

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

A World of Kindness

“Betzael ben Uri ben Hur of the tribe of Yehuda did everything that Hashem commanded Moshe. With him was Oholiav ben Achisamach of the tribe of Dan.” (38:22-23)

Imagine a world where everyone looked the same.
Same eyes. Same expressions.

Same height. Everything the same. Wouldn't that be a great world? We'd all get along so well!

And yet, Hashem created the exact opposite: a world where everyone is different from everyone else.

We're all different heights. We all have different interests. We all have different personalities, different character traits, different strengths and different weaknesses. Plus, we all have different opinions.

But all these differences can (and sometimes do) lead to discord, harmful speech and hatred for the other. So why did Hashem create so many differences? The Chafetz Chaim said that the blessing of *“borei nefashot rabbot v'chesronon”* means that Hashem created a myriad of different people, and each one of us has our own strengths – but, more importantly, our own weaknesses.

The doctor can't farm, so the farmer will help make his food. The farmer never went to medical school. So the doctor will help the farmer. Hashem desired a world of kindness, so He created a giant tapestry of different people who all need each other. That's the meaning of *“Olam Chesed Yiboneh”* – “The world will be built on kindness.”

“Betzael ben Uri ben Hur of the tribe of Yehuda did everything that Hashem commanded Moshe.”

The tribe of Yehuda was the most elevated of the tribes. From Yehuda came the kings of the Jewish People. In spite of the fact that Betzael “did everything that Hashem commanded Moshe,” nevertheless, Betzael needed a partner – Oholiav ben Achisamach from the tribe of Dan. Dan was the lowest of the tribes, and despite this, or maybe because of this, Betzael needed him. The Mishkan was a microcosm of the world. And just as the world is built on kindness, so too the Mishkan needed to be built on kindness. Maybe we can find a hint to this in Oholiav's name: For he is called Oholiav ben Achisamach. “Achisamach” could be read as, “My brother depended.” In other words, even though Oholiav came from the lowest of the tribes, without him Betzael could not create the microcosm of the world of kindness that was the Mishkan.

Q & A

Questions

1. Why is the word Mishkan stated twice in verse 38:21?
2. Why is the Mishkan called the "Mishkan of Testimony"?
3. Who was appointed to carry the vessels of the Mishkan in the midbar?
4. Who was the officer in charge of the levi'im?
5. What is the meaning of the name Betzalel?
6. How many people contributed a half-shekel to the Mishkan? Who contributed?
7. Which material used in the bigdei kehuna was not used in the coverings of the sacred vessels?
8. How were the gold threads made?
9. What was inscribed on the stones on the shoulders of the ephod?
10. What was on the hem of the me'il?
11. What did the Kohen Gadol wear between the mitznetet and the tzitz?
12. What role did Moshe play in the construction of the Mishkan?
13. Which date was the first time that the Mishkan was erected and not dismantled?
14. What was the "tent" which Moshe spread over the Mishkan (40:19)?
15. What "testimony" did Moshe place in the aron?
16. What function did the parochet serve?
17. Where was the shulchan placed in the Mishkan?
18. Where was the menorah placed in the Mishkan?
19. Who offered the communal sacrifices during the eight days of the dedication of the Mishkan?
20. On which day did both Moshe and Aharon serve as kohanim?

Answers

1. 38:21 - To allude to the Beit Hamikdash that would twice be taken as a "mashkon" (pledge) for the sins of the Jewish People until the nation repents.
2. 38:21 - It was testimony for the Jewish People that G-d forgave them for the golden calf and allowed His Shechina to dwell among them.
3. 38:21 - The levi'im.
4. 38:21 - Itamar ben Aharon.
5. 38:22 - "In the shadow of G-d."
6. 38:26 - 603,550. Every man age twenty and over (except the levi'im).
7. 39:1 - Linen (See Rashi 31:10).
8. 39:3 - The gold was beaten into thin plates from which threads were cut. (See Rashi 28:6).
9. 39:6, 39:7 - The names of the tribes.
10. 39:24,25 - Woven pomegranates and golden bells.
11. 39:31 - Tefillin.
12. 39:33 - He stood it up.
13. 40:17 - Rosh Chodesh Nissan of the second year in the desert. For seven days before this, during the consecration of Aharon and his sons, Moshe erected and dismantled the Mishkan. (Rashi 39:29)
14. 40:19 - The curtain of goatskin.
15. 40:20 - The Luchot Habrit.
16. 40:21 - It served as a partition for the aron.
17. 40:22 - On the northern side of the Ohel Mo'ed, outside the parochet.
18. 40:24 - On the southern side of the Ohel Mo'ed opposite the shulchan.
19. 40:29 - Moshe.
20. 40:31 - On the eighth day of the consecration of the Mishkan.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Pick Your Poison

In the midst of the Greco-Persian wars, at a time before people like Alexander the Great and Alexander Litvinenko regularly fell subject to political assassinations via poisoning, two Tarsusian courtiers in the palace of the Persian king Ahasuerus plotted to kill the monarch. According to the Talmud (*Megillah* 13b), these subversive agents, named Bigthan and Theresh, planned to place poison (*eres*) in the king's cup and get rid of him once and for all. An alternate tradition about their traitorous plan reads that they wanted to slay Ahasuerus while he slept, and present his decapitated head to the Greek kings (*Yossiphon* ch. 4). A later source synthesizes these two versions by recording that the traitors planned to poison Ahasuerus' queen Esther by having her drink a *sam ha'mavet* (poison), and then slaying her royal husband (*Targum Sheini* to Esther 2:21). In this article we have encountered two Hebrew terms for "poison": *eres* and *sam ha'mavet*. Additional words for "poison" include *ra'al*, *eches*, *rosh*, *chamat* and *la'anah*. This essay investigates these various words for "poison," examining their etymologies and seeking to find out in what ways, if at all, they differ from each other.

When discussing the suspicion that a snake might have injected its venom into a liquid drink left uncovered, the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 30b) states that there are three types of *eres*: that of a young snake, which sinks to the bottom of a liquid, that of an old snake, which flows on the top, and that of a middle-aged snake, which dallies along somewhere in the middle (see also *Succah* 50a and *Bava Kama* 115b). On the very next page, the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 31b) claims that all *sheratzim* (loosely, "insects") have *eres*, but only a snake's is lethal. Elsewhere, the Talmud discusses how exactly snakes emit their *eres*, seeking to clarify whether they release venom only when they are angry, or if the venom is always present on their teeth (*Sanhedrin* 78a, *Bava Kama* 23b). From all of these sources it becomes apparent that the word

eres is not a general term for "poison." Rather, it refers to "venom" as a specific type of poison, and most often refers even more specifically to "snake venom."

The word *eres* does not appear in Biblical Hebrew or in Mishnaic Hebrew, but as we have seen above, it does appear in Hebrew passages of the Babylonian Talmud. It also appears a handful of times in the Jerusalem Talmud, where it is almost always spelled with a YOD after the initial ALEPH (so it was likely pronounced something like *iras*). Although the origins of this word are shrouded in mystery, eminent etymologists like Dr. Alexander Kohut (1842-1894), Rabbi Ernest Klein (1899-1983), and Avraham Even-Shoshan (1906-1984) claim that the Hebrew word *eres* actually derives from the Latin word *virus* (which means "virus" in English). Nonetheless, the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* considers this etymology "highly dubious."

The two-word phrase *sam hamavet* literally means "potion of death." It, too, does not appear in the Bible, but makes a single appearance in the Mishna. The Mishnah rules that if an animal consumed a *sam ha'mavet* or was bitten by a snake, it is not considered a *treifah* that would render its ritual slaughter invalid, but it is still forbidden to be eaten because it is dangerous (*Chullin* 3:5). Given the context, it is clear that *sam ha'mavet* does not refer to a snake's venom. This term also appears several times in the Talmud, as when discussing in *Eruvin* 56a whether a *tznon* (loosely, "radish") is considered healthy (*sam ha'chaim*) or poisonous (*sam ha'mavet*), in discussing the deleterious effects of studying Torah without the proper intentions (*Taanit* 7a), and in a story where a woman swore on the life of her child (*Gittin* 35a). The Talmud (*Bava Kama* 47b, 56a) also discusses whether one who killed another person's animal by feeding it a *sam ha'mavet* can be held liable in court.

Although the word *sam* is spelled in these sources with a SAMECH, the letters SIN and SAMECH are often understood to be interchangeable. Hence, when the Bible (Gen. 23:33) reports that Bethuel “placed” (*sam*) food before Abraham’s servant who sought to wed Bethuel’s daughter to Abraham’s son, various exegetical sources (such as *Midrash Sechel Tov*, *Midrash Aggadah*, and *Daat Zekanim*) see that word as an allusion to Bethuel attempting to poison Abraham’s servant. Other assassinations using *sam ha’mavet* include those carried out by Athaliah (see a commentary attributed to Rashi for II Chron. 22:10).

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) understands the core meaning of the biliteral root SAMECH/SIN-MEM as “placing something in its place.” He explains that the Biblical word *samim* (“potion/elixir,” or in Modern Hebrew, “drugs”) – used in reference to the ingredients of the *ketoret* (Ex. 30:7, 30:34, 40:27, Lev. 16:12, II Chron. 2:3, 13:11) – derives from this root because such substances are typically stowed in specially-designated places. It seems from all of this that *sam ha’mavet* is a general term for a “poison” that includes various different types of toxic solutions, but does not refer to any one specific poison.

The prophet Isaiah warns that G-d will judge the Kingdom of Judah “because the Daughters of Zion have become haughty, they walk with outstretched necks and peering eyes... and with their feet, they *eches*” (Isa. 3:16). The word *eches* in this passage is clearly a verb, but it is unclear what action this verb denotes, especially because this verb appears nowhere else in the Bible.

The prophet continues to foretell that, in the future, G-d will remove the various adornments from upon the Jewish People, one of those being called an *eches* (Isa. 3:18). The word *eches* in this verse is clearly a noun, and according to Rashi and Ibn Ezra (to Isa. 3:18) refers to special shoes worn on the feet. But does this help us understand what the verb *eches* means?

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 62b, *Yoma* 9b) explains that Isaiah’s last criticism of the Daughters of Zion was that they would place various perfumes inside their shoes, so that when they would happen upon Jewish bachelors in the marketplaces of Jerusalem, they would kick their feet and spray enticing

fragrances in a shameful way. In doing so, these women would infect those men with the Evil Inclination, which functioned like *eres* (“poison,” venom”). Based on this, Rashi (to Isa. 3:16) explains that *eches* means “snake venom,” and the act of *eches* attributed to the Daughters of Zion refers to “poisoning” the young Jewish men to sin. Interestingly, the Vilna Gaon connects these two meanings of *eches* by noting that *eches* refers specifically to shoes that were enclosed in snakeskin.

Other commentators disagree with Rashi’s assertion that *eches* means “poison.” For example, Ibn Ezra and the Radak (to Isa. 3:16) explain the verb form of *eches* differently by connecting it more directly to the noun form of the word. They explain that *eches* in the first verse refers to the Daughters of Zion calling attention to themselves by making noises with their special shoes. Radak even adds that these shoes functioned like bells that produced metronomous sounds. Although these commentators do not mention this, perhaps this meaning of *eches* also connects back to snakes because the sounds made by these shoes resemble the rattle of a rattlesnake.

Similarly, when Proverbs (7:22) compares the immoral woman to an *eches*, Rashi (to Prov. 7:22) explains that *eches* refers to a snake’s venom. Rabbi Isaiah of Trani (1180-1250), however, writes that *eches* there refers to a ball and chain often tied to prisoners’ feet to impede their escape. This relates to *eches* in the sense of “shoes” because they are both worn/tied to the feet (see Ibn Ezra there and Radak in *Sefer HaShorashim* as well). The analogy presumably means to highlight that when one sins, that sin is “tied” to him forever and will resurface when one faces the Day of Judgment (see *Sotah* 3b). Others explain *eches* as “dog.”

Dr. Kohut was the first to note that Rashi’s explanation of *eches* as “snake venom” was likely informed by the Greek word *echis* (“viper”). The word *echis* does seem to appear in rabbinic literature in that sense, as the Midrash (*Midrash Tanchum* 18, *Mechilta* to Ex. 15:22) translates *efeh*, which is a type of snake in Biblical Hebrew, into *echis*. (For more about words for “snake” in Hebrew, see my earlier essay called “Slithering Serpents and Sea Snakes” from July, 2017).

However, Rashi (to *Shabbat* 62b) offers a different etymology of the term *eches*, noting that this word is a metathesis of the word *ka'as* ("anger"), because the snake emits its venom only when it becomes angered. Conversely, Rabbeinu Efrayim supposes that *ka'as* is a metathesis of *eches* ("poison"), because anger puts a sort of poison in one's heart.

Either way, the connection between *eches* and *ka'as* is already found in the Talmud, when offering a homiletical explanation of the name of Caleb's daughter Achsa (*Joshua* 15:16-17, *Judges* 1:12-13, *I Chron.* 2:49). The Talmud asserts that she was called Achsa "because anyone who sees her becomes angry (*ka'as*) at his wife," which Rashi explains to mean that she was so beautiful, that comparing her with any other woman might cause a man to become angry at his wife for not being as beautiful. The basis for this onomastic exegesis is the metathetical connection between AYIN-KAF-SAMECH (the supposed root of Achsa, which also seem to be the root of *eches*) and KAF-AYIN-SAMECH (*ka'as*).

Interestingly, the great Italian Kabbalist Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano (1548-1620) explains that Achsa's name alludes to the fact that she was a reincarnation of Moses' wife Zipporah, who saved Moses from death by "snake" through circumcising their child (*Ex.* 4:24-26).

Other Hebrew words for "poison" include:

1. *Ra'al* (*Nachum* 2:4, *Zech.* 12:2) or *tarelah* (*Ps.* 60:5, *Isa.* 51:17, 51:22) is often understood to mean "poison." However, Rashi (to *Isa.* 51:17, *Nachum* 2:4) writes that it actually refers to some concoction that renders a person weak and immobile, as though he were tied up and detained. There is, indeed, a similar word *re'alah* (*Isa.* 3:19), which is a sort of adornment in which one "wraps" oneself. Radak (to *Isa.* 51:17 and *Sefer HaShorashim*) cites the explanation that *ra'al* refers to "poison," but also defines the word as meaning

"shake," "rattle," and "roll" (akin to *ro'ed*, to which *ra'al* might be etymologically-connected via the interchangeability of LAMMED and DALET). Perhaps we can reconcile these two understandings by positing that *ra'al* refers not to a lethal poison but to a sort of toxic contagion that would cause a person to have seizure-like convulsions. In Modern Hebrew, the word *ra'al* refers to "deadly poison."

2. *Rosh* (*Deut.* 29:17, *Iyov* 20:16, *Lam.* 3:19, and more) refers to "poison" extracted from the *rosh* ("head") of a snake, and essentially refers to "snake venom" (see Targum and Rashi to *Jer.* 8:14). This word is typically spelled with an ALEPH in the middle, just like the Hebrew word for "head;" but in one instance (*Deut.* 32:32), this *rosh* is spelled with a VAV instead of an ALEPH. Other sources understand *rosh* as referring to a poisonous plant extract, with Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Felix (1921-2004) writing that *rosh* is best identified with poppy/opium or conium. To that effect, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim traces this word to the biliteral REISH-SHIN ("head") as reflective of this plant's round top, which resembles a head.
3. The word *chamat* (*Deut.* 32:33, *Ps.* 58:5) refers to "poison" as something emitted by a snake when "angered" (*cheimah*).
4. Interestingly, Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino (in his lexicon of Hebrew synonyms *Ohel Moed*) claims that the Biblical term *la'anah* (typically translated as "wormwood") is a synonym for *rosh*, *chamat* and *ra'al* in that all these words mean "poison." However, this assertion is quite novel, because the earlier commentators (like Rashi and Radak) mention that *la'anah* is very bitter but do not write that it is deadly or poisonous.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

The Book of Shemot concludes with this Torah portion. After finishing all the different parts, vessels and garments used in the Mishkan, Moshe gives a complete accounting and enumeration of all the contributions and of the various clothing and vessels which had been fashioned. The *Bnei Yisrael* bring everything to Moshe. He inspects the handiwork and notes that everything was made according to Hashem's specifications. Moshe blesses the people. Hashem speaks to Moshe and tells him that the Mishkan should be set up on the first day of the first month, i.e. Nissan. He also tells Moshe the order of assembly for the Mishkan and its vessels.

Moshe does everything in the prescribed manner. When the Mishkan is finally complete with every vessel in its place, a cloud descends upon it, indicating that Hashem's glory was resting there. Whenever the cloud moved away from the Mishkan, the *Bnei Yisrael* would follow it. At night the cloud was replaced by a pillar of fire.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

THE AMIDAH (PART 7) – BLESSING OF INSIGHT

“Prayer is not a miracle. It is a tool, man’s paintbrush in the art of life. Prayer is man’s weapon to defend himself in the struggle of life. It is a reality. A fact of life.”

(Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer)

The fourth blessing reads: “You graciously endow man with wisdom and teach insight to a human. Endow us graciously from Yourself with wisdom, insight and discernment. Blessed are You, G-d, gracious Giver of wisdom.”

The fourth blessing is the first of a series of thirteen blessings in which we ask G-d to grant our personal requests. Why are wisdom and insight the opening theme for these thirteen blessings? After all, there are several other blessings in the series that might be considered of greater importance. The Vilna Gaon explains that human wisdom is the main element that differentiates us from the animal world. Therefore, we begin with an appeal to G-d that He grant us the wisdom and the insight to be able to recognize how to live our lives, and that we are perceptive enough to use our wisdom to guide us to the correct conclusions. In fact, this is such a fundamental point that Rabbi Ami (Tractate *Brachot* 33a) declares, “So great is ‘understanding,’ that it is placed at the beginning of the weekday blessings.”

Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet (1235-1310), often known as the Rashba (an acronym of his title and name), was the spiritual leader of Spanish Jewry. Blessed with an exceptionally gifted intellect, he wrote, among other things, commentaries on the Talmud. His thousands of responsa, covering the entire gamut of Jewish law, were published posthumously. The Rashba writes that it is absolutely logical that wisdom and insight are the first request, because it is only with genuine understanding that a person can repent for his sins and ask G-d for forgiveness. Rabbi Ami then goes on to make a very stark statement: “It is forbidden to have mercy on a person who does not have understanding.” The commentaries explain that Rabbi Ami is speaking about a person who does not trouble himself to use the intellect that G-d gave him. Such a person is negligently ignoring the opportunity to draw closer to G-d, and, consequently, he loses his prerogative to Divine mercy.

Interestingly, this is the only blessing in the middle section of the *Amidah* that does not open directly

with a request. Rather, it first praises G-d, and only then do we ask G-d to help us reach an elevated level of understanding. Perhaps it is possible to understand why the format of this blessing is different from the others by focusing on the word for “endow” – *chonen* in Hebrew. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the two-letter root of the word *chonen* is *chet nun*, which spells the word “*chen*.” *Chen* is a difficult word to translate because it relates to an inner dimension of a person. It really describes no physical aspect. Since it is granted to a person by G-d, it lacks tangibility, and, therefore it is nearly impossible to define. *Chen* is what lets people connect on a deeper level even when they do not know each other particularly well. *Chen* is what makes a person feel content and fortunate to be in another’s presence even if they have only just met. Rabbi Hirsch connects *chen* to the similarly spelled word “*chinam* – free.” In the same way that it is possible that a person who has been granted *chen* might be undeserving of it, so, too, our blessing teaches that G-d bestows knowledge on mankind even if it is undeserved. Or, even worse, when mankind uses their G-d-given wisdom to deny His Divinity.

In its simpler understanding, the word “*da’at* – wisdom” –refers to our ability to think. However, the commentaries add a whole new level of understanding to our blessing, pointing out that the word *da’at* also means connection (see *Ber. 4:1*).

Accordingly, the knowledge that G-d has so generously granted to us should be used to build a relationship with Him. For a person to not use his wisdom constructively is truly a travesty because he is rejecting the very Source of his knowledge.

Within the blessing we beseech G-d to grant us three different forms of knowledge: “*chochma* – wisdom,” “*binah* – insight” and “*da’at* – discernment.” *Chochma* is knowledge that is taught to us. For example, a young child who is taught that two and two equals four now knows more than before. *Binah* is closely related to the word *boneh* – build. *Binah* allows a person to take their preexisting knowledge and to build upon it. In the words of the Midrash (*Mishlei parsha 1*), *binah* means to “understand something by means of something else.” Thus, a child who knows that two plus two equals four can now work out alone that two plus three equals five. Not so *da’at*. *Da’at* is the highest level of understanding. Whereas *chochma* and *binah* are attainable by everyone, and they are both prerequisites for *da’at*, *da’at* itself can only be attained by those to whom G-d grants it. It is not a discipline that can be learned. Rather, it is the highest level of attachment to G-d. This is why Rashi defines *da’at* as being *ruach hakodesh*, Divine inspiration. (*Shemot 31:3*)

Our blessing concludes with the words, “Blessed are You, G-d, gracious Giver of wisdom.” The wisdom here does not refer to secular knowledge. Rather, it refers to Torah knowledge and insight. Our Sages teach that all wisdom in the world should be utilized to recognize and serve G-d. Our Rabbis teach that the most direct method of doing so is through His Torah, because the Torah gives us the insight to know what it is that G-d wants from us. Therefore, we end with an expression of thanks to G-d for giving us the opportunity to study His Torah and to gain greater clarity into how to live our lives.

To be continued...

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PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

THE SONG OF THE RAIN



The Rains say: “Voluntary rain You sprinkle, *Elokim*, Your heritage that is weak You establish.”
(*Tehillim* 68:10)

The Torah clearly spells out that life-giving rainfall depends upon the Jewish nation’s loyalty to Hashem. When rain is withheld, it is a sign for the nation to repent and to pray. Even so, frail man is far from perfect. When the rain falls, each drop sings that the rains of “*Elokim*” (the name that connotes Hashem’s attribute of justice) are in truth “voluntary.” He has mercy on “His heritage that is weak” from hunger. And even if they are lacking in righteousness, He will shower them with gifts of rain.

On a deeper level of understanding, “Your heritage that is weak” refers to spiritual weakness, from sin. When the Jewish People sin, Hashem withholds rain until they repent, and He thereby “establishes” them with righteousness.

An additional reason why rains are called “voluntary” is because they are aroused by our voluntary gifts to the poor. Hashem thus rewards us measure for measure, in Divine proportion. When we voluntarily open our hearts and palms in compassion to the needy, Hashem also voluntarily and uncritically opens His floodgates of blessing wide-open, and the song of the rain resounds through the Heavens and Earth.

▪ Sources: *Sifsei Renanos*; *Perek B’Shir* (Vilna)

**In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib*

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Chagigah 9-15

“Return, Wayward Children” (Yirmiyahu 3:22)

A Heavenly voice called out, “Return, you wayward children, except for Acher.” As a result, Acher thought his return to Hashem was hopeless, and he continued in his heretical ways.”

We are taught in our *sugya* about one of the most complex, troubling and mysterious Torah endeavors in history. Four great Tannaic Torah Sages “*nichnisu l’pades*,” as the *beraita* calls it. The commentaries explain this matter in a number of ways, and I would not even attempt to try to explain its meaning, even I would claim to understand it. Rather, the topic I would like to address is the possibility for *anyone* to do *teshuva* and decide to return to the way of Hashem.

Regarding these four Sages, the *beraita* says that one Tana lost his life, one lost his mind, one became a heretic – whereas Rabbi Akiva “entered in peace and exited in peace.” The name of the Tana who became a heretic was Elisha ben Avuya, the teacher of Rabbi Meir. The *gemara* explains what he experienced to lead him to err, and how he came to be known by the moniker “Acher” – “other” – as if he became an “other” person after taking a drastic spiritual change for the worse (also addressed by the Tosefot beginning with ‘*Shuvu*’ on 15a).

Yet, despite his spiritual fall, his student Rabbi Meir learned from his teachings, with a careful approach, as the *gemara* teaches. Rabbi Meir would also accompany him. A *beraita* relates one particularly intriguing exchange which transpired between them after Elisha became Acher. One Shabbat, Rabbi Meir and Acher were on the outskirts of the city. Rabbi Meir was on foot while Acher traveled on a horse. At one point, Acher told Rabbi to “return” and go back, since they were about to traverse a distance outside the city that would constitute a Shabbat transgression according to halacha. Rabbi Meir replied, “You too

need to ‘return’ (i.e. repent and return to Hashem and mitzvah observance). Acher said, “But I have already heard a Divine voice say: “Return (to Me), wayward children – *except* for Acher (see Yirmiyahu 3:22).” Many understand this to mean that Acher had heard that his fate was already sealed and there was nothing he could do about it that would help.

However, is it really true that a person can transgress in some way or become a heretic and lose the ability to exercise his free will to repent and return to the way of Hashem? It seems clear from the words of the Rambam that a person always has free will and nothing stands in the way of *teshuva*.

The Rambam states in the laws of *teshuva* that “...twenty four matters ‘impede’ *teshuva*. Four of them are such great sins that Hashem does not give the transgressor the opportunity to do *teshuva*... Five of them close the ways of *teshuva* before the transgressor... Five of them, one who transgresses them is not able to completely repent for them... There are five things for which it is unlikely that a person will repent since they are not considered as sins by many people... There are five of them that a person is drawn after continuously, and finds it very difficult to leave...”

In the same section, the Rambam makes it clear that *teshuva* atones for all of the twenty four sins that he lists. He states, “All these, and similar matters, even though they impede repentance, do not prevent it; rather, if a person repented for them, this person is a *ba’al teshuva* and has a portion in the World to Come.”

So, did Acher really hear a Divine voice saying that any *teshuva* he might do would not be accepted? I merited hearing a novel explanation of this matter from my revered teacher, Harav Moshe Shapiro,

zatzal. He taught that the Divine voice was not saying that Acher was a lost cause because his *teshuva* would not be accepted by Hashem. Acher certainly had retained his free will to do *teshuva*, and Hashem would lovingly accept him.

Rather, Acher knew himself that without hearing Hashem call him to do *teshuva*, the current state of his soul could not even try to do *teshuva*. He heard Hashem call to everyone else to do *teshuva* but excluded him from the call. He despaired and remained a heretic. But if he had in fact done *teshuva*, it would certainly have been accepted by Hashem.

The story is told of a Jew who approached the

tzaddik Reb Asher of Stolin and asked him, “How is it possible for me to do to *teshuva*? I have transgressed one of the sins about which, according to my understanding, it is stated that *teshuva* will not help.”

The *tzaddik* answered, “First of all, your understanding is incorrect. *Teshuva* will surely help. But even if your understanding would be correct, how is that statement relevant to you? You must do that which is incumbent upon you. Are you worried that you will not have a portion in the World to Come? The Rabbis have already said, “One moment of *teshuva* and good deeds in this world is worth more than the entire life in the World to Come!”

▪ *Chagigah 15a*

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Sanctified Creativity

The full description of the construction of the Mishkan culminates with the following observation of Moshe: *Moshe saw the entire work and lo! They had accomplished it; as Hashem had commanded, so had they done; and Moshe blessed them.*

Moshe noted that this work bore two distinct characteristics: *The people* had done the work, and they had done it *exactly as Hashem had commanded*. These two characteristics will come to define all spiritual work: it must be “done” by the individual and it must be done strictly as Hashem has commanded.

The people “did [the entire work]” – they had done every part of the work, from the smallest to largest component, and the work was an expression of their devotion, enthusiasm and dynamism. But every last detail was done “as Hashem has commanded” – their zeal and enthusiasm had been subordinated completely to the Divine command. There had been no attempt on the part of any craftsman to bring his

own ideas and his own individuality to bear upon the work by making additions or omissions. Rather, for each and every one of the craftsmen, this was his greatest reward: to carry out Hashem’s command and intention with scrupulous care and precision.

This “freedom in obedience and obedience in freedom” was the crowning characteristic of the craftsmen, and the nation as a whole, in the construction of the Mishkan. Precisely when one subordinates himself and his creative energies to the Will of Hashem, does he realize the unsurpassed joy of a duty eagerly fulfilled. Upon this energetic devotion, carefully circumscribed by duty, the blessing of Moshe takes root. The text does not record the content of this blessing, but our Sages do: *May it be His will that the Shechina (Divine Presence) should rest in the work of your hands. And may the pleasantness of the L-rd, our G-d, be upon us.*”

▪ Sources: *Commentary, Shemot 39:43*