

OHRNET

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IN CHUTZ LA'ARETZ PLEASE SAVE THIS FOR NEXT WEEK

PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Deluxe Delusion

“... and On ben Pelet, sons of Reuven ” (16:1)

It's amazing how we can be blind to the blindingly obvious. Rashi explains that the name of On ben Pelet can be understood as follows: He sat in mourning all the days of his life for his sin of joining in at first with Korach (*Onen* means mourner), and that miracles were wrought for him (Pelet or Pele means wonder or miracle), and because he repented he was saved from Korach and his plot. He was the “son of Reuven,” meaning that he saw (the word “Reuven” is from the root “to see”) the falsity of the Korach's claim.

Ostensibly, then, On ben Pelet was on a high spiritual level and was motivated only by altruism. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (109b), however, explains: Rav says, “On, son of Pelet, did not repent on his own, but rather his wife saved him. She said to him: What difference does it make to you? If this Master, Moshe, is the great one, then you are the student. And if this Master, Korach, is the great one, then you are the student. Why are you involving yourself in this matter?”

Which suggests that On's motivation was to gain status, and that his wife was pointing out to him that whoever was going to be the boss, it wasn't going to be him.

But didn't we establish that On ben Pelet was acting altruistically and because of his righteousness the truth was revealed to him? Apparently, there must have been some minute desire within him for honor and self-advancement, and when his wife pointed this out to him, he did *teshuva*.

Which begs another question. Did On ben Pelet need his wife to point out to him that he wasn't going to be the boss? Surely that was abundantly clear to On without his wife's rebuke.

It emerges from this that even a tiny delusional idea in our heart can totally blind us – even to the blindingly obvious.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Korach, Datan and Aviram, and 250 leaders of Israel rebel against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. The rebellion results in their being swallowed by the earth. Many resent their death and blame Moshe. G-d's “anger” is manifest by a plague that besets the nation, and many thousands perish. Moshe intercedes once again for the people. He instructs Aharon to atone for them and the plague stops. Then G-d commands that staffs, each inscribed with the name of one of the tribes, be placed in the *Mishkan*. In the morning, the staff of Levi, bearing Aharon's name, sprouts, buds, blossoms and yields ripe almonds. This

provides Divine confirmation that Levi's tribe is chosen for priesthood and verifies Aharon's position as Kohen Gadol, High Priest. The specific duties of the *levi'im* and *kohanim* are stated. The *kohanim* were not to be landowners, but were to receive their sustenance from the tithes and other mandated gifts brought by the people. Also taught in this week's Torah portion are the laws of the first fruits, redemption of the firstborn, and various offerings.

• Source: *Chidushei HaLev*

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Shabbat 100-106

Mitzvah or Aveirah?

The Yeshiva Sages asked a question on the *mishna* from a teaching in a *beraita* that says, “One who rends his clothing for his recently departed relative on Shabbat is *chayav* (obligated to bring a sin offering if done forgetfully) – and he fulfills his *mitzvah* of *kriah* (the *mitzvah* to rend one’s garment for a close relative’s passing from this world.)”

The *gemara* states that this *beraita* appears to directly contradict our *mishna* which states, “One who rends his clothing for his recently departed relative on Shabbat is *patur* (is exempt from bringing a sin-offering if done forgetfully), and for all destructive acts done on Shabbat one is *patur*.” The apparent contradiction: If a person tears his garment in mourning his relative, the *mishna* says he is not obligated to bring a sacrifice, but the *beraita* says that he is obligated!

The *gemara* answers that although both the *mishna* and the *beraita* state that he is tearing his garment for his relative, the *mishna* is talking about a distant relative (such as a cousin), while the *beraita* is teaching about a close relative (i.e. his mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter or wife). Since he has no obligation to do *kriah* for a distant relative, his tearing the garment is a *destructive* act – an act not forbidden by the Torah and therefore he is exempt from bringing a *korban*. However, a person has an obligation to do *kriah* for a close relative, and therefore it is considered a *constructive* act and *chillul* Shabbat, for which he would be obligated to bring a *korban*. (Commentaries explain that *kriah* is an act that provides a constructive psychological release and comfort by the mourner venting his anguish in a controlled and religious manner.)

A question that seems to be especially troubling, although it does not appear in our *sugya* of a mourner tearing his clothing on Shabbat, is a principle known as “*mitzvah ha’baah b’aveira*” – literally, “a *mitzvah* that comes with a transgression.” Elsewhere in Shas we learn that a *mitzvah ha’baah b’aveira* is unacceptable and is not a *mitzvah*. (Succah 30a) The case taught in the *beraita* is

one of a person rending his garment on Shabbat for a close relative, for which he is not only obligated a

korban, but is also considered as having fulfilled his *mitzvah* of *kriah*. He fulfills this *mitzvah* by his act of tearing his garment, even on Shabbat, although this is considered a desecration of Shabbat and should seemingly fall into the problematic category of “*mitzvah ha’baah b’aveira*.” How can his tearing be considered a *mitzvah* if it is also an act of *chillul* Shabbat?

This question is posed and discussed in the Talmud Yerushalmi and is also widely addressed by the great Rishonim and Achronim throughout the ages. The key to each approach is to carefully define the phrase *mitzvah ha’baah b’aveira*. One approach is to carefully look at the relationship between the *mitzvah* and the *aveira*. Does the *aveira* have a direct affect on the performance of the *mitzvah*? If so, the “*mitzvah*” is not a *mitzvah*. It is an example of a *mitzvah ha’baah b’aveira*. For example, a stolen *lulav* cannot be used for the *mitzvah* of *arbah minim* on Succot since the *lulav* is affected by the transgression by retaining an “*aveira*-status” since the thief should be returning it instead of holding it in his hand to try to fulfill a *mitzvah*. In our case, however, the garment is just a garment with which a person is transgressing by tearing it on Shabbat. This transgression in no way relates to the *mitzvah* of *kriah* he wishes to fulfill by tearing it. The aspect of it being torn on Shabbat is a side issue (albeit quite serious), so to speak, since the *mitzvah* is for the mourner to tear his garment, an act which could be done not on Shabbat just as well.

• *Shabbat 105b*

Anger Danger

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said in the name of the Sage Chilfa bar Agra who said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri: “A person who tears his clothing in anger, who smashes his vessels in anger and who wastes his money in anger, should be considered to you as if he is an idol worshipper. Why? Because this is the strategy of a person’s *yetzer hara* (evil inclination): Today it urges him to do something wrong; tomorrow it urges him to do something else that is wrong (i.e. worse); and so on – until it finally tells him to worship idols and he indeed goes and worships idols.”

• *Shabbat 105b*

Q & A

Questions

1. Why did Datan and Aviram join Korach?
2. Why is Yaakov's name not mentioned in Korach's genealogy?
3. What motivated Korach to rebel?
4. What did Korach and company do when Moshe said that a *techelet* garment needs *tzizit*?
5. What warning did Moshe give the rebels regarding the offering of the incense?
6. Did Moshe want to be the *kohen gadol*?
7. What event did Korach not foresee?
8. What does the phrase *rav lachem* mean in this week's Parsha? (Give two answers.)
9. What lands are described in this week's Parsha as "flowing with milk and honey"?
10. When did Moshe have the right to take a donkey from the Jewish community?
11. What did Korach do the night before the final confrontation?
12. What sin did Datan and Aviram have in common specifically with Goliath?
13. Before what age is a person not punished by the Heavenly Court for his sins?
14. What happens to one who rebels against the institution of *kehuna*? Who suffered such a fate?
15. Why *specifically* was incense used to stop the plague?
16. Why was Aharon's staff placed in the middle of the other 11 staffs?
17. Aharon's staff was kept as a sign. What did it signify?
18. Why are the 24 gifts for the *kohanim* taught in this week's *Parsha*?
19. Who may eat the *kodshei kodashim* (most holy sacrifices) and where must they be eaten?
20. Why is G-d's covenant with the *kohanim* called "a covenant of salt"?

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

Answers

1. 16:1 - Because they were his neighbors.
2. 16:1 - Yaakov prayed that his name not be mentioned in connection with Korach's rebellion (*Bereishet* 49:6).
3. 16:1 - Korach was jealous that Elizafan ben Uziel was appointed as leader of the family of Kehat instead of himself.
4. 16:1 - They laughed.
5. 16:6 - Only one person would survive.
6. 16:6 - Yes.
7. 16:7 - That his sons would repent.
8. 16:7,3 - *Rav lachem* appears twice in this week's Parsha. It means "much more than enough greatness have you taken for yourself" (16:3) and "It is a great thing I have said to you" (16:17).
9. 16:12 - Egypt and Canaan.
10. 16:15 - When he traveled from Midian to Egypt.
11. 16:19 - Korach went from tribe to tribe in order to rally support for himself.
12. 16:27 - They all blasphemed.
13. 16:27 - Twenty years old.
14. 17:5 - He is stricken with *tzara'at*, as was King Uziyahu (*Divrei HaYamim* II 26:16-19).
15. 17:13 - Because the people were deprecating the incense offering, saying that it caused the death of two of Aharon's sons and also the death of 250 of Korach's followers. Therefore G-d demonstrated that the incense offering was able to avert death, and it is sin, not incense, which causes death.
16. 17:21 - So people would not say that Aharon's staff bloomed because Moshe placed it closer to the *Shechina*.
17. 17:25 - That only Aharon and his children were selected for the *kehuna*.
18. 18:8 - Since Korach claimed the *kehuna*, the Torah emphasizes Aharon's and his descendants' rights to *kehuna* by recording the gifts given to them.
19. 18:10 - Male *kohanim* may eat them and only in the *azara* (forecourt of the *Beit Hamikdash*).
20. 18:19 - Just as salt never spoils, so this covenant will never be rescinded.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

All About Hair

The story of Korach and his rebellion against Moshe is all about hair. Korach – whose name literally means “bald” in Hebrew – was said to have resented the fact that he was left shaven without hair, while Aharon the Kohen Gadol was decked with clothes befitting a king (*Zohar, Tazria* 49a). Moreover, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 110a) relates that Korach’s wife egged him on by telling him that the requirement to shave all the Levites’ hair (Num. 8:7) was intended to humiliate him. In those two sources, two different words for “hair” appear: the *Zohar* uses the word *saara*, while the Talmud uses the word *mazia*. In this essay we will discuss four different words for “hair” in Aramaic (*saara*, *mazia*, *binta*, and *nimah*), exploring their etymology and trying to understand how those words might differ from each other.

When it comes to the Aramaic term *mazia* (whose first three letters are MEM-ZAYIN-YOD), Rabbi Dr. Jared Greenblatt argues that it is related to the Syriac/Aramaic word *ma’azia* (spelled MEM-AYIN-ZAYIN-YOD) which means “goat hair.” The latter word appears in multiple places in the Targumim (e.g., see Targum Onkelos to Ex. 25:4, 26:7, 35:6) and is clearly a cognate of the Hebrew word *eiz* (“goat”). Rabbi Greenblatt argues that in later permutations of the word *ma’azia*, there was a germination of the letter ZAYIN so that it morphed into *mazia*, as if the AYIN was dropped. Rabbi Dr. Alexander Kohut (1842-1894), on the other hand, contends that *mazia* is unrelated to *ma’azia*, but is rather derived from Old Persian, noting that it is related to the Old Persian word for “hair of the eyebrows.” Either way, Rashi (to Deut. 32:24) identifies the first word in the phrase *mizei raav* (Deut. 32:24) to be the sole appearance of this Aramaic word in the Bible (although others including Ibn Janach, Ibn Parchon, Ibn Ezra, and Radak explain *mizei* differently).

The word *mazia* appears in the Talmud in many places, including when Mordechai asked Haman to cut his “hair” (*Megillah* 16a), when Rabbi Akiva picked out the hay from his wife Rachel’s “hair” (*Nedarim* 50a), and when Rebbe allowed his “hair” to grow long as part of his repentance (*Sanhedrin* 25a). The translation known as Targum Yonason (to Deut. 21:12) also uses this word when saying that the beautiful captive woman must shave the *mazia* of her head before a Jewish soldier can legally marry her.

The word *binta* appears in a famous Talmudic passage that compares death by way of Divine Kiss to “lifting a hair (*binta*) out of milk” (*Berachot* 8a). The Talmud refers to a type of medicinal leech called a “*Bini* of the Water” (*Gittin* 68b), which Kohut explains is related to the Aramaic word *binta*, because such leeches are long and thin like strands of hair. Kohut also notes that elsewhere this type of leech is called a “*Nimah* of the Waters” (*Avodah Zarah* 12b), using another common term for “hair” (see below).

In another famous Talmudic passage, the Rabbis speak about taming the force of the evil inclination for idolatry, which took on the animified form of a lion made of fire. The Talmud relates that when the Rabbis captured this fiery lion, a “hair-strand” (*binta*) from its “hair” (*mazia*) slipped off (*Yoma* 69b), symbolizing that the fight against idolatry is not completely over. In this case, the words *binta* and *mazia* appear side-by-side. Those two words again appear in tandem when the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 84b) relates that after Rabbi Elazar (son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai) died, his body was kept in an attic for many years and did not rot, such that if a single “hair” (*binta*) slipped away from his “hair” (*mazia*), his body would start bleeding.

One major player in the Korach saga was On ben Pelet. He was originally listed as part of Korach's entourage (Num. 16:1), but later disappears from story's continuation. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 109b-110a) accounts for On's disappearance by explaining that his righteous wife saved him from joining in the rebellion by uncovering her hair (*mazia*). When Korach's men came to bring On to the final showdown against Moshe, those "pious" people were deterred by the presence of a woman with uncovered hair – they turned back and never came to get On.

The Talmud lauds the actions of On ben Pelet's righteous wife by applying to her the verse, "The wise among women builds her house" (Prov. 14:1). As Rabbi Avraham Meir Israel (1913-1995) explains in *Yalkut HaMeiri*, the Hebrew word for "builds" (*bantah*) is phonetically similar to the Aramaic word *binta* ("hair"), thus hinting to the role of "hair" in this story.

The Bible reports that Benjaminite sharpshooters were said to be able to sling a rock at a hair without missing (Judges 20:16). The Hebrew word for "hair" in that verse is *saarah*, but Targum (there) renders it *binat saara* in Aramaic. Other places in which cognates of *binta* appear in the Targumim include Ps. 40:13 and Iyov 9:17. However, Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur (1469-1549) notes in *Meturgaman* that these three examples are the only instances of *binta* in the Targum. In all other cases the Targumim simply Aramaicize the Hebrew *saar* into the Aramaic *saara* without really translating it.

The Hebrew word *saar/se'ar* refers to both a single strand of hair (Lev. 13:37) and a collective of hairs (Lev. 14:9). Rabbi Greenblatt theorizes that the Hebrew and Aramaic words *saar(a)* appear to be cognates with words for "barley" (*seora*), and explains that barley is possibly called "hairy" because it has longer awns than wheat does. Indeed, the Mishna uses the word *se'ar* to refer to the fibers that protrude from various produce (see *Shabbat* 21:3 and *Kilayim* 3:5). Rabbi Greenblatt also notes that both sets of words may be related to *seir* ("goat"), just like *ma'azia* is. (Some Hebrew grammarians differentiate between the word *se'ar*, which denotes a "patch of hair," and *se'arah*, which denotes a single strand of hair – see *Tosefot Yom Tov* for *Negaim* 4:1 and *Niddah* 3:2.)

The word *nimah* is the common word for "hair" in the Talmud. For example, the Talmud (*Yoma* 38b) reinforces the idea of Divine Oversight by saying: "A person can never touch that which is set aside for his friend – even a mere hair's worth (*nimah*)." *Nimah* also refers to the hair on a person's body in the context of immersing in the *Mikveh* (see *Eruvin* 4b and *Succah* 6a). Finally, the Talmud uses the word *nimah* in reference to "pubic hair" when discussing Tamar tying a "pubic hair" that castrated Amnon as he raped her (*Sanhedrin* 21a), and in explaining that the concubine in the story of *Pilegish B'Givah* was rejected by her husband because she had failed to remove a "pubic hair" (*Gittin* 6b).

That said, it seems that *nimah* means "hair" only as a secondary, borrowed meaning. In other instances, *nimah* actually refers to a "string" or "cord." It is the word typically used to refer to the cords of a stringed-instrument (Targum to Ps. 6:1, *Tosefta Arachin* 2:7, *Eruvin* 102b) or the string of a bow (Targum to Ps. 11:2, *Iyov* 30:11). *Nimah* is also used to refer to "threads" used for sowing (see *Shabbat* 64a, 74b) or that stick out of clothing (*Menachot* 42b, *Succah* 9a). In fact, several philologists and linguists note that the Aramaic word *nimah* is derived from the Ancient Greek word *nema* ("thread"). *Nimah* is also borrowed to mean "kernel" (*Shabbat* 79a).

I have not found any theories about why Talmudic Aramaic would have four different words that all mean "hair." However, based on what we have written above, I would like to suggest the following. The term *mazia* refers specifically to a patch of hair, the term *binta* refers to a single strand of hair, and *nimah* refers to hair that is sticking out or is otherwise considered undesirable. That accounts for the first three words, and *saara* simply means "hair" in Hebrew and was adopted into Aramaic in that sense as well.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BLESSING FOUR: BE YOURSELF!

“Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for having made me according to His will.”

The blessing that many women recite in place of “...for not having made me a woman” is fascinating for two reasons. Firstly, its origins are not clear. The majority of the Morning Blessings can be found in the Talmud, but this blessing is a much later composition. It is first mentioned within Jewish Law in the 14th century by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher in his magnum opus the Tur, and by Rabbi David Abudraham in his scholarly work entitled Sefer Abudraham. But there is no real indication as to who composed it and when exactly it was written. The second fascinating element regarding this blessing is the language it uses. We could have expected the blessing to mirror the men’s blessing and be “...for not having made me a man.” However, it instead reads, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for having made me according to His will.”

As we discussed in the previous article, keeping the commandments is a privilege. The fact that men have more commandments to keep obliges them to make a special blessing that acknowledges the gift they have been granted. And this is also the reason why women cannot make a corresponding blessing of “...for not having made me a man.” To do so would mistakenly imply that it is *good* not to have been given so many commandments.

On the other hand, as was also previously pointed out, women are inherently more spiritual than men, meaning that they do not have the same need that men have to be constantly connected to the commandments in order for them, as women, to be able to sustain their relationship with G-d.

Where do we see that women have an innate sense of spirituality? The Maharal of Prague writes in Be’er Hagolah 4:16 that there is fundamental spiritual concept that G-d built into the Creation called *ma’alin bekodesh*, to grow in holiness. *Ma’alin bekodesh* means that in spiritual progression something that follows another is on a higher spiritual level than that which immediately precedes it.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to Genesis 2:22, in explaining the creation of Adam and Eve, writes that the fact that Eve was created after Adam is proof that women have an innate spiritual potential that men do not possess.

When Adam was created, G-d took earth and fashioned his body. But when it came to creating Eve, the material for her body was not taken from the earth, which represents inanimate, albeit pure, potential. Rather, she was created from the sensitive living body of Man.

And that brings us to the question of the wording of the blessing. Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz of Frankfurt, in his brilliantly erudite work called Hafla’ah, writes that even though Eve was created from Adam’s side, it was established for all the future generations that she would be born complete. He continues, “It seems that they [the Rabbis] enacted for women to recite the blessing ‘for having made me according to His will’ over this. Meaning, over being created complete, as arose in G-d’s will from the first.”

My Rebbi, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, explained that G-d’s will is to give – to bestow kindness – to mankind. So, too, a woman is created with the same will to give and to create, to nurture and to support. This is why the blessing women make is, “...for having made me according to His will.” The blessing is conveying that women were created *similar* to G-d’s will.

A classic example of the way that the spiritual needs of men and women differ is the commandment for men to wear *tefillin*. The Rabbis teach that *tefillin* are a mystical and esoteric means of establishing a bond with G-d. But, explains Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, women have a far more meaningful way of creating their relationship with G-d, through the experience of carrying life within them. Intriguingly, in the Kabbalistic works the inner chamber of the *tefillin* is compared to the womb and the leather strap is a parallel to the umbilical cord.

But perhaps the most significant idea that can be gleaned from the differences between the blessing that men recite and the one that women recite is that every individual – regardless of gender – has the most incredible potential to reach unparalleled closeness to G-d. As Rabbi Mordechai Becher writes, “Men and women have different challenges. Commandments are described in the Zohar as be an upright and noble human being. A being who can

tikkunim, solutions, fixes to these challenges.” Consequently, the commandments that men are obligated to keep are tailor-made to help men meet their challenges. So, too, the commandments that women have serve exactly the same function for women. And the different blessings for men and women reflect their different approaches to serving G-d.”

In effect, the ultimate spiritual level of each individual is determined by how they respond to their challenges and whether they utilize the unique potential that has been granted to them by G-d.

Please Note: *There are various opinions within Jewish Law as to how – or even whether – women make this blessing. The*

accepted Ashkenazic and Chassidic approach is that the blessing is recited as it appears in the Prayer Book including the Names of G-d. However, there is at least one Chassidic sect whose custom is (mostly) not to recite it. Among the Sefardic communities there are two differing opinions. Some rule that women should go directly from the third blessing to the fifth blessing without reciting the fourth blessing at all. Others rule that the blessing should be recited without saying the Names of G-d. Rather, to say: “Blessed are You for having made me according to His will.”

Accordingly, each person should follow their own family or community custom. Anyone who is unsure as to what is the correct approach for them should consult with a local Orthodox Rabbi.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

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

Giving: It’s a Given

Korach and his followers attack Moshe and Aharon, accusing them of misappropriating the leadership for themselves, when in reality, “the entire community, all of them are holy.” Here, in proclaiming a rebellion against the appointment of the sons of Aharon as Kohanim, Korach also challenged something much broader – the Divine origins of Moshe’s mission and of the Torah itself. Korach sought to replace the Torah with the subjectivity of the individual: *Every man is holy! We don’t need restrictions, commands, and appointments teaching us how to relate to and serve G-d! Each of us holy men need only to follow the inner stirrings of holiness he feels in his heart in order to attain G-d’s closeness and approval.*

His argument had appeal. Novel and spontaneous worship feels connected. But the Torah has a different view of subjective spiritual impulses of piety and devoutness. Only he whom *G-d chooses* will come near to Him. (Bamidbar 17:5). Only those acts which *G-d chooses* bring man near to Him. G-d has already told man what is good, what brings closeness.

Following the demise of Korach and his cohorts, Elazar is instructed to remove the copper pans, but to “throw away the fire.” The pans were to be made into a thin plate as an overlay for the altar. This was to serve as an eternal reminder to the people that the fire – the offering not ordained by G-d – is not acceptable.

Next, the Torah presents rules about the Kohanim and Leviim regarding the Temple service, so that its holiness would be appropriately guarded. It is in this context that the Torah characterizes the priestly service as being a G-d given *avodat matanah* – G-d “gives” the Kohanim the “service of free-willed giving.”

This is a most significant statement, and its principle applies beyond the priestly service. G-d wants to *give us our giving*. The giving of ourselves and of our possessions to G-d emanates from the deepest wellsprings of our free will. But this giving must not be guided by personal whim – the giving itself is “given.” It conforms to G-d’s standards – the given code as set forth in the Torah. Not only are the things we give – our possessions – nothing but giving back to G-d what we received from Him, but the very fact of our giving – the nature and quality of our gifts, and the very motivation to give – is also merely the fulfillment of His will. In this way, “the service of free-willed giving” is realized: through our own free-willed obedience, we realize G-d’s Will and achieve nearness.

This is a direct response to Korach’s challenge. The Jew’s divine service consists not of the gratification of self-devised practices that give him a spiritual lift, but of free-willed, faithful obedience to G-d’s expressed Will.

● *Source: Commentary, Bamidbar 18:6-7*

Special Feature!

PARSHA PERMUTATIONS 5780/2020

Which Week Is Which?

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

This time of year is an interesting one. Right after most of Klal Yisrael's return to shuls before Shavuot, at least in some format (many due to President Trump's declaring 'Houses of Worship' as at least as essential as liquor stores, as in these trying times of COVID-19, "We need more prayer, not less"), and many figuring out if/how to catch up on all the *parshiyot* missed in the weekly public Torah readings, Klal Yisrael entered another *parsha*-based dilemma.

For five weeks (six *Shabbatot*), already starting right after Shavuot, and lasting until the Three Weeks, the Jewish world will not be aligned. No, I am not referring to constellations, but rather to the weekly *parsha*. A simple innocuous question of "What's this week's *parsha*?" will elicit a different response depending on where in the world the question is being asked. This is because the *parsha* will not be the same regularly scheduled one outside of Israel as it is in Israel.

Truthfully, this type of dichotomy actually happens not so infrequently, as it essentially occurs whenever the last day of a Yom Tov falls on Shabbat. In *Chutz La'aretz*, where a second day of Yom Tov is halachically mandated, a Yom Tov Torah reading is done publicly; yet, in Israel (except for specific *Chutznik minyanim*) the Torah reading of the next scheduled *parsha* is read. This puts *Eretz Yisrael* a *parsha ahead* until the rest of the world soon 'catches up' by means of an upcoming potential double-*parsha*, which each would be read separately in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The reason for this current interesting phenomenon is that for this year, 5780/2020, the second day of Shavuot, which is observed only outside *Eretz Yisrael*, fell out on a Shabbat. On that Shabbats/Yom Tov the communities of the Diaspora *leined* the Yom Tov reading of 'Asser Te'asser' (*Devarim*, *Parshat Re'eh*, Ch.14:22), whereas in *Eretz Yisrael*, communities read *Parshat Naso*, the next *parsha* in the cycle, as Shavuot had already ended for them.

Parsha Background

The background for this uncanny occurrence is as follows: It is well known that the Torah is divided into 54 *parshiyot*, ensuring there are enough *parshiyot* for every Shabbat of the yearly cycle, which begins and ends on Simchat Torah. Since most (non-leap) years require less than 54 *parshiyot*, we combine certain *parshiyot*. This means that two consecutive *parshiyot* are read on one Shabbat as if they are one long *parsha*, to make sure that we complete the Torah reading for the year on Simchat Torah.

As detailed by the Abudraham, there are seven potential occurrences when we read "double *parshiyot*." These seven are:

Vayakhel/Pekudei, the last two *parshiyot* of *Sefer Shemot*
Tazria/Metzora, in *Sefer Vayikra*
Acharei Mot/Kedoshim, in *Sefer Vayikra*
Behar/Bechukotai, in *Sefer Vayikra*
Chukat/Balak, in *Sefer Bamidbar*
Matot/Masei, the last two *parshiyot* of *Sefer Bamidbar*
Netzavim/Vayelech, towards the end of *Sefer Devarim*

However, there are several possible instances in which certain *parshiyot* are combined in *Chutz La'aretz*, yet are read on separate weeks in *Eretz Yisrael*. This is one of them, with those *parshiyot* being *Chukat/Balak*.

Calendarical Conundrum

Although, as mentioned previously, this calendarical conundrum occurs not infrequently, this year's split seems to contrast greatly with last year's (5779/2019), when the odd alignment with *Eretz Yisrael* being a week ahead continued with a divergence of more than three months (!), with *Eretz Yisrael* out of sync with the rest of the world, and only realigning by *Matot/Masei* – around Rosh Chodesh Av.

On the other hand, this year, the split will be much shorter, ending right before the Three Weeks, with *Chukat* and *Balak* being read separately in *Eretz Yisrael* and together as a double parsha in the rest of the world.

However, this gives rise to an important question. Indeed, many have been asking, why last year did we not catch up by *Chukat/Balak* if it is fine for us to do so this year? In layman's terms, why did we wait so long for the whole world to be realigned last year, and this year we get to take a shortcut? Or, to paraphrase the Haggadah, "Mah nishtana hashana hazot"?

Although this year, with lockdowns due to coronavirus, this issue may not appear to have much practical ramification, as (of this writing) the Israeli Interior Ministry just re-shut the borders, even to yeshiva *bochurim* sporting student visas, and even those allowed into Israel are mandated a 14-day quarantine period, nonetheless, there are important *klalim* (rules) for us to learn.

Although some cite alternate *minhagim* (customs), nevertheless, it is important to note that nowadays this parsha split is indeed *Minhag Yisrael*, as codified by the Gr"m and the Mishnah Berurah. We should also realize that back then travel to and from *Eretz Yisrael* was far less of an issue – since undertaking the trip would take several months, missing one parsha would be the least of one's worries. But to properly understand the 'whys' of this fascinating dual dichotomy, one must first gain an understanding of the parsha rules and setup. In fact, this is not a new question, as several early *Acharonim*, including the Maharit, Rav Yosef Tirani, citing Rav Yissachar ben Sussan, one of the foremost experts on intercalation of the Jewish calendar and its *minhagim*, in his renowned *sefer Tikkun Yissachar* (written in 1538/5298), addressed this issue almost 500 years ago.

Managing Mnemonics

While it is technically true that *Eretz Yisrael* does not, nor should not, have to take *Chutz La'aretz* into account, to slow down or join *parshiyot* together due to their independent *luachs* (or to be grammatically correct, 'luchos') and cycles, as *Eretz Yisrael's* is indeed deemed the *ikar kariah*, nevertheless, there is more to the story.

The Tur, when codifying the halacha, sets four necessary sign-posts in relation to *parshiyot*, time of year and various Yamim Tovim. He also offers special codes, mnemonics, for remembering the proper order of *parshiyot*. In a regular year, he writes, 'Pikdu U'Pischu.' This refers to *Parshat Tzav* being Shabbat Hagadol, directly before Pesach; 'Minu V'Atzru', *Parshat Bamidbar* is directly prior to Shavuot; 'Tzumu V'Tzalu', the fast of Tisha B'Av is directly before

Parshat Va'etchanan (also meaning that *Parshat Devarim* is always Shabbat Chazon and *Va'etchanan* is always Shabbat Nachamu); and 'Kumu V'Tik'u', that *Parshat Netzavim* is before Rosh Hashanah. These mnemonics, denoting the four specific rules, or more accurately, necessary points of parsha alignment (or realignment) during the year, are accepted *lemaaseh* as *halachah pesukah* by all later authorities.

So now that we have the necessary background, let's get back to our question. Last year, as per the *halacha pesuka*, the world only re-synchronized after three months by *Matot/Masei*, skipping over the potential combo of *Chukat/Balak*. Yet, this year, we specifically realign by *Chukat/Balak*. Why? What could the difference be?

Pondering the Pearls of Parshat Pinchas

The Bnei Yisaschar cites an interesting reason. He explains that whenever possible we attempt to ensure the public reading of *Chalukat Ha'aretz*, the apportioning of *Eretz Yisrael*, during the period of communal mourning known as *Bein Hametzarim*, colloquially called 'The Three Weeks.' This period heralds the beginning of the tragedies that took place prior to the destruction of both *Batei Hamikdash*, from the breaching of the walls of ancient Yerushalayim on the 17th of Tammuz, until the actual destruction of the Beit Hamikdash on Tisha B'Av.

The reason for these readings, which are found in the *parshiyot* of *Pinchas*, *Matos*, and *Masei*, to be *leined* specifically then, is to remind us of Hashem's promise that although we are currently in *golus*, exile, nevertheless, 'le'eileh techalek ha'aretz,' we will still inherit *Eretz Yisrael*.

A similar assessment is given by the *Minchas Yitzchak*, albeit regarding *Korbanot*, especially the *Korban Tamid*, which is also detailed in *Parshat Pinchas*. He explains that the *Korban Tamid* protected *Klal Yisrael* from sinning with idolatry. When the *Korban Tamid* was no longer offered, it enabled the *Yetzer Hara* of *Avodah Zarah* to strengthen, and this sinning eventually led to the Beit Hamikdash's destruction.

As such, and since we no longer have *Korbanot*, but at least we still have their recital, in the vein of 'v'neshalmah *parim sifoseinu*,' that our *tefillot* are their current replacement, the *leining* of the *Korbanot* is specifically read during the Three Weeks when we are mourning the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. This serves to embolden and enable us to fight the reasons and causes for its destruction, and allow its rebuilding.

An additional point the Bnei Yissaschar raises is that *Parshat Pinchas* contains the *Parshat HaMoadim*, the reading detailing all the *Yamim Tovim* and their observances. He explains that this is also an appropriate reading for the Three Weeks, to comfort us in our time of mourning. This is as the *Navi Zechariah* (Ch. 8:19) prophesized that when the *Geulah* comes, this period will be turned into one of great rejoicing ('*l'sasson u'lsimcha ul'moadim tovim*').

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, last year, (5779/2019) it was simply not worthwhile for *Chutz La'aretz* to make *Chukat* and *Balak* into a double parsha merely to catch up to *Eretz Yisrael*, since if it would have, then *Parshat Pinchas* will not have fallen out in the Three Weeks. Therefore, it was proper for *Chutz La'aretz* to wait and not catch up to *Eretz Yisrael* until *Matot/Masei*, thus ensuring that *Parshat Pinchas* be *leined* during *Bein Hametzarim*, and enabling us to glean and appreciate its veiled significance and promises for the future.

Yet, this year, the opposite holds true. In 2020, the fast of *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz*, and hence, the start of the Three Weeks, occurs on Thursday, as does its climax, *Tisha B'Av*, three weeks later. According to our mnemonic rule cited previously, *Parshat Devarim* has to be Shabbat Chazon, and the following parsha, *Va'etchanan*, is always Shabbat Nachamu, directly following *Tisha B'Av*. This means that the preceding week has to already be the double parsha of *Matot/Masei*, in order for *Parshat Pinchas* to be recited during the Three Weeks. If we would wait until *Matot/Masei* to realign, as we did last year, then for most of the world *Parshat Pinchas* would not be *leined* during the Three Weeks, but rather preceding it. Hence, the need to correct the calendar before *Shiva Asar B'Tammuz*, in order for *Pinchas* to be *leined* by all of Klal Yisrael in the correct time - during the Three Weeks.

The Code for Consolation

The Maharit continues that the reason why *Matot* and *Masei* are generally combined is to a similar, yet reverse, reason to *Bamidbar*. As the *Tur* wrote, the code for this time of year is '*Tzumu V'Tzalu*,' the fast of *Tisha B'Av* is directly before *Va'etchanan*. This is not merely by chance.

Parshat Va'etchanan contains the verses of '*Ki Toleed Banim U'vnei Vanim V'noshantem Ba'aretz*,' which although not a pleasant reading, as it is a *tochacha* (rebuke), nevertheless, *Chazal* glean that there is a hidden message of redemption buried within. *V'noshantem* in *Gematria* equals 852, letting us know that after 852 years of living in *Eretz Yisrael*, the *Galut* would start. Yet, we find that the *Galut* actually started two years early, after 850 years. This is because Hashem did not want *chas veshalom* to have to destroy us, and therefore, as a kindness, brought the exile two years early, to ensure Klal Yisrael's survival.

Therefore, explains the Maharit, we commonly join up *Matot* and *Masei* to make certain that *Parshat Va'etchanan* is always immediately following *Tisha B'Av* as *Shabbat Nachamu*, thus offering us a message of consolation even amidst the destruction.

In conclusion, although it may seem complicated and confusing, on the contrary, each calendar calculation is clearly consistent with the clarion call of our *Chazal* - parsha combination and separation, synchronized to serve as a buffer from condemnation and to showcase hope and consolation when we need it most.

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