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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

I'm Kadosh

“How good are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael!” (24:5)

My friend Rabbi Leib Kelemen once described a bus journey with his son from Yerushalyim to Netanya. Nearing the outskirts of Netanya, his nine-year old son, whose name was Kadosh, needed to use the bathroom. Rabbi Kelemen ran up to the bus driver and asked him if he could stop for his son to relieve himself, but the bus driver just shrugged. Going back to his son, Rabbi Kelemen told him he would have to wait.

The minutes passed, and the son was shifting in his seat trying to control his urge as it grew stronger. Finally, they reached the bus station in Netanya, and none too soon! They jumped down from the bus and sprinted to the rest rooms, which were closed for repairs!

They rushed out onto the street and ran. Suddenly, they passed a pub. Rabbi Kelemen looked inside, and so indeed did his son. He said “Okay! Let’s go in here!” Looking through the glass at the denizens of the pub, a motley bunch of boozers, his son said, “But Daddy, what is this place?” “It’s a pub.” “What’s a pub?” his son asked. So, Rabbi Kelemen explained what a pub is. “It’s a Beit Marzeach.” “But Daddy,” said the little boy, “I can’t go in here. I’m Kadosh!”

Nearly forty years ago, I remember walking out of a so-called “art film” feeling that I needed to take a shower. I wasn’t religious at the time, but the *pintele yid* inside me was revolted by what the secular world trumpets as “significant art.” If we would only realize that our souls are hewn from the holiest place in existence. If we would truly understand that even though our feet are walking on the sidewalk, our souls reach up to the highest places in existence. If we know how noble we are, how royal we are, and how lowly and empty are the baubles of the secular world, we would then surely all turn away and say, “I can’t look at that – I’m Kadosh!”

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Q & A

Questions

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the malach that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the malach kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilaam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

Answers

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilaam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the land. Bilaam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilaam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me. The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel."
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avot. Bilaam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do mitzvot.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "Shatum ha'ayin." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means "the open eye", which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Bava Batra 11-17

Prophecy in Our Time

Rav Avdimi from Haifa said, "From the day that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, although prophecy was taken from the Navi'im (Prophets), it was not taken away from the Chachamim (Torah scholars)."

The Maharsha points out that this teaching refers to the destruction of the *First* Beit Hamikdash. This is because the last of the *Navi'im* – Chagai, Zecharia and Malachi – lived only until the beginning of the *Second* Beit Hamikdash. He explains that the expression, "From the *day* of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash," does not mean from that exact day but is rather meant to exclude the period of the *Second* Beit Hamikdash. This means that there was indeed prophecy to *Navi'im* during the 70 years of the Babylonian exile before then.

The *gemara* originally quotes Rav Avdimi from Haifa as saying something that sounds similar to the above-quoted teaching, but is in fact quite different: "From the day that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, prophecy was *taken* from the *Navi'im* and *given* to the *Chachamim*." This statement, however, is incorrect, explains the *gemara*, since it implies that *beforehand* the *Chachamim* were not fit to receive prophecy – which is certainly not true. Therefore, the *gemara* explains what Rav Avdimi's statement must certainly have been: "From the day that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, although prophecy was *taken* from the *Navi'im*, it was *not taken* from the *Chachamim*." The Sage Ameimar adds that "A *Chacham* is 'better' (*adif*) than a *Navi*," and he explains how this principle is derived from a verse in Tehillim (90:12).

Rashi explains that although prophecy was taken from the *Navi'im* who were not *Chachamim*, it was not taken from the *Navi'im* who were *Chachamim*. This seems to imply that a person in the category of "*Navi*," although certainly having *chochma* (Torah wisdom) since it is a requirement for a *Navi* (Masechet Nedarim 38a), did not possess the same high degree of Torah mastery to be considered a "*Chacham*." (See the Maharsha, who, based on the *gemara* in Nedarim, presents a question on Rashi since a *Navi* is required to be a *Chacham*. He suggests an answer that highlights a practical difference between these two categories.)

However, due to the question from the *gemara* in Nedarim, the Ramban offers an explanation of our Rav Avdimi's statement that differs from Rashi's explanation. The Ramban, in his *Chiddusim on Shas*, writes that there is an important difference between the nature of a *Navi's* prophecy and that of a *Chacham*. The prophecy of a *Navi* is one that is related to the *Navi* in the form of a vision or "mental picture" by Hashem or one of His agents ("angels"). The prophecy of a *Chacham*, however, is one that derives in a "manner of *chochma* not like the vision of a *Navi*. Rather, a *Chacham* "knows the truth with the Divine Spirit (*Ru'ach Hakodesh*) within him." I heard from a great Rabbi in Jerusalem what the Ramban means, based on the verse in Mishlei (7:3), which states to "write them (words of Torah) on the tablet of your heart." A *Chacham* is a person who masters the depth, breadth and essence of the Torah, and has internalized it to make it part of himself. In a sense he is "a walking Torah." And since the Torah is the way in which Hashem communicates with us, a *Chacham* is attuned to hear and understand the ongoing communication between the Giver of the Torah and the *Chacham*, who is able to fully receive it.

• *Bava Batra 12a*

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS

Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when performed by someone who understands its significance” (Meiri, Bava Kamma 17a).

BIRKAS KOHANIM

Mitzvah #378

There is a mitzvah for the Kohanim to bless the Jewish People daily with Birkas Kohanim. The congregation takes part in this mitzvah by standing before the Kohanim and calling upon them to recite the blessings (Sefer Chareidim 4:18). Birkas Kohanim is part of the sacrificial service in the Beis HaMikdash, as well as part of the prayers that we recite instead of the sacrificial service. It is essentially a call for Hashem to look upon our service in favor and bless us in accordance with our requests (Maharam Chaviv, cited in Ginas Veradim 1:13). These blessings may be regarded as the climax of our service, whose purpose is to bring glory to Hashem's name, for they demonstrate that Hashem is willing to extend His kindness without limit and waits only for us to merit them. The Kohanim serve as the conduit for Hashem's blessings because they administer the service and because of their sanctity (Rav Menachem Recaniti).

Birkas Kohanim also bestows us blessings beyond our requests and potentially incorporates all the blessings in the world (Abarbanel). Hashem peers down at us through the “windows” between the fingers of the Kohanim, and it is a time of intense Divine favor (Rav Shimshon of Ostropoli). The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sotah 9:11) states that ever since the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, the curse of each day is worse than that of the day before. In other words, Hashem is still angry about the sins that removed much of His Divine Presence from His world, which continue to linger amongst us, and this expresses itself in a gradually increasing curse. The Yerushalmi asks: What stands against that curse? Why does the curse not destroy us, and how do we merit much blessing and abundance despite our present distance from Hashem? The Yerushalmi answers: Every day, the curse is negated by Birkas Kohanim.

As for those living outside Eretz Yisrael who are accustomed to receiving Birkas Kohanim only during the festivals, it is not clear if and to what extent they benefit from the Birkas Kohanim of Eretz Yisrael (see Chessed LaAlafim §6, Halichos Shlomo ch. 10, Teshuvos V'Hanhagos Vol. 1 §130, and Maharsha to Chaggigah 5a). However, the Birkas Kohanim that all Jews receive during the festivals benefits them for the entire year to some degree (see Sefer Shemeinah Lachmo, cited in Yevarechecha Hashem, ch. 15).

The text of Birkas Kohanim is brief and concise, yet multifaceted and all-inclusive. We will present here one interpretation based on various sources (Midrash Rabbah; Midrash Chaseiros Veyeseiros; Nezer HaKodesh to Bereishis Rabbah 43:8; Abarbanel; Rav Hirsch):

Birkas Kohanim consists of three blessings corresponding to the three Patriarchs in whose merit we have these blessings. The first blessing is three words, the second is five words, and the third is seven words. The gradually increasing length suggests a gradual increase of potency in the blessings.

The first blessing states, "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you." Meaning, may He increase your possessions and progeny and protect them. This blessing has three words corresponding to the three Patriarchs, which intimates that we should receive these blessings in their merit even if we ourselves are undeserving.

The second blessing states, "May Hashem shine His countenance toward you and be gracious to you." After we have been blessed with physical bounty in the first blessing, we are blessed that Hashem relates to us with graciousness. To illustrate the distinction between these two blessings, someone who merited receiving a small

amount of monetary gain as a result of the first blessing might merit that whatever he receives suffices as a result of the second blessing. The second blessing has five words, corresponding to the Five Books of the Torah that were received in the merit of the Patriarchs, and this indicates that we must fulfill the Torah to merit the blessings that Hashem promised the Patriarchs. In an alternate approach, the second blessing differs from the first in that it is primarily a spiritual blessing, that Hashem should graciously endow us with the light of His Torah. It thus has five words corresponding to the Five Books of the Torah.

The third blessing states, “May Hashem turn to face you and grant you peace.” This blessing completes the text of the Birkas Kohanim and suggests a complete blessing. Hashem's primary trait is kindness, and when He turns His attention to someone, He focuses on doing only good for that person while disregarding that person's faults. The Talmud (Berachos 20b) relates that the nations complained about the favoritism indicated by this blessing, and Hashem responded that He treats the Jewish people the way they treat Him. For, He commanded them to bless Him upon eating to satiation, and they bless Him after eating as little as an olive-sized piece of bread. Since the Jewish people go beyond their call of duty to bless Hashem, He overlooks the letter of the law when blessing them. He goes so far as to bless them with shalom, peace. “Shalom” is related to the word “shalem,” complete. One who merits peace lacks nothing; one who lacks peace cannot enjoy anything he has. Hashem did not find a receptacle for His blessing other than peace. This blessing has seven words corresponding to the seven Heavens from which Hashem sends down His blessings to His beloved nation.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, King of Moav, is in morbid fear of the Bnei Yisrael. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilaam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a malach (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilaam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The malach instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say about the Jewish People. When Bilaam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse, and three times blessings are issued instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam has failed, sends him home in disgrace. The Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This act brings an end to the plague – but not before 24,000 people died.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KIDDUSH LEVANAH (PART 6)

UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON

“My walk on the moon lasted three days. My walk with G-d will last forever.”
Charles Duke - Lunar Module Pilot, Apollo 16

Kiddush Levanah then continues with the following sentence that is repeated three times: **Blessed is He Who fashioned you – *Yotzrech*, blessed is He Who made you – *Osech*, blessed be your Owner – *Konech*, blessed is your Creator – *Borech*.**

By studying the natural world we are able to appreciate the myriad, complex details that each and every element is comprised of. As we contemplate the beauty and the symbolism of the moon it is supposed to remind us of the fact that Hashem created not just the moon but each of us as well. He fashioned us and made us and we are beholden to Him because He is our Creator. But we are not created identically. Each person has been individually fashioned by the Master Craftsman, Himself.

The Orach Chaim haKadosh writes (*Shemot* 22:6) that there is not one single moment when Hashem isn't working for each single individual.

But, just as Hashem is working for us so, too, we must to work for Hashem. The third of the Ten Commandments states (*ibid.* 20:7), "You shall not take the Name of Hashem, your G-d, in vain, for Hashem will not absolve anyone who takes His Name in vain." In his brilliant commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin ingeniously interprets the verse in a figurative sense to mean that it is referring to the unique talents that Hashem grants each individual. For example, some people are blessed with the most beautiful voices, there are those who excel in teaching Torah, while others are talented artisans. The list is endless. Writes Rabbi Berlin, our individual talents are what the verse calls, "Hashem's Name." The Torah is cautioning each person not to "carry" their G-d-given talents in vain. Because, if one does so, "Hashem will not absolve anyone who takes His Name in vain."

The legendary Mashgiach of the Mir Yeshivah in Belarus, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1873-1936) points out that no two blessings that Yaakov blesses his children with are the same. And then he adds an acutely poignant and thought-provoking idea. Many parents have the custom to bless their children on Friday night. And when they do so they invest a lot of intent and thought as to what they expect from them. How they would like to see their children turn out. But, sometimes, it might be possible that the parent's intent is for their child to succeed in the areas that the parent, themselves, didn't succeed in. The parent projects on to their child *their own* unmet dreams and aspirations. If a parent has in mind what is best for *the parent*, it is similar to watering a plot of earth that has no seeds in it. Nothing can grow there because the most vital ingredient of all is missing. In the same way, if the Brachot that we bless our children with are to be effective, they have to be based on the unique needs of each individual child - not the unfulfilled aspirations of the parent.

Or, as the Kotzker Rebbe pithily and concisely would say, there is nothing as unequal as equal treatment of children!

Perhaps that can explain a fascinating detail in our prayer. The first letter of each descriptive verb in Hebrew - *Yotzrech*, *Osech*, *Konech*, *Borech* - spell out the name Yaakov. Because Yaakov recognized the latent talents within each of his children. And by doing so he was able to bless each one that they successfully tap into their individuality so that they are able to serve Hashem to their fullest.

To be continued...

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Lick It Up

When the Moabites led by Balak turned to their mortal enemies the Midianites to ally with them against the impending threat of the Israelites, the Moabites said to the Midianite elders, "Now the congregation [of Israelites] will lick away all our surroundings, like an ox licks away the vegetable of the field..." (*Num.* 22:4). The Hebrew verb for "licking" used twice in this passage is *lechicha*, and these are the only two times that

derivatives of the trilateral root LAMMED-CHET-KAF appear in the Torah. That root appears another four times in the rest of the Bible (II Kgs. 18:38, Mic. 7:17, Isa. 49:23, Ps. 72:9), but there is another term for “licking” – *lekikah* – which appears slightly more often than that in the Bible. In this essay, we explore these two synonymous expressions, while examining their etymology and considering what the difference between them might be.

The term *lechicha* appears in the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud *Bava Kamma* 6a, Jerusalemic Talmud *Bava Kamma* 6:5) when discussing the liability of a person who lit a fire that scorched a plowed field in such a way that the owner would have to plow the field again. The term used in the Talmud is that the fire “licked” (*lichacha*) the plowed area. Perhaps the flames that came forth from the greater fire to scorch the earth can be likened to a tongue exiting a person’s mouth and licking something outside. Other than that, I’m at a loss to explain the connection (see I Kgs. 18:38 and Targum to Mal. 3:19 where the verbs for “licking” are again used in reference to a fire “singing” something.)

The verb form *lechicha* appears in rabbinic literature in another very fascinating context: The Midrash (*Esther Rabbah* §8:7) relates that when Mordecai declared a fast day over the holiday of Passover (in order to prayer for the overturn of Haman's decree against the Jewish People), Mordecai prayed to Hashem saying, “It is revealed and known before the Throne of Your Honor O Master of the Worlds that it is not from the haughtiness of my heart or the exaltedness of my eye that I did [this in] not bowing to Haman, rather from You fear I acted in this way to not bow to him, for I am in awe before You to not give Your honor to a [man of] flesh and blood, and [therefore] I did not want to bow to anyone other than You. For who am I that I should not bow to Haman on pain of the salvation of your Nation Israel? For I would have licked [*lechicha*] the shoe of his foot [if not for my aforementioned considerations]. And now, O our God, save us from his hand...” In a nutshell, Mordecai said that the only reason did not lick Haman’s shoes and instead opposed him was for the sake of Heaven, and not for his own personal gain. And the verb used to denote that gross act of “licking” Haman’s shoes is a cognate of *lechicha*.

Rabbi Yaakov Berger of Kiryat Sefer writes in *Milon Leshon HaMikra* conjectures that the term *lechicha* derives from the word *cheich* (“palate”), whose root is CHET-(YOD)-KAF. This presumes that the initial LAMMED of *lechicha* is not part of the core. In a similar way, Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah Zilberberg (Di Kasif) in *Leshonenu HaKedoshah* (p. 304) connects *lechicha* to *cheich*, explaining the act of “licking” as using the tongue to roll liquids (*lach*) towards one's *cheich*.

As mentioned earlier, declensions of the Biblical Hebrew term *lekikah* appear seven times in the Bible within two contexts (Jud. 7:5–7, I Kgs. 21:19, 22:38). The first context concerns the Jews’ war against Midian in the time of Gideon. When preparing for that war, Hashem did not want Gideon to lead such a large army because then His miraculous intervention that will lead to the Jews’ victory will be less apparent. Instead, Hashem commanded Gideon to whittle down the number of soldiers in his army by carrying out a very interesting test: He brought his soldiers to drink water from a river, and watched how each soldier would drink. The soldiers who “lapped up” or “licked up” (*yalok*) the water to drink (like a dog) were considered worthy of joining his army. These men were referred to as *ha’milakekim* (literally, “the lickers”). The other soldiers who crouched down in a bowing or prostrating position on their knees were understood to have been too steeped in idolatry to be worthy of joining Gideon’s army and were instead discharged from duty. In the second context, the prophet Elijah warns Ahab the King of Israel that at that same spot that dogs licked (*lakeku*) the blood of Naboth, they will lick (*yaloku*) Ahab's blood as well (I Kgs. 21:19), and the Bible reports that indeed that is precisely what happened (I Kgs. 22:38).

Interestingly, this root also appears in the make-up of a proper name: the Midrash (*Midrash Tanchuma Ki Teiztei* §9, *Pesikta D’Rav Kahane Zachor* §8) parses the name of the evil nation Amalek as a portmanteau of the words *am* (“nation”) and *lak* (“lick”) – a reference to the notion that Amalek came like a dog to “lick” the

blood of the Jewish People as they exited Egypt. Similarly, another Midrash (*Midrash Aggadah* to Parashat Balak, also in *Baal HaTurim* and *Sefer Russiana*) parses the name of the Moabite king Balak as a portmanteau of *ba* (“he comes”) and *l’luk* (“to lick”) – again in reference to the notion that Balak wanted to “lick” the blood of the Jewish People.

The trilateralists like Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, Radak, and Ibn Parchon trace these words to the trilateral root LAMMED-KUF-KUF, while the biliteralist Menachem Ibn Saruk in *Machberet Menachem* traces them to the two-letter root LAMMED-KUF. As you may have noticed in the previous paragraph, not every inflection of *lekikah* actually has two KUFs. Either way, both Ibn Saruk and Radak actually use cognates of LAMMED-CHET-KAF (*lechicha*) to define the meaning of LAMMED-KUF-(KUF). This implies that they saw those expressions as essentially synonymous. Indeed, Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino in his work *Ohel Moed* lists these two terms as synonyms. Of course, the letters KUF, KAF, and CHET are often considered interchangeable, so it should not surprise us that they understood those two roots are meaning the same thing. Indeed, Rabbi Dr. Asher Weiser in *Mikra V’Lashon* sees *lechicha* as a cognate with *lekikah* (again, probably assuming the former’s CHET turns into the latter’s first KUF, and the former’s KAF turns into the latter’s second KUF).

Like Ibn Saruk, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (in his work *Cheshek Shlomo*) traces *lekikah* to the biliteral root LAMMED-KUF. He defines the core meaning of that root as “detaching something small from something bigger.” In line with that definition, he explains that when licking something up, one only slurps up a little bit at a time, thus “detaching” a small amount of food or drink with one’s tongue from the rest of the foodstuff in question.

Another word he sees as related to this is *yelek* (Nah. 3:16, Joel 1:4, 2:25), which refers to a type of grasshopper that Rabbi Pappenheim explains would typically consume its food via *lekikah*. Ibn Ezra (to Joel 1:4) cites a similar explanation in the name of the Karaite exegete Yefet ben Ali. [For more about the word *yelek* and other Hebrew words for grasshoppers, see ["Army of Grasshoppers"](#) (Jan. 2018).] A third word that Rabbi Pappenheim sees as related is *melikah* (Lev. 1:15, 5:8), which is the ritual act by which the Kohen uses his finger to “detach” the head of a sacrificial bird from the rest of the body (and needless to say, the fowlbeast’s head is smaller than the rest of its body). Furthermore, Rabbi Pappenheim sees the word *lahakat* (“group/gathering”) in Sam. I 19:20 as derived from this root, arguing that it actually denotes a sub-group formed from a subset of a larger grouping. (Others explain *lahak* as a metathesized form of *kahal*.)

The famed German philologist Wilhelm Gesenius (1786–1842) wrote that words in Semitic languages and Indo-European (what he calls Indo-Germanic languages) share many stem-words and grammatical roots. He ascribed such occurrences to one of two phenomena: Sometimes, there are direct borrowings between these families of languages that account for common etymons, while other times, both language families independently created similar words in imitation of the same natural sounds (known as *onomatopoeia*). As an example of the latter, he adduces (*Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Introduction §1:4) the case of the words *lakak* (Hebrew), *lachach* (Hebrew), *leicho* (Greek), *lingo* (Latin), *lecher* (French), *lecken* (German), and *lick* (English). The way he sees it, all of these words refer to “licking” in various languages, but despite their similarities are not etymologically cognate with each other. Rather, they are all based on an onomatopoeic representation of the sound one makes when “licking.” We could add to his list even more words, including: *lek* (Afrikaan), *likken* (Dutch), *slikke* (Danish/Norwegian), *sleikja* (Icelandic), *ligh* (Irish), *leccata* (Italian), *linge* (Romanian), *yaleaq* (Arabic), and of course *leki* (Esperanto).

Along similar lines as Gesenius, Rabbi Moshe Tedeschi-Ashkenazi (1821–1898) in his work *Otzar Nirdafim* (§175) on Hebrew synonyms writes that the two roots in question, LAMMED-CHET-KAF (*lechichah*) and LAMMED-KUF-KUF (*lekikah*) essentially mean the same thing, but he proffers an important difference between them: He claims that LAMMED-KUF serves as an onomatopoeic representation of the sound one makes when licking up (“slurping”) liquid. Hence, in the case of Gideon’s test to see who is worthy of joining his army, the verb used to denote the soldiers “licking up” water is derived from LAMMED-KUF-KUF. On the other hand, he sees the root LAMMED-CHET-KAF as making a harder sound which implies “licking”

something less liquidly than water. Because of this, he explains LAMMED-CHET-KAF as sourced in the root CHET-KAF, which gives us the word *cheich* (“palate”). This is why in the case of Balak’s parable about an ox “licking up” the vegetables of a field, he uses the root LAMMED-CHET-KAF, and not LAMMED-KUF-KUF. [By the way, the word *chiyuch* (“smile”) in Modern Hebrew is also derives from *cheich*.]

Interestingly, Ibn Parchon in his *Machberet He’Aruch* writes that *lechichah* refers to “eating quickly,” while *lekikah* refers to “drinking without a vessel.” That distinction perhaps alludes to the sort of distinction that Rabbi Tedeschi was referring.

Nonetheless, if you asked me, I would argue that the onomatopoeia explanation is not enough, because different cultures “hear” and “record” the same natural sounds differently. For examples of this, see my essay “Animal Sounds” (Mar. 2021). To me, the fact that across so many different languages, the word for “licking” bears a resemblance to the Hebrew word for that same act rather suggests that Indo-European languages might have borrowed or evolved from Semitic languages (as some linguists posit), and did not just develop independently alongside them.

The root LAMMED-KUF-HEY refers to the act of “hitting/smiting” another person and is common in the Rabbinic Hebrew term *malkut* (which refers to the mandated meting out of lashes given to a sinner). Although this may not be at all connected to *lekikah*, we could argue that the whip used to mete out such corporeal can be likened to a “tongue” lashing upon the sinner’s body in the same way that a “tongue” might lick something else. In a fascinating parallel, the English word *lick* in the expression “to lick one’s enemies” (based on Num. 22:4) similarly refers to “smiting” or “defeating” one’s enemies, and the English idiom to “lick the whip” refers to tasting or experiencing punishment. Thus, the English *lick* refers to both smiting another, and to the act of passing one’s tongue over something to taste it, moisten it, or clean it. Nonetheless, linguists would probably say that it is simply by chance that this usage resembles the Semitic roots LAMMED-KUF-HEY (“hitting”) and LAMED-KUF-KUF (“licking”).

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