a tallit over the heads of the people who read the end of the Torah and the beginning of the Torah. Why?

SUCCOT Q&A!

Answers to Succot Questions!

1. It must grow from the ground, no longer be connected to the ground, and not be receptive to tumah (ritual defilement).
2. Because the commandment of living in a succah is to dwell in the succah for seven days the same way you dwell in your house the rest of the year. (*Mishna Berura 640:13*)
3. Eat (an 'established' meal) or sleep. (*Orach Chaim 639:2*)
4. One. Eating a meal in the succah the first night of Succot is a requirement. The rest of the festival, a person can eat 'snacks' which are not required to be eaten in a succah. (Outside Israel, one must eat a meal the second night of Succot as well. However, there is no requirement to live outside Israel!)
(*Orach Chaim 639:3*)
5. Beauty. (*Ramban Vayikra 23:40*)
6. Its spine must be at least 4 tefachim (halachic hand-breadths).
7. 33.3% (*Orach Chaim 656:1*)
8. Because he gathered (*kihale*) vast wisdom, and because he, as king, gathered the nation on Succot after the Sabbatical year. (*Rashi, Kohelet 1:1*)
9. Bal Tosif - "Do not add to the mitzvot." The commandment to live in the succah applies for only seven days. To sit in the succah on the eighth day with intent to fulfill the mitzvah transgresses "bal tosif." (*Orach Chaim 666:1*)
10. It represents the wedding canopy, symbolizing that through the Torah we wed ourselves to G-d.

גמור חתימה טובה

ohr.edu wishes all of Israel a Happy & Sweet Year

The Miracle of Nature

BY RABBI YITZCHAK BOTTON

**“You shall dwell in succot for a seven day period. So that your generations will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in succot when I took them out of the land of Egypt; I am the L-rd your G-d.”
(Vayikra 23:42-43)**

The holiday season culminates with the festive days of Succot, *z'man simchateinu* (the time of our joy). Growing up in Miami, I couldn't help feel that, as joyous as everyone was, something was missing - air conditioning! After all, that's what it was like for the Jews in the desert. Surrounded by "Clouds of Glory" that protected them completely from the harsh sun, they experienced pleasant environmental conditions throughout their extended desert stay. The Clouds of Glory also smoothed out the ground for easy travel and cleaned and pressed their clothing. Food and drink was hand delivered, and to top it all off, they ate Heavenly bread. Better than a five-star hotel, and all at no extra charge.

So why do we sit in hot and humid shacks with our own live nature show of exotic flying things. As all things in Judaism, the answer is - it's a *machloket* (matter of dispute).

Clouds of Glory

According to Rabbi Eliezer, the *succot* (shelters) mentioned in the verse refer to the Clouds of Glory that provided everyone with complete shelter and protection. This was an open miracle that continued for forty years without interruption.

Thus, according to Rabbi Eliezer the holiday of Succot symbolizes two fundamental principles of Jewish faith: 1) G-d's great love and concern for the Jewish People, taking personal care of them throughout their forty year stay in the desert. 2) The knowledge that G-d is constantly present and in total control of the forces of nature.

By showing the Jews in the desert constant miracles that transcended the laws of nature, G-d, in effect, trained them to live on a higher level of reality than the rest of the world. As Rabbi Chanina said, "He Who commanded the oil to burn will command the vinegar to burn." This is the reality that the Jews of the desert lived with.

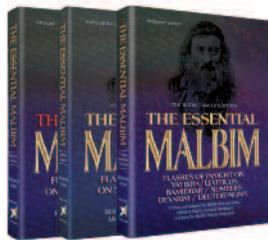
When miracles become the norm, they are no different than nature itself, which is in reality no less a miracle. Making water fall is no less a feat than making it stand. To put it simply, if G-d was able to make everything out of nothing, then He can make everything into nothing, and everything in between.

Desert Booths

According to Rabbi Akiva the *succot* we are commanded to build represent the physical booths that we built in the desert after the Exodus to protect us from the blistering desert heat. The question is asked, why make a holiday to celebrate dwelling in hot and humid huts?

According to Rabbi Akiva, the *succa*, symbolizing life in this world, represents the fusion of Divine providence and man's effort. Thus, despite the fact that G-d was present in the desert, the Jews still had to build huts to live in. And so, in today's dark world, we must find G-d within nature. This is what the "non-miraculous" booths of the Festival of Succot represent - finding G-d's Divine Hand in the natural world.

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Abarbanel

ON SHEMITA

By Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett

The *mitzvot* to observe the Shemita, or Sabbatical year, every seven years, and the Yovel, the fiftieth year, are graphic demonstrations of the Jewish nation's reliance on Divine Providence for its very existence. By refraining from agricultural activities every seven years and for two consecutive years in years 49 and 50, the nation demonstrates that G-d is the true owner of the Land and that all natural forces are totally subservient to His will. They also point clearly to the Divine origin of the Torah, as it is inconceivable that any man-made system would demand a complete cessation of agricultural activity for two consecutive years.

Abarbanel, in his lengthy discussion of Shemita and Yovel in Sefer Vayikra (Parshat Behar), reveals a deeper understanding of these *mitzvot*. On the simplest level, Shemita is a reminder of the nature of the world's Creation — six days of activity followed by the seventh day of rest. Just as the word "Shabbat" refers to the last day of creation of the universe as a whole, the word "Shabbat" in reference to work of the Land reminds us of the original Divine Creation.

On a deeper level, the *mitzvah* of Shemita points to man's lifespan and the purpose of his existence. Man's 70-year average lifespan is divided into three parts: 10 years of childhood, 50 years of labor and then, ideally, 10 years of refraining from labor. Thus, the seventh decade of life corresponds to the seventh day of Creation and the seventh year of the agricultural cycle. The seventh decade of one's life should be dedicated to spiritual pursuits, as this is the true goal of man's existence. When the verse tells us that the Shemita year is a 'Sabbath to G-d', it is telling us that our souls should cling to our Creator and turn away from activities of the physical world. Since our purpose in life is to attain spiritual fulfillment, the verse states that 'the Sabbath produce of the Land shall be yours to eat', meaning that you shall eat and be nourished by food for your soul. The verse then says that everything will be left as ownerless, to be enjoyed by everyone equally, including slaves and even animals. This is a further hint to the insignificance of material achievement, as after a man's death everything is turned over to those who had no part in their accumulation. The fiftieth year of the cycle, the Yovel year, hints at the fiftieth year of a man's labors in the material world. From this point on he should dedicate himself in his senior years to his spiritual needs. Just as the fiftieth year results in freedom for slaves and the return of ancestral lands to their original own-

ers, so too should the soul return to its original source.

On the deepest level, the *mitzvot* of Shemita and Yovel point to the fundamental nature of the physical world itself and hint to its ultimate fate. The physical world is by definition impermanent; the only permanent feature in existence is G-d Himself. Even the celestial bodies are subject to eventual destruction, regardless of how stable they appear. (It should be noted that in the last decades, astronomers have confirmed Abarbanel's insight. They have demonstrated that there are stages in the 'lives' of stars, ultimately culminating in their 'deaths'). Besides Abarbanel, Ramban and others have indicated that when the Torah speaks of six days of Creation it is also referring to six millennia as well, at the end of which the world will no longer exist as we know it.

Although there are numerous interpretations of what will happen after the year 6,000, Abarbanel writes that the idea of Shabbat and Shemita, the cessation of physical activity, will apply to that seventh millennium as well. With proofs from numerous verses in Tanach, Abarbanel shows that just as the earth was preceded by a state of "absolute nothingness", so too it will return to that state. This destruction will be in two stages. In the first stage the earth will continue to exist, but it will be a desolate wasteland. This is based on the *gemara* in Sanhedrin (97a) where Rav Katina states, "For six thousand years will the world exist and for one thousand years it will be destroyed...." The *gemara* goes on to support Rav Katina's opinion: "Just as the Sabbatical year causes cessation for one year out of seven years, so too the world ceases one millennium out of seven millennia."

The second stage will occur after seven cycles of seven millennia, parallel to the Yovel that takes place after seven cycles of seven years. At that time the total destruction of the physical universe will occur. Just as the physical universe was preceded by a state of absolute nothingness, so too will it return to the same state. As noted previously, this is another meaning of the verse, in reference to the Yovel year, "In this year of Yovel you will return each man to his ancestral heritage." In effect, the Torah is telling us that the ancestral heritage of the entire universe was its absolute non-existence.

In conclusion, according to Abarbanel, we can understand the *mishna* in Avot (5:11) which states, "Exile comes to the world for idolatry, immorality, bloodshed and for working the earth during the Sabbatical year." The first three are under-

Abarbanel

ON SUCCOT

By Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett

Abarbanel offers several insights into the holiday of Succot and the succa itself. First of all, the temporary nature of the succa is a reminder of our temporary life on earth. The seven days of the festival correspond to the seven decades of the average lifespan. The number of bulls which were brought as sacrificial offerings decreases with each day of the festival. This is to remind us that each passing decade brings us closer to the inevitable end, and encourages us to make the best use of our time to develop our spiritual potential. The first and last days of the festival represent the first and last decades of life. In the first decade — the years of our youth — we revel in the delights and pleasures of the physical world. This is to remind us that we are not prohibited from enjoying those delights. However, in the last decade we are enjoined to make the physical world secondary to spiritual accomplishments. The eighth day, the separate festival of Shemini Atzeret, reminds us that if we have merited living into an eighth decade we have attained a special level of holiness and spiritual purity.

Abarbanel offers a unique insight into the deeper meaning of the four plant species which we use on Succot. The Torah prescribes that the citron, palm branch, willow and myrtle be

held together on the first day of Succot. (According to Rabbinic law they are held together on the intermediate days of the festival as well.) Each of these species, as they are named and described by the Torah, hints at the sweetness and pleasures of the physical world as previously indicated by the first decade of life. The citron is described as the “fruit of a beautiful tree” — which is pleasing to the eyes of all who gaze upon it. The palm tree is also beautiful and pleasing to the eye. The myrtle is described as the “branches of a braided tree”. The Hebrew word “*avot*” is normally translated as “braided” since on each branch there is a series of three leaves that grow closely together like a braid. Abarbanel, however, states that the word ‘*avot*’ is actually derived from the word ‘*aveit*’ which means fat or corpulent, and is a reference to the beautiful, dense arrangement of the leaves on each branch. Finally, the Hebrew word for the willow, “*arava*” has the same root as the word “*arav*” which can mean pleasant and sweet. After describing the four species the Torah states immediately that “You shall celebrate it as a festival for G-d.” This is a clear indication that the pleasures and delights of the physical world are to be enjoyed only according to the parameters of the Torah in order to serve G-d properly.

Abarbanel **ON SHEMITA** *continued from page twelve*

standable — they are often referred to as the three ‘cardinal sins’ that may never be transgressed under any circumstances. But why is observing the Sabbatical year more important even than Shabbat, for example? In essence, Abarbanel is telling us that Shemita and Yovel are communicating some of the most fundamental principles of Judaism: G-d is omnipotent; the Creator of the universe from absolute nothingness and will

return it to absolute nothingness as well. G-d is the sustainer of all life, as we are assured of our sustenance even if we periodically refrain from all agricultural activities. Finally, the requirement to observe the agricultural cycle hints at the requirements of our own life cycle as well, since the ultimate goal is pursuit of spiritual growth after decades of involvement in the demands of the physical world.

תג שמח

ohr.edu wishes all of Israel a Happy Succot

Abarbanel

ON THE PARSHA

By Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett

Bereishet - Cain and Abel

The narrative of Cain and Abel (Kayin and Hevel) presents numerous difficulties. Why did they choose their respective professions? Why was only Hevel's sacrifice accepted? Why does G-d challenge Kayin's justifiable anger? Why does Kayin murder his brother, and why does he lament his punishment of being forced to wander? He should have been executed for murder!

Kayin, the farmer, saw that the ground was the source of all life. His name, which means "acquisition", indicates that he was rooted in materialism. Hevel, as a shepherd, pursued the less material objectives of leadership, honor and power, as the shepherd is the leader of his flocks. The word "hevel" which connotes the ethereal is an indication of his lack of concern for materialism. Kayin, the firstborn, chose farming, since plant life precedes animal life, just as acquisitions precede honor. Hevel, on the other hand, viewed shepherding as a higher and more honorable profession, as evidenced later by the Patriarchs.

Each brought a sacrifice in order to substantiate his claim to superiority, not in order to give thanks to G-d. Kayin felt that farming was most important since it was the foundation of man's physical existence, providing food, clothing and shelter. He felt that shepherding was without substance and required little effort. Hevel, however, felt that it was much more honorable to deal with animals, whereas Kayin was dealing with the ground which had been cursed to produce thorns and thistles. He brought his offering from the choicest of his flocks to show the absence of this curse.

G-d's acceptance of Hevel's offering was an indication that his life was on a higher plane. His pursuit of honor actually brought him to a level which shielded him from other negative characteristics. He was in control of his occupation while Kayin was enslaved to the ground and its material products. There is no honor in material possessions, and when one is not concerned with his own honor he is more likely to lapse into dishonesty and theft. Kayin was constantly involved with the demands of working the ground, while Hevel was free from the hazards of materialism and able to concentrate on higher contemplations.

Kayin was upset as he saw himself subservient and inferior to his younger brother. But G-d tells him that the actual problem is his failure to fulfill his own potential. G-d tells him that he does not have to be a slave to the material world, but that

he can rise above it and conquer it. G-d also tells him that Hevel was not a paragon of perfection; he had a desire for power and fame. Kayin was afraid that Hevel having chosen a life of control over others would also exercise that control over Kayin and his descendants, even to the point of usurping his land. He felt that he had no choice but to kill Hevel to prevent this from happening. Kayin would then be left alone to do G-d's work.

In terms of Kayin's complaint that his punishment was more than he could bear, Abarbanel relates that he actually means just the opposite. He is actually referring to the fact that his transgression was so heinous that G-d cannot bear to forgive him, even though G-d's power to forgive can overcome even the most grievous transgressions. Furthermore, when Kayin complained that someone was likely to kill him during his wanderings from place to place, he was actually expressing his desire to be killed because of the severity of his act of premeditated murder.

Noach – The Great Flood

At the end of Parshat Bereishet the Torah states, "And G-d saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth... I will blot out man, whom I created, from the face of the ground" (Ber. 6:5,7). G-d is stating clearly that man's evil nature is the cause of the destructive flood. However, in Parshat Noach, at the conclusion of the flood, G-d says, "I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man, since the nature of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I continue to smite every living being." (Ber. 8:21). Here G-d is saying that man's evil nature is the reason for *not* bringing another flood.

Abarbanel explains that man's being "evil from his youth" is not a reason to be forgiven for transgressions. Rather, the punishments will take place over the course of a lifetime, beginning in his youth and extending into his old age, instead of being one cataclysmic event. Additionally, the verse concludes "...seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter... shall not cease." This indicates that future punishments will occur in the context of earth's natural cycles of drought, famine, and extremes of heat and cold.

Prior to the flood, the earth's rich physical environment led to gross materialism. Just as the first stage of an individual's life is characterized by spiritual emptiness, so too the first stage in

1. Passover commemorates the going out of Egypt. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah. What historical event can Yom Kippur be said to commemorate?
2. For what kinds of sins does Yom Kippur not atone?
3. What should someone do if the person he wronged does not forgive him the first time?
4. Why is the vidui confession included during the mincha prayer the afternoon before Yom Kippur?
5. On Yom Kippur we refrain from: Working, eating, drinking, washing, anointing, family relations and wearing leather shoes. Which three of these prohibitions are more severe than the others?
6. In what two ways does the prohibition against eating food on Yom Kippur differ from the prohibition against eating pork the entire year?
7. Who wrote the prayer "Unesaneh Tokef" said during the chazan's repetition of musaf?
8. Why do we read the book of Yona on Yom Kippur?
9. In what two ways does havdalah after Yom Kippur differ from havdalah after Shabbos?
10. Ideally, what mitzvah should one begin immediately after Yom Kippur?

Answers to Yom Kippur Questions!

1. Moshe came down from Mount Sinai on the tenth of Tishrei with the second set of Tablets, signifying forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf. Yom Kippur can be said to commemorate this event, the first national day of forgiveness for the Jewish People.
2. Sins committed against other people, including hurting someone's feelings. Yom Kippur does not atone for these sins until the perpetrator gains forgiveness from the victim himself. (Orach Chaim 606:1)
3. He should try at least two more times to gain forgiveness. (Orach Chaim 606:1)
4. Lest one choke while eating the pre-Yom Kippur meal and die without atonement, or lest one become intoxicated and unable to concentrate on the prayers at night. (Mishna Berura 607:1)
5. Eating, drinking, working. (Mishna Krisus 1:1)
6. Although any amount is forbidden, eating on Yom Kippur is not punishable by a Sanhedrin until one has eaten food equal in volume to the size of a date. Eating pork, on the other hand, is punishable for eating even an olive-sized piece, which is smaller than a date. (Mishna Berura 612:1)
7. "Unesaneh Tokef" was written by Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany about 1000 years ago.
8. The repentance of the people of Ninveh serves as an inspiration to us to repent, and shows us that repentance can overturn a Divine decree. (Shelah Hakadosh)
9. After Yom Kippur, the blessing over spices is omitted from havdalah. Also, the source of the flame used for havdalah after Yom Kippur must be a fire kindled before Yom Kippur. (Orach Chaim 624:3,4)
10. Building the succa. (Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5)

Abarbanel **ON PARSHA** *continued from page fourteen*

the development of mankind was characterized by spiritual emptiness, materialism and sensuality. The phrase "man's heart is evil from his youth" is a reference to this first stage. The flood obliterated this first stage and led to an attachment to spiritual pursuits, obviating the need for another flood.

The rainbow is then presented as the sign of the covenant that G-d will not bring another flood. Abarbanel points out a difficulty in understanding this narrative. First of all, a rainbow is a natural phenomenon which must have existed prior to the flood. If G-d is promising a new relationship with mankind, the sign should be something new as well. He answers that after the flood there was a change in the physical nature of the clouds themselves. During the flood they were so dense that

no sunlight could penetrate to produce a rainbow. From this point onward they will no longer be so dense as to envelop the entire atmosphere in cloud. This would allow for the refraction of light necessary to produce the rainbow. This new atmospheric reality hints to the new status of mankind. There will no longer be one unified, immoral society. Some societies will sink into immorality, others will not. Just as rain will now fall in some areas and not in others, so too some regions will suffer due to the behavior of their inhabitants and others will not.

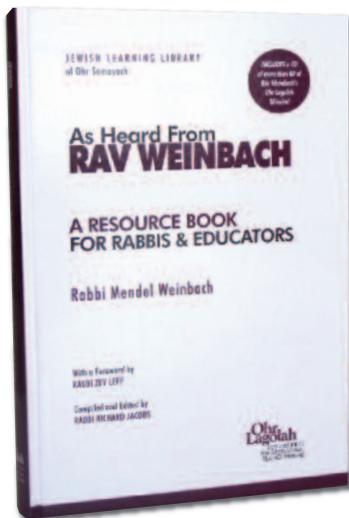
The rainbow is a reminder to mankind that G-d has modified nature and diluted the density of the atmosphere, precluding the possibility of another catastrophic deluge.

THE BOOK OF YONA Q&A

1. Why do we read the Book of Yona on Yom Kippur?
2. How long was Yona inside the fish?
3. What did the sailors do when they saw their ship floundering in the storm?
4. In which well-known sea was Yona when he was inside the fish?
5. What did Yona do inside the fish?
6. How big was the city of Ninveh?
7. What length of time were the people of Ninveh given in which to repent?
8. How did the people of Ninveh react when they heard Yona's prophecy?
9. Why did Yona originally try to escape from delivering G-d's prophecy to the people of Ninveh?
10. Give another answer to question number nine.

Answers to The Book of Yona Questions!

1. The repentance of the people of Ninveh serves as an inspiration to us to repent, and shows us that repentance can overturn a Divine decree. (*Shelah Hakadosh*) Also, it teaches that even Yona could not flee from G-d. (*Sefer Hatoda'ah*)
2. Three nights and three days. (2:1)
3. They prayed to their gods, cast their vessels into the sea, and then drew lots to find out on whose account the storm came about. (1:5-7)
4. Yam Suf - The Sea of Reeds. (1:6)
5. He prayed. (2:2)
6. A three-day walk from end to end.
7. Forty days. (3:4)
8. They fasted, covered themselves in sackcloth, repented and returned all stolen property. (3:5-8)
9. He was afraid that if the non-Jews in Ninveh repented but the Jewish People did not repent it would look bad for the Jewish People. (1:3)
10. He was afraid that the people of Ninveh would think he was a false prophet, since he said that the city would be destroyed and it wasn't. (4:2)



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“RETURN US”

“Return us... to Your Torah, bring us near... to Your service.”

Years ago there was a show about a superhero who was given a superhero outfit without instructions how to use it. Clueless as to how to operate it, he began a trial and error process that successfully provided enough humor to last the season, maybe two. As ignorant as that superhero was, today’s superheroes are even more ignorant and foolish as well. At least, if asked why he didn’t follow the instructions, he could say “I didn’t have any instructions, so I had to figure out things for myself.” We, on the other hand, do have the “Instruction Book”, but do we even bother reading to read it? Instructions directly from the Creator, and is it logical to think that we know better?

When it comes to doing the *mitzvot*, as in all things, a person must take care to know the “whats and hows” before attempting to begin. Moreover, considering that the Torah is an expression of Divine wisdom, the details of our service are totally dependent on its dictates. Hence, even the slightest, seemingly insignificant, change on our part could invalidate the entire service. This is why we first mention “Torah”, which gives us the instructions, and only afterwards do we mention “service”, i.e., the performance of the *mitzvot*.

A Choice of Knowledge

Man is made up of two opposites: a body that wants to live for this world, and a soul that wants to live for the next world. Being that the body and soul have their own ideas of what life is all about, how do they ever unite? The soul must convince the body to follow it, instead of its desires for the pleasures of this world. The way to accomplish this most difficult of tasks is through the study of Torah, for only through the knowledge of Torah can one become a true “person”, choosing to emulate his Creator.

It is for this reason that the Torah is called a light. It illuminates the darkness of this world, giving sight to the animal within man by showing it truth; that it is better to live with G-d’s rules for a short time, and live forever, than to live without rules for a short time, only to be buried in the end forever.

This is the deeper meaning for the connection of request in the previous blessing in the *Amida* for understanding, and in this blessing for repentance. Only through the understanding of G-d’s ways, which a person ultimately learns by virtue of his Divine soul, can he put his mundane earthly desires aside and choose to live a life devoted to the service of G-d, thereby attaching himself to Him through the observance of Torah and *mitzvot*.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

SHLOMO HAMELECH – A SOURCE FOR SIMCHAT TORAH

“Shlomo awoke and behold it was a dream.” (*Melachim* 1 3:15) How can one be awake and still dreaming? The solution offered by the *Midrash* to this mystery is that when Shlomo awoke in the morning something happened which demonstrated to him that the dream he had experienced the night before had come true.

In his dream G-d appeared to the king and asked him what he wished to be granted from Heaven. Shlomo did not ask for long life, wealth or power, rather for the wisdom of “an understanding heart” which would enable him to properly rule such a challenging nation from the throne he had inherited from his father David at such a young age. This found favor in the eyes of G-d who promised him wisdom surpassing that of anyone before or after him.



Upon arising Shlomo heard birds chirping and donkeys braying. When he sensed that he was able to comprehend the language of these creatures he realized that his dream had come true. He then came to Jerusalem and made a great feast for all of his servants.

This is the source, concludes the *Midrash*, for celebrating the completion of Torah study. Just as Shlomo realized that a feast was in order upon gaining such great wisdom, so too do Jews who complete an entire year of publicly reading the entire *Sefer Torah*, portion by portion, celebrate their acquisition of wisdom with singing, dancing and feasting on *Simchat Torah*. This is also the source for the festive meal which celebrates the *siyum* completion of an entire tractate of the *Talmud*.



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