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PARSHA INSIGHT

BY RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

Make Yourself at Home!

“And behold! Three men were standing over him!” (18:2)

There are some people who look like they are giving but they’re really taking. And there are some people who look like they are taking when they’re really giving.

Anyone who buys a \$5,000-a-plate charity dinner is giving a lot of charity, but he’s also getting a lot of status mixed in with his sushi.

On the other hand, there are people who look like they’re takers but they are really giving.

Once there was a Jewish traveling salesman who found himself in a largely non-Jewish town on a Friday afternoon. His business had delayed him way beyond his expectations, and there was now no way he could get home for Shabbat. He had heard that there was just one Orthodox family in town where he could spend Shabbat, and as the sun was starting to set he made his way there.

The owner of the house opened the door to him and showed him into the living room. “May I stay here for Shabbat?” asked the traveling salesman. “If you like,” replied the host. “The price is \$200.” “\$200!” exclaimed the traveling salesman. “That’s more than a first-class hotel!” “Suit yourself,” replied the host.

Realizing that he had no option, the salesman reluctantly agreed. In the short time left before Shabbat the host showed the salesman his room, the kitchen and the other facilities for his Shabbat stay.

As soon as the host left the room the salesman sat down and thought to himself: “Well, if this is going to cost me \$200, I’m going to get my money’s worth.” During the entire Shabbat he availed himself unstintingly of the house’s considerable facilities. He helped himself to the delicious food in the fridge. He had a long luxurious shower both before and after Shabbat. He really made himself “at home”.

After Shabbat, when he had showered and packed, he made his way downstairs and plunked two crisp \$100 bills down on the table in front of his host.

“What’s this?” inquired the host. “That’s the money I owe you,” replied the salesman. “You don’t owe me anything. Do you really think I would take money from a fellow Jew for the mitzvah of hospitality?” “But you told me that Shabbat here costs \$200!”

“I only told you that to be sure that you would make yourself at home.”

When a guest comes to your home, his natural feeling is one of embarrassment. No one likes being a taker. When a guest brings a present the worst thing you can say is “You shouldn’t have done that!” Rather, take the bottle of wine (or whatever it is), open it up and put it in the middle of the table and say, “Thank you so much!” By allowing him to contribute to the meal you will mitigate his feeling of being a taker and you will have done the mitzvah of hospitality to a higher degree.

The mitzvah of hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We learn this from the beginning of this week’s Torah portion. G-d had come to visit Avraham on the third day after his *brit milah*, the most painful day. G-d made the day extremely hot so that Avraham should not be bothered by guests. When G-d saw that Avraham was experiencing more pain from his inability to do the mitzvah of hospitality than the pain of the *brit milah*, He sent three angels who appeared as men so that Avraham could do the mitzvah of hospitality. When these “men” appeared, Avraham got up from in front of the Divine Presence to greet his guests.

Hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.

• Sources: Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and others

TALMUD TIPS

ADVICE FOR LIFE

Based on the Talmudic Sages found in the seven pages of the Talmud studied each week in the Daf Yomi cycle

BY RABBI MOSHE NEWMAN

Sanhedrin 100 - 106

Reward for Building a City

Rabbi Yochanan said, “Why did Omri merit kingdom? Because he added one city to Eretz Yisrael...”

Rabbi Yochanan continues this statement on our *daf* by citing a verse (Kings I 16:24): “And he bought the mountain of Shomron from Shemer for two talents of silver... he built up the mountain and called the name of the *city which he built*... Shomron.”

Omri merited a reward of kingdom despite his being quite evil, as it says in the next verse, “And Omri did what was bad in the eyes of the Lord, and he was more wicked than all those that preceded him.” (Kings I 16:25)

However, if we look at the verse before the one that speaks about his building a new city — Kings I 16:23 — it appears that Omri already became king *before* he added a city to Eretz Yisrael. That verse states, “In the thirty-first year of Asa the king of Judah, Omri ruled over Israel for twelve years, in Tirzah he ruled for six years.” Rashi comments that Omri ruled there as king for six years before he built the city of Shomron in the Land of Israel.

This question is posed by the Maharsha, who answers as follows: Rabbi Yochanan isn’t teaching the reason why the evil Omri merited being king of Israel. Rather, he is explaining why Omri merited a kingdom that would span for more generations than previous kings of Israel. He merited that not only his son, but also his son’s son would sit on the throne of kingship. The Maharsha cites a Midrash Yalkut which appears to support his explanation of our *gemara*.

(Had the Maharsha not explained Rabbi Yochanan’s words in this manner, perhaps one might have thought to explain them differently, since Rabbi Yochanan’s words explicitly appear to be giving a reason for Omri *himself* meriting being a king. It was certainly known to the One Above that Omri would, in the *future*, when he would gain the power of a king, add a new city to Eretz Yisrael — and this would be his merit for becoming king in the first place.)

• *Sanhedrin 102b*

Not Green with Envy

Rav Yossi bar Choni said, “A person may become envious of anyone else, except of his child or his student.”

The *gemara* explains that a (normal) person is not capable of feeling envy if his offspring or his student surpasses him. The case of not envying one’s child is learned from David’s lack of envy towards his son Shlomo. At first, Adoniyahu tried to seize the throne as king to follow King David. However, this plan was foiled, and the prophet Natan anointed King David’s son, Solomon, to be the true king to follow King David (see Kings I chapter 1). Subsequently, a verse (Kings I 1:47) relates that “King David’s servants came to bless King David saying, ‘May G-d make the name of Solomon better than your name, and make his throne greater than your throne.’ And the king (David) bowed down upon the bed.” From here we see that King David was not envious of his son being blessed to surpass him, and showed acceptance and happiness of his son’s lofty station — and certainly not an iota of envy.

Regarding the lack of envy towards a person’s student, the *gemara* cites two possible sources for this teaching. One is that the prophet Elisha said to his mentor, the prophet Elyahu, (Kings II 2:9), “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” And Elyahu allowed Elisha, his student, his request (Rashi). A second possible source for lack of envy towards one’s student is seen in the manner in which Moshe Rabbeinu transferred his authority to teach Torah and rule in matters of Jewish Law. One verse states (Bamidbar 27:18): “G-d said to Moshe, ‘Take for yourself Yehoshua the son of Nun, a man of spirit, and you shall lay your *hand* upon him’.” However, in verse 23 we see that Moshe “laid his *hands* upon him (Yehoshua).” Although G-d had told Moshe to place one hand, Moshe placed two hands. This shows that Moshe felt no envy towards his student (Rashi). Moshe generously, above and beyond, desired to bestow on his beloved student abundant wisdom and authority, certainly without envy (as explained by Rashi in Bamidbar 27:23).

• *Sanhedrin 105b*

PARSHA Q&A?

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
 2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
 3. What were the missions of the three angels?
 4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
 5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
 6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
 7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
 8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
 9. How many angels went to Sodom?
 10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
 11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
 12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
 13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
 14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
 15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
 16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
 17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
 18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
 19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
 20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?
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PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this week's questions! - All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
 2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
 3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
 4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
 5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
 6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
 7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
 8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
 9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
 10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
 11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
 12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
 13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
 14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
 15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
 16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
 17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
 18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
 19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
 20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.
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LOVE of the LAND

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

Biriyah — Tombs of the Great

Less than a mile north of Tsefat is a place called “Biriyah” where two great figures in Jewish history are buried.

One is Benayahu ben Yehoyada, who was one of King David’s most important aides both as a scholar and a warrior, and whose great deeds and holiness



are described in the Talmud and the Zohar.

The other is the Talmudic Sage Abba Shaul. In addition to his great Torah scholarship he was proud of his role as a gravedigger; about which he once said “The evil inclination can’t be found in the cemetery.”

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by G-d. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. G-d reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. G-d agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham “bargains” G-d down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot’s wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot’s daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After G-d appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham. As

promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar’s son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but G-d tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and G-d promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that G-d is with him. In a tenth and final test, G-d instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, G-d sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham’s unquestioning obedience, G-d promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The parsha ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

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BY RABBI YIRMIYAHU ULLMAN

Ancestral Merit

From: Bracha

*Dear Rabbi,
Would you please explain to me the notion of ancestors' merit benefitting or affecting a person? How does this work and in what ways is it expressed?*

Dear Bracha,

The notion you refer to is called *zechut avot* in Hebrew, or the merit of one's forebearers. It describes the general or particular good influence over a person resulting from the good deeds, righteousness and piety of one's ancestors. It can be expressed in the form of protection from harm, Divine aid, beneficial opportunities or even as a pre-disposition for righteousness.

You can think of it as a type of "spiritual inheritance" from one's predecessors, which bequeaths certain advantages according to the nature and extent of the inheritance.

For example, someone whose ancestors were tall will very likely inherit the innate advantages of being tall. This is so even though the person himself did nothing to "deserve" these advantages, but they will nevertheless accompany him throughout life.

Similarly, internal traits (such as a pleasant temperament), or talents (such as musical ability), may also be passed down from forebearers to progeny. These beneficial traits and talents become part of the matrix in which the person operates and with which he experiences life.

So too with ancestral merit. The good deeds, Torah study and piety accrued by the righteous are passed to, and continue to have a beneficial effect on, their descendants. This is the case even if the descendants don't deserve it in their own right. In which case, it will likely accompany them generally or particularly

throughout life until it is depleted. But hopefully this ancestral merit will provide the opportunities and pre-disposition upon which the offspring can capitalize in order to continue the righteous ways of their forebearers.

We find this idea in the resolution of seemingly contradictory Talmudic teachings regarding in whose merit the Jews received the miraculous manna, the clouds of glory and the travelling well of water.

According to one Talmudic source these gifts were given in the merit of Avraham's hospitality to the angels (Gen. 18:4). The teaching thus states (Bava Metzia 86b): "As a reward for the 'milk and butter' (which Avraham served to his visitors), they received the manna; as a reward for 'and he stood over them (to serve them)', they received the pillar of the cloud; as a reward for 'let some water be taken (to wash your feet)', they received the well of Miriam".

However, the Maharsha notes a contradictory Talmudic source (Ta'anit 9a) which attributes the manna, clouds of glory and well of water to the merit of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, respectively. So were these miracles performed for the Jewish People in the merit of Avraham or, rather, in the merit of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam?

The answer is that the gifts were bestowed as a result of a process, not due to a single event or individual. The process began with the righteousness of Avraham, whose merit planted the seed of possibility for the miracle to occur. This ancestral merit of Avraham was passed on in potential to his progeny — Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. They then capitalized upon their ancestral pre-disposition for righteousness and brought that seed of merit into fruition through the formation of the manna, clouds of glory and the travelling well.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

Seeing is Believing

The Hebrew language has quite a few root-words that refer to the concept of “seeing”. In this essay we will briefly try to get a handle on some of those words and their unique connotations. The verbs which we will discuss are: *ra’ah*, *hibit*, *metzitz*, *mashgiach*, *mashkif*, *shur*, *tzofeh*. As with many of the sets of synonyms which we have encountered, each of these words has its own special meaning and connotation, and they are not all truly interchangeable.

The Malbim (1809-1879) writes that *ra’ah* refers to the physiological function of the eye, the sense of sight. It also refers, in specific, to a sight which one may suddenly stumble upon without intent to behold. Similarly, the Vilna Gaon (to Isa. 5:12) explains that *ra’ah* refers to seeing something on the surface level, while *hibit* refers to seeing something which one would not otherwise notice with a quick glance.

Accordingly, the verb *hibit* (or its noun form *habatah*) refers to a more deliberate form of seeing in which the seer purposely engages in order to investigate or understand something better. The Midrash (*Bereishet Rabbah* 44:12) says that the verb *hibit* refers to one who is higher looking down towards something below him. Although this suggests that *hibit* too refers to the act of looking and not the idea of examination, Malbim accepts both approaches. He reconciles them by explaining that sometimes *hibit* refer to the act of examination — which is not necessarily done by somebody positioned above that at which he is looking — and sometimes *hibit* refers to actually seeing, in which case it refers specifically to one located above that which he sees.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) rejects the notion that *hibit* denotes a deliberate form of looking, and instead explains that the word *hibit* refers to the movement of one’s head in order to face whatever it is he wants to see. In essence, *hibit* is also related to deliberate looking, but more indirectly — it denotes the movement of the head, as opposed to the role of the eye. The actual word for a more deliberate form of looking, explains Rabbi Mecklenburg, is *mashkif*.

Interestingly, Rashi (to Gen. 18:16) writes that whenever *mashkif/hashkafah* appears in the Bible, it

has a negative connotation, except for Deut. 26:15 which is a positive “looking”. Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) correctly explains that Rashi did not mean that all instances of this word in the *entire Bible* portend something bad, but rather he meant that instances of this word in *the Torah* do so.

Radak in *Sefer HaShorashim* writes that the word *mashkif* refers specifically to the act of one who sees, but cannot be seen. Rashi (to *Berachot* 29a) writes that *hishkif* refers to one who stares at something in the hopes of jogging his memory. The work *Sefer Ha’Chochmah*, ascribed to the late 12th century Asheknazic scholar Rabbi Elazar Rokeach of Worms, explains that *mashkif* refers to somebody who looks down from a high place, while *tzofeh* is somebody situated *very* high up (e.g., a tall mountain) and looks downwards.

The act of *tzofeh*, commonly translated as “gazing”, refers to the notion of seeing something which does not physically exist. It denotes the idea of seeing an abstract concept as opposed to a concrete, tangible item. The Malbim explains that the act of anticipating or awaiting that which does not yet exist is likewise called *mitzapeh* because the anticipator, too, sees something which is not existent (yet), but hopes it will soon materialize. For this reason, prophets are sometimes called *tzofim* (seers) because their prophetic visions are not physically existent, but are nonetheless very real. Rabbi Wertheimer notes that *tzofeh* also refers to somebody who stays in a specific location for an extended time in order to watch certain developments as they happen (e.g., a sentinel).

The Vilna Gaon (to Prov. 15:3) explains that *tzofeh* is the act of seeing something from afar. However, others associate the notion of looking from afar with other words: The Midrash (to Ecc. 5:1) says that the difference between *ra’ah* and *hibit* is seeing from close-up and seeing from far-away, but records a dispute between sages about which one is which. Moreover, the Malbim writes that the word *shur* refers to the act of seeing something far away, whether in time or space.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) writes that the word *shur* is related to the word *yashar*

Continued on page seven

PRAYER Essentials

BY RABBI YITZCHAK BOTTON

Laws of “*Devarim Shebekedusha*” Part 1

The *Kaddish* Prayer, as well as *Kedusha* and *Barchu*, are all considered “*Devarim Shebekedusha*” (“Holy matters”), and therefore cannot be recited unless there is a minyan of ten men present. This halacha is learned from the verse, “I (G-d) shall be sanctified amidst the Children of Israel (Vayikra 23:32).” By connecting this verse with the verse, “Separate yourselves from amid this assembly..” (in Bamidbar 16:21) we learn that an official assembly of men which constitutes “a congregation” is required for the recital of *Kaddish*, and that the minimum number of people for this is ten.

Other *Devarim Shebekedusha* include *Kri’at Shema*, the public Torah readings (on Mondays, Thursdays and Shabbat for example), the *Haftarah* (a section from the prophets read aloud in the Synagogue on Shabbat after the Torah reading); *Nesi’at Kapaim* (lit. “raised hands”, referring to the special blessings by the *Kohanim* recited with their hands raised and “The Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy” (beginning with Hashem, Hashem....).

The conclusion of the halachic authorities is that this rule is of rabbinical origin, as is the entire concept and structure of daily, organized prayer. In the event

that a *Davar Shebekedusha* is said without ten men present, the people present do not fulfill their obligation, and it is therefore necessary to say it again in the presence of ten (*Birkat Habayit*). However, if there was thought to be ten men present — for example, in a case where one person left without the others realizing it — *Kaddish* or *Kedusha* and the like does not need to be said again as it is considered as though their obligation is fulfilled. This applies when at least six people remained — with less than six people even “after the fact” their obligation is not fulfilled (*Piskei Teshuvot*).

When reciting a *Davar Shebekedusha* it should be said loud enough for ten people to hear. Not less than seven *Kaddeshim* should be recited each day, as is hinted to in the verse, “Seven times a day I have praised You (Tehillim 119:164).” However, according to the Arizal twelve *Kaddeshim* should be said each day: Six during Shacharit, two during Minchah and four in the Ma’ariv service (*Kaf HaChaim*). *Kedusha* is said twice a day, in Shacharit and Mincha, during the second blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei when it is repeated out loud for the congregation. *Barchu* is also said twice a day: in Shacharit and in Ma’ariv, just before the blessings of the Shema.

What’s In a Word...continued from page six

(straight) and denotes a certain feature of the sense of sight: Unlike the senses of smell, hearing, or tasting, the sense of sight can be directed and channeled to focus on a specific view by moving oneself so that his eyes are directly opposite it and cannot see anything else. The nose, ears, and taste-buds cannot be used in this way, but rather whatever stimuli reach them are all beheld at the same time. Those senses do not have the ability to focus or zero in on something specific.

The Malbim explains that the verb *metzitz* does not primarily refer to the act of seeing, but is a borrowed term which hyper-literally means “stretches”. One who is *metzitz* looks at the object in question by contorting his neck to allow himself a better view (see Song of Songs 2:9 which uses the word *metzitz* in reference to peering through a lattice). Similarly, Rabbi Wertheimer writes that this word refers to “looking” in a situation where one’s field of vision is somewhat

constricted. In English, we call this “peeking”.

Rabbi Wertheimer writes that in contradistinction to *mashkif*, *mashgiach* always has a good connotation. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935-2017) explains that the verb *mashgiach* does not refer to somebody who simply watches, but to somebody who *actively* watches. When he sees something that requires intervention, the *mashgiach* does not hesitate to take action and rectify the situation. This is comparable to word *hashgachah* which is used to describe G-d’s administrative role in creation. He does not simply watch creation as a passive *deus otiosus* (Latin for “god at rest”), but actively affects the world’s events according to His will.

Ellyu Nishmat my mother Bracha bat R’ Dovid
and my grandmother Shprintza bat R’ Meir

Letter & Spirit

Insights based on the writings of Rav S. R. Hirsch

BY RABBI YOSEF HERSHMAN

Circumcised and Circumscribed

Our Torah portion opens with a weakened 99 year old Avraham, sitting in the scorching sun, desperate to find wayfarers to invite into his tent. Avraham had just performed the very first mitzvah that will be binding on his children, the mitzvah that will serve as the sign of G-d's eternal covenant with the Jew — *Brit Milah*.

The preamble to this mitzvah tells us a great deal about its purpose. “*I am E-L SHA-DAI conduct yourself before My Countenance and become complete.*” Then, even before the symbolic act of the covenant is presented to him, Avraham is told two things: This is an exclusive covenant between G-d and his children, and that by accepting this covenant he will become the father of a multitude of nations.

The requirement to be *tamim*, complete, is introduced with the words “*I am E-L SHA-DAI.*” There is a close tie between that name of G-d and the demand G-d makes of man. “*Sha-dai*” is an abbreviation for “*ani hu she'amarti l'olami 'dai*” (“I am the One Who said to My world: It is enough!”) G-d did not create the world and allow it to expand and evolve unchecked. Rather, He still stands above the world and its elements and has ordained the “Enough!” over all of these forces and their effects. He sets the extent, the duration and the limitations for everything.

Avraham is instructed to act accordingly. He is not told *halach*, “walk” before Me, but rather *hit'halech*, “conduct yourself” before My Countenance. Do not just go in the way of your drives and passions, but purposefully conduct yourself, in order that you may become *tamim*, complete. The root *taf-mem* expresses both perfection (as in *ish tam*) and cessation (as in *yitamu chata'im*). Rav Hirsch explains this peculiarity: that which is truly perfect can be only “one” thing, so that anything that is to be truly perfect, truly “one,” must have ceased to exist as anything else. Thus, there are no contradictions in the character of a *tamim*; every aspect of his existence, and all of his

relationships, are disciplined in one direction only. To those aspects that do not comport with his goal, he instructs: Cease! Enough! To achieve this, one must “conduct” and direct his behaviour. Only then can its unity of purpose be achieved.

The symbolic act of *milah* serves as an ever-present reminder of this duty. Control over our physical bodies and desires is to be the basic condition of the covenant. We are to rise freely above our sensuality, to be a master over it, and to continually declare “Enough!” We are to counter it with measure and moderation, with reason and restraint. We are to circumscribe our physical selves.

While we are to circumscribe our physical drives to achieve perfection, we are not to circumscribe ourselves from the rest of humanity. Where does Avraham sit after his *brit milah*? In the groves of Mamre! He is still with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. His relationship to mankind has not changed. Moreover, he is greatly distressed that he may not have the opportunity to host guests — and he could not have expected anyone other than uncircumcised idolaters. And what a reception they received! The finest fresh food, prepared with great haste by Avraham, his wife and his son.

The juxtaposition to *milah* is not coincidental. The people of Avraham, although isolated by circumcision, are not to cut themselves off from the rest of humanity. While they are a contrast to the rest of the world, they are ready to realize every universal human value. Indeed, by their very self-circumscription, they become a force of moral spirit to uplift a multitude of nations. As the children of Avraham, the *bnei brit*, may we live up to the standard taught by *brit milah*, and as models of self-restraint, may we then fulfill our mandate to be a light unto the nations.

• *Commentary to Bereishet 18:1, Collected Writings II, Milah, pp. 66-80*

BY RABBI ZE'EV KRAINES

The “Skinny” on Skin

Mezuzot, like Torah scrolls and tefillin, must be written on specially prepared animal hides. Historically, the skins of goats, calves, sheep and even deer have been used. (You can snag an antique deerskin Torah scroll on eBay for just \$49k!) Vellum, made from the skins of unborn calves, is prized for its smoothness and pliability. Some also suggest that since it has not entered into our corrupt world nor tasted its pleasures, it symbolizes spiritual innocence and purity. Until recently vellum was a rare commodity, but nowadays, the massive cattle ranges of the American Midwest provide “yippy-ay-oh” choice-grade vellum aplenty for scrolls worldwide. The animal does not need to be kosher slaughtered; it just needs to be from a kosher species.

Of course, the rawhide must be prepared for writing through a tanning process. According to present-day practice, the hides are first soaked in water and then tanned in limewash for a number of days until their hair falls off. They are then hung to dry, soaked again, and stretched on a wooden frame to dry.

A Jew must be physically involved in the process and have intention to dedicate the skins for their holy purpose. The extent of that involvement is a matter of halachic controversy: some authorities allow the use of machinery after a certain point, while others insist that it be purely hand-made. Because of these considerations and others, nowadays *sofrim* only write on parchment that is produced under rabbinic supervision.

Originally, after the tanning process, the outer hide (epidermis) was split from the inner fleshy skin (dermis) and the revealed surfaces were prepared for their various scribal purposes. This “splitting” is the reason

why the Hebrew word for our parchment is *klaf* (split).

There are three layers of the split hide. The top layer just below the hair is called *gvil*, the layer beneath is called *klaf*, and the lowest layer, against the flesh, is called *duchsustus*. Torah scrolls may be written on *gvil* or *klaf*, although the use of *gvil* for Torah scrolls is very uncommon today. Tefillin and mezuzahs are written exclusively on *klaf*.

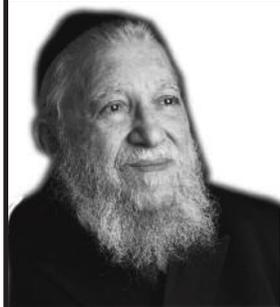
Nowadays, for a variety of reasons, the hide is not split. Rather, the soft flesh of the hide is scraped away, and the mezuzah script is written on the epidermis' inner surface.

The resulting parchment has a non-uniform, grayish surface with natural markings. Unfortunately, a great deal of cheap substandard *mezuzot* on the market are then “smeared” with glossy white paint to make it easier and quicker to write on them. Aside from the fact that many authorities do not consider such a coated mezuzah surface kosher to begin with, there is also the problem that once the parchment is folded to be put in a case, the coating usually cracks, destroying some of the letters and rendering the mezuzah “non-kosher.” Even if this does not happen immediately, eventually sunlight and humidity will almost surely cause this painted surface to dry and crack.

Not surprisingly, these cheap scrolls are usually written hurriedly and carelessly and do not pass halachic inspection. For these reasons and others it is important to purchase one's *mezuzot* and tefillin from a *sofer* or a reputable merchant. Caveat emptor!

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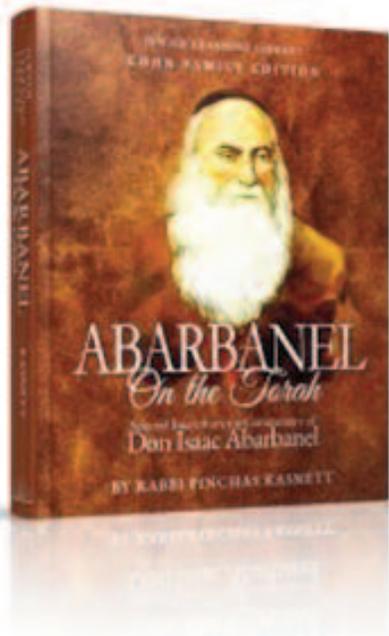
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