

SEPHARDIC COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

QOL HA'QAHAL

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DEDICATED IN LOVING MEMORY OF MR. NATHAN MANN A"H





*Dedicated in Loving Memory of
Mr. Nathan Mann A"H*

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QOL HA'QAHAL MISSION

To promote Torah throughout our community by providing a platform for our rabbis, students and institutions.

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Cover Art: Cairo, Egypt - Giza. General view of pyramids from the Giza Plateau. The Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur is on the UNESCO World Heritage List and are one of the world's most amazing achievements. Built during the reign of Cheops, around 2530 B.C., the largest pyramid towers nearly 500 feet high and covers 13 acres.



Parashat Vayigash

DEFEND YOUR LIFE!

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

כי איך אעלה אל אבי והנער איננו אתי? פן אראה ברע אשר ימצא את אבי!

How will I ascend to my father without the lad? I will not be able to witness the harm befalling my father! (Gen 44:34. Judah son of Jacob to the Egyptian viceroy, circa 3,800 BCE)

“We are humans and we are bound to make wrong decisions, be it for fear, anger, greed, or arrogance, but we should not let our mistakes trap us.”

The story of Joseph and his brothers is arguably the greatest biblical saga, culminating in the dramatic encounter at the viceroy's palace, as Joseph, unable to continue his façade and choked to tears following Judah's passionate defense of Benjamin and his pleading on behalf of his old father, finally reveals his true identity to his brothers:

אני יוסף! העוד אבי חי?

It is I, Joseph! Is my father still alive? (Gen 45:3)

We readers, at the edge of our seat following this saga, are now somewhat disappointed by the anticlimactic reaction of the brothers:

ולא יכלו אחיו לענות אותו כי נבהלו מפניו.

Terrified of him, the brothers remained speechless (Gen 45:3).

That's it. No hugs. No kisses. No tears. No melodramatic confessions and regrets. Just terrified silence.

“Well,” we say, “it is momentary shock, they'll get to it.”

Oh, but they don't. Joseph now launches one of the longest monologues in the Torah (123 words), absolving his brothers of the responsibility for his exile and enslavement, and promising to take care of them and their families. As he concludes his soliloquy, he embraces and kisses Benjamin, crying on his shoulders. And Benjamin returns his lost brother's affection:

ויפול על צוארי בנימין אחיו ויבך ובנימין בכה על צואריו.

With that he embraced (lit. fell on) his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck (Gen 45:14).

Joseph then turns to his brothers with tears and kisses:

וינשק לכל אחיו ויבך עליהם.

He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them (Gen 45:15).

But unlike Benjamin they don't respond affectionately:

ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו.

Only then were his brothers able to talk to him (Gen 45:15).

In other words: once the drama was over, his brothers spoke with him. Spoke with him? Casually? What were they saying: You got a nice tan? How was jail? No way, twelve years a slave?

The content of their conversation is obviously of no importance or the Torah would have recorded it for future generations. So we must honestly ask: What happened to them? Why are they so apathetic? Have they no emotions or are they upset that the viceroy, who turned out to be their brother, caused them so much strife?

The rabbis answer this question:

אוי לנו מיום הדין! אוי לנו מיום התוכחה! (בראשית רבה, ויגש צג:י)

Woe to us from the Day of Judgment! Woe to us from the Day of Reproach!

The brothers, say the rabbis, were not afraid of Joseph but rather of what his reappearance meant for them. They are petrified because they too have their demons, to admit they committed a grave mistake, and to chalk off the last twenty two years of their lives as years emptied and distorted by their wrongdoing.

“But”, we ask, “haven’t they already expressed their remorse when they were imprisoned by Joseph and had some time to contemplate their actions?” Yes, indeed. The Torah recounts their conversation:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו: אַבְל אֲשֶׁמִּים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אֲחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרָתוֹ נִפְשׁוּ בְּהַתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלָינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ

They said to each other: we truly deserve punishment for our brother, for we have seen his suffering when he was pleading with us and we would not listen (Gen 42:21).

The midrash quoted above reveals that it was not true remorse. Had it been, the first thing they would have done when they came back to Canaan is sit with their father and tell him the truth about what they did to Joseph and to him, followed by organizing expeditions to look for their lost brother. They didn’t, and remorse which does not lead to action and amendments is rendered null and void. Yet there is another fleeting moment of regret, a moment which reveals the haunting burden of an ancient sin which looms large in the brothers’ apparently tranquil life. It is the knowledge that they have wronged their brother and father and the feeling that their father knows or suspects. It happens when Joseph’s servant accuses them of stealing his master’s silver goblet, to which they answer:

מָה נֹאמֵר לְאֲדֹנָי, מָה נִדְבֵּר וּמָה נִצְטָדֵק

How can we answer our master? How can we speak or how can we justify ourselves? (Gen 44:16)

They are apparently talking about their current predicament, but their subconscious is taking them back to the moment of anger, in which they have thrown Joseph into the pit and walked away, ignoring his crying and his pleas.

How many lost, sleepless nights have they accumulated? Did they hear his voice boring in their ears across time and space? Did he call out their names: Reuben, Simon, Levy, Judah...? Did he remind them that they are brothers? Did he scream out “What about Dad? It will kill him!”?

We will never know. They walked away, but his voice stayed with them, and with it the guilt.

They now unwillingly confess to a total stranger, blurting out what has been choking them for years: our sin is out in the open! God has exposed us!

הָאֱלֹקִים מִצָּא אֶת עֲוֹן עַבְדֶּיךָ

God has uncovered the crime of your servants (Gen 44:16)

Their subconscious, for a second, was peeking through the cracks of their mental armor, but they pushed it back in, returned to Egypt and faced the viceroy, with Judah at the lead, delivering a fiery speech and invoking the ruler’s emotions as he mentions the old father, waiting in despair for his youngest son to return home safely.

But when Joseph presents himself and asks if his father is still alive, the true meaning of his words crushes them as they realize that they have been misleading themselves all these years. They cannot argue that they need Benjamin to return for their father’s sake because by selling Joseph they have cruelly ripped the old man’s heart from his chest. The simple words Joseph uttered in order to reveal his identity were interpreted by them thus: I am Joseph! Is my father still alive after all you did to him?

Many years ago, standing at the empty pit, they could have argued that their act was a crime of passion, that in the heat of the moment they did not know what they were doing and that when they finally came back to their senses and wanted to pull Joseph out of the pit they found out that he was already gone, sold by one tribe of nomads to another. In their covert discussions over the years, of their actions on that fateful day, they probably said that. Nothing, though, could justify what they did to their father. Anyone who knows, or is a bereaved parent, could attest that there is no greater pain. For Jacob who saw in Joseph the reflection of Rachel, his beloved, first, and only wife, the pain was unbearable. Can you visualize the scene of the blood-stained striped robe being handed to Jacob, who almost loses his mind? How could they see Jacob, bereft, mourning, depleted, and keep the truth from him? How could they have lived with the guilt and the shame? How could they bare his gaze, resting upon them momentarily, searching for answers? Did they not hear how he was voicelessly accusing them, pleading with them, begging to know what has happened to his son?

The answer, as they now realized when they were facing Joseph, was that initially they were afraid, afraid of telling the truth and taking responsibility, but eventually they were unable to go back and undo their actions because that would have meant admitting that they were wrong. In the first moment of shock after Joseph’s disappearance they decided to deceive their father, and with each following year, despite the tension and the silent accusations, they felt safer in the path they chose and the habit into which they fell: “If I wanted to tell him, I should have done it years ago, but now it is too late!”

Only when Joseph said “It is I, Joseph! Is my father still alive?” did they realize that they were misleading themselves, and as the Rabbis said, they were standing judgment, trying to defend their lives, with no good arguments. There is no such thing as a foolproof life. We are humans and we are bound to make wrong decisions, be it for fear, anger, greed, or arrogance, but we should not let our mistakes trap us. I have met, and counseled, many people who would prefer having miserable relationships, morose life, inadequate jobs, and unsatisfying careers, over having to confront their errors and say “this is not how I want to live my life!”

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Parashat Vayhi

TRANSFERRING ZEKHUT: יששכר וזבולון

Rabbi Moses Haber - Heshvan 5775

In memory of Rabbi Ezra Labaton z"l

Who taught me that the process of searching is as rewarding as the reward itself!

The first time I questioned the possibility of transferring one's merit/ *zekhut* to another, was as a young Rabbi, several years ago. A fellow congregant approached me one morning after *shaharit*, informing me he was in his year of *abelut* for his father and he had to go on a trip with no access to a minyan. He asked if I could 'take over' saying kaddish for him until he returned. Not knowing how to respond, and definitely sure that I didn't want to upset someone in mourning, I accepted the task and fulfilled his request. Over the course of time, these requests came regularly which motivated me to investigate the broader issue at hand, can one effectively transfer one's merit/reward by fulfilling another's obligation/ *חייב* in the first place? Specifically and maybe most importantly, when dealing with the *misva* of Talmud Torah. Can one person fulfill this *misva* on behalf of another and then subsequently forward the merit/ *zekhut* received to another person?

An early hint of the feasibility of doing so comes from a story we are familiar with. At the end of Sefer Beresheet, Ya'qob Abinu, before his passing, grants a blessing to each of his sons. Beresheet (ch. 49)

א וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֶאֱסֹפוּ וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים[...]

יג זְבֻלֹן לְחוּף יָמִים יִשְׁכֵּן וְהוּא לְחוּף אֲנִית וְיִרְכָּתוּ עַל-צִידוֹ:

יד יִשְׁשַׁכָּר חֲמֹר גֶּרֶם רִבֵּץ בֵּין הַמְּשָׁפָּתִים:

טו וַיִּרָא מְנַחָה כִּי טוֹב וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ כִּי נַעֲמָה וַיַּט שִׁכְמוֹ לְסִבְלָן וַיְהִי לְמַס עֲבָד:

1 And Jacob called unto his sons, and said: 'Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days. [...]

13 Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, and he shall be a shore for ships, and his flank shall be upon Zidon.

14 Issachar is a large-boned donkey, couching down between the sheep-folds.

15 For he saw a resting-place that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant under task-work

As the Rabbis often do, meaning is derived from *pesuqim* which are in close proximity to each other.¹ A very early *midrash* (5th cent.) spells out the conclusion we are to come away with in our case of the berakhot of Yisachar and Zebulun:

י(ג) "זבולן לחוף ימים ישכון" בסחורתו, ויששכר בתורתו, זה עם זה שותפין בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא

13 "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea" with his business, and Yisachar with his Torah. Together, partners in this world and in the world to come. (Beresheet Rabbah, Vayhi 97)

The proximity of the *pesuqim* hint to the significance of a reciprocal relationship between the two brothers. To which, a partnership is formed that allows both brothers to gain from the investments of the other. Zebulun who dwells on the coast in a port city is blessed with financial success in the shipping industry while Yisachar is blessed with success in Torah. When shared, both blessings lead to the mutual benefit of both parties; in the world of today (financially) as well as in the world to come (spiritually).

Another Midrash comes to a similar conclusion: (Beresheet Rabbah, Parashat Vayhi ch. 99)

ט (מט, יג) "זבולן לחוף ימים ישכון," הרי זבולן קדם ליששכר, שכן מייחסן יששכר וזבולן, ולמה כן? אלא שהיה זבולן עוסק בפרקמטיא ויששכר עוסק בתורה,

וזבולן בא ומאכילו לפיכך קדמו, עליו אמר הכתוב (משלי ג) “עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה,” יששכר כונס וזבולון מביא באניות ומוכר ומביא לו כל צרכו, וכן 1אומר (דברים לג) “שִׂמְחָה זְבוּלֹן בְּצִאתָהּ; וַיִּשְׁכֹּר, בְּאַהֲלֶיהָ,” למה “ש”יששכר באהליך” שלך הן? שאת מסייעו לישב בהן. 2משה

Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea,” indeed, Zebulun before Yisachar, because in their lineage it is Yisachar, Zebulun. And why is it so? But rather, Zebulun was involved with merchandise and Yisachar was involved with Torah, and Zebulun would come and feed him. Therefore, he was listed first. About him said the verse (Mishlei 3:18) “she is a tree of life to those who grasp her.” Yisachar gathers and Zebulun bring on ships and sells and brings him all that he needs. And as Moshe said, (Debarim 33:18) “rejoice Zebulun on your journeys, and Yisachar in your tents.” Why Yisachar in his tents, they are yours? You aid him to sit in them.

“Most important to this conversation, is the need of a serious analysis of the purpose of the entire corpus of commandments. Are the misvot ‘a means to an end’ or an ‘end in themselves.’”

This *midrash* asks why Zebulun is mentioned before Yisachar in the sequence of the berakhot. Confirming the message of the first *midrash* cited, Zebulun will deal in trade and Yisachar in Torah. Zebulun who would sustain Yisachar financially while learning, is honored by being placed first in the order of the blessings. Similar *midrashim* abound!³

Adding to the previous *midrash*, we are introduced to another set of blessing given to the brothers, by none other than Moshe Rabbeinu himself in his speech to the nation in *parashat veZot HaBerakha* who also inverts the order of the sons.

יח וְלִזְבוּלֹן אָמַר שִׂמְחָה זְבוּלֹן בְּצִאתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכֹּר בְּאַהֲלֶיהָ:

יט עַמִּים הָרַקְרָאוּ שָׁם יִזְבְּחוּ וְזָבְחֵי-צֶדֶק כִּי שָׁפַע יָמִים יִנְקוּ וְשָׁפְנֵי טְמוּנֵי חוֹל: (דב' לג)

18 And of Zebulun he said: Rejoice, Zebulun, in thy going out, and, Issachar, in thy tents.

19 They shall call peoples unto the mountain; there shall they offer sacrifices of righteousness; for they shall suck the abundance of the seas, and the hidden treasures of the sand. (Debarim 33)

The relationship between the two brothers seems even stronger now, many years later in Sefer Debarim, than in Sefer Beresheet. No longer are both *berakhot* just listed next to each other, now both blessing are stated in a single *pasuq*.

Similarly, in the following *midrash*, the order of the blessings are given significance. Again, Moshe changes the order of the blessing to hint at the merit/reward received by Zebulun for sustaining his brother's important work in his tent (namely, the learning of Torah). This *midrash* takes the extra step by showing the etymology of Yisachar's name, which can be defined quite literally, ‘there is’ (יש) ‘reward’ (שכר).⁴

וכל השבח הזה מנין היה לו ליששכר? משל זבולן. שהיה עוסק בפרגמטיא שלו ומאכיל את יששכר שהיה בן תורה. הה”ד (בראשית מט) “זבולן לחוף ימים ישכון,” וכשבא משה לברך את השבטים הקדים זבולן לברכת יששכר (דברים לג) “שמח זבולן בצאתך ויששכר באהליך,” שמח זבולן בצאתך ממה באהלי זבולן [read: ‘יש’ ‘שכר’] ויש אומרים יששכר.

And all this praise, from where did Yisachar earn it? From Zebulun, who was involved in his business and would sustain Yisachar who was a son of Torah. That is what is written, (Beresheet 49:13) Zebulun shall dwell by the sea shore.” And when Moses came to bless the tribes, he placed the blessing of Zebulun before the blessing on Yisachar (Debarim 33:1), “Zebulun rejoice on your journeys and Yisachar in your tents.” Zebulun, be rejoice in your journeys how Yisachar is in your tent. And there are those who say Yisachar, “yesh” (there is), “sachar” (reward), in the tents of Zebulun.

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Taking an entirely different approach to the relationship of the two brothers, a later *Midrash* (Yalqut Shimoni, Vayhi), draws significance from the spatial placement of the tribes as they camped in the desert.

אשרי הצדיק ואשרי שכונותיו. יהודה ויששכר וזבולון שהיו סמוכין לאהרן ולמשה שנאמר "והחונים לפני המשכן קדמה לפני וגו'" נעשו גדולים בתורה שנאמר "יהודה מחוקקי", וכן מבני יששכר "יודעי בינה לעתים" ומזבולון "מושכים בשבט סופר"...

Praised in the righteous individual and praised are his neighbors. Judah, Yisachar and Zebulun who were near Aharon and Moshe, as it says, "those who were to camp before the tabernacle in front etc... (Bemidbar 3:38) were made knowledgeable in the Torah as it says, Judah my scepter (Tehillim 60:9), and similarly from the children of Yisachar, "men who knew who to interpret the signs of the times (Dibrei HaYamim I 12:33), and from Zebulun, "such as hold the marshal's staff" (Shofetim 5:14)...

Here, importance is placed not on a reciprocal relationship resulting in a mutual benefit, but rather the benefit of having good neighbors as it states 'praised is the righteous and praised is his neighbor.' Both Yisachar and Zebulun (and Yehuda) encamped close to Moshe and Aharon and became great in Torah, due to their proximity to them.

Clearly, while the principle '*ain mikra yose mide peshuto*'⁵ (a verse does not leave the realm of the apparent meaning) is recognized, the *Hakhme HaMidrash* thought it is didactically useful to show a relationship between these two brothers. They do this either to teach us the importance of 'sharing the burden' when it comes to the physical and spiritual necessities of life or to teach the importance of choosing good neighbors.⁶

It is doubtful that *Hakhme HaMidrash* wanted us to go too far when applying the concept of Yisachar and Zebulun, when placed in context of certain principles of halakha. Three come to mind: שליח של אדם כמותו, יצא מוציא, שומע כעונה.

1. 'hearing is like answering' is the principle where one can fulfill one's own obligation by listening to another fulfill theirs. An example, is the recitation of the *hazan* of the *berakha* on the *shofar* (שומע קול שופר) which is read out loud by the *hazan* while affirmed by the congregation. Because the *hazan* and the congregation both intend to have each other in mind, the *hazan* fulfills the congregation's requirement of saying the *berakha* on the *shofar*. This also applies to the saying of *halel*, *kedusha*, or *kadish*.⁷ If one cannot read it on his own, his obligation can be fulfilled through another's reading of it.

2. 'one who has already fulfilled a *misva* can fulfill another's *misva* as well.' This principle states that a person who has already completed his obligation of a *misva* can assist another in fulfilling his/her obligation as well. An example of this is reading the *megilla* on Purim. A *hazan* who already fulfilled his obligation to 'read' the *megilla* (על), (מקרא מגילה), is permitted to read it again to fulfill another's obligation.

The common denominator of the two principles listed above is that both parties need to be in the vicinity of each other during the performance of the *misva* at hand. No one should assume that another can 'hear' the *shofar* or 'read' the *megilla* for them if they are not present as well.

3. 'a person's messenger is as himself.' This concept at first look, seems like it can support a relationship where the person who sponsors a 'learner' can receive the learners merit / *zekhut* for doing so. An example used in the Talmud of שליח של אדם כמותו is one of marriage⁸ where a person assigns a messenger, שליח, to 'marry' a woman on his behalf (similar to the case of Abraham sending his slave to find a bride for Yishaq).

Once again, one cannot conclude from this example the possibility of the messenger himself (especially the father) of receiving the merit / *zekhut* of the *misva* of *kiddushin* in this case. Rather, the messenger acts on behalf of the groom to submit and bind the groom's proposal of betrothal to the bride.

Interestingly, the question we are dealing with, has already been asked by Maharam Alashkar (Rabbi Moshe Alashkar, 15th-16th cent. Egypt):⁹

עוד שאלת, אם יש ממש באותן שמוכרין זכויותיהן זה לזה. אם זכה הקונה או הפסיד המוכר. ואם פעולה זו יש לה עיקר?

Further you asked, is there is something for those who sell their merits one to another. Did the buyer gain or the seller lose, and does this practice have a root?

In his response, he quotes at length, from a response of Rav Hai Gaon (10th-11th cent. Pumpedita).

Responsa of the Geonim (new version) ch. 147

כי דברים אלו דברי הבל שאין לסמוך עליהן! ואיך יעלה על לב כי שכרו של זה של מעשים טובים שעשה זה לזה? והלא הכתוב אומר "צדקת הצדיק עליו תהיה" (יחזקאל יח:כ) וכן אמר "ורשעת הרשע עליו תהיה" כשם שאין אדם נתפס בעון זולתו, כך אין אדם זוכה בזכות זולתו. היחשוב כי מתן שכר של מצות דבר שישאהו אדם בחיקו וילך כדי שיתן זה מתן שכרו לזה. אלו ידעו מה הוא השכר לא היה זה נותנו לזה ולא זה מקבלו מזה... כל אחד ואחד מעלתו לפי מעשיו כמו שכתוב "ושבתם וראיתם בין צדיק לרשע וגו'" (מלאכי ג:יח)...

These words are words of vanity, and one should not rely on them! How can it be, that the merit of the person who does good deeds be given to the other who does none?" For doesn't it say "the righteousness of the *sadik* will be on him (Ezek 18:20)... Do you think that the merit received for fulfilling a commandment is like something you carry in pocket and consider who to give it to? If you knew what merit was, you wouldn't sell it and the other wouldn't receive it. Every person's greatness is according to his own actions, as it says "Then shall you again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serves God and him that serves Him not" (Mal 3:18).

"The proximity of the pesuqim hint to the significance of a reciprocal relationship between the two brothers."

In a serious tone, as cited below, Rav Hai Gaon concludes his response by stating, that in reality the one who accepted the money for fasting, did not fast for God but rather for his own financial benefit and will merit punishment instead of reward.

He continues: וזה השוטה שמכר תעניתו אכלה כלבא לשירותיה. מה שכר יש לו לפני השם ית' וכבר נטל דמים זה לא ליי' ישב בתענית אלא סגף עצמו ונפשו באותן הדמים. והוא קרוב לקבל פורענות מלקבל שכר. כי עשה שם שמים פלסתר וכקדרום לאכול בה לחם.

and this silly person...what merit does he have before God? When he took money for mortifying himself by fasting, he did not do it for God but for himself. He should receive a punishment instead of merit, for he used the Torah as a tool, with which to feed himself.

In conclusion, all men have the obligation of Talmud Torah:

Rambam's listing of the Positive Commandments

ז:ו קרפ מירבד, דִּינְבֵּל פִּתְגוּשׁוֹ, רִמְאָנֶשׁ, הִדְמִלְלוּ הָרוֹת דְּמִלְל 12

To study Torah and teach it as it says, "and you shall teach your children" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Rambam Laws of Talmud Torah ch. 1

כָּל אִישׁ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, חַיִּב בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה: בֵּין עָנִי בֵּין עָשִׁיר, בֵּין שְׁלֵם בְּגוּפוֹ בֵּין בְּעַל יְסוּרֵינוּ, בֵּין בַּחֲזוֹר בֵּין שֶׁהֵיָה זָקֵן גָּדוֹל שֶׁתִּשֵּׁשׁ כּוּחוֹ, אִפְּלוּ עָנִי הַמְּחֻזָּר עַל 7. הַפְתָּחִים, וְאִפְּלוּ בְּעַל אִשָּׁה וּבָנִים-חַיִּב לְקַבֵּעַ לוֹ זְמַן לְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר "וְהִגִּיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה" (יהושוע א,ח).



R' Hai Gaon was the head of the Talmudic Academy of Pumbedita during the era of the Abbasid Caliphate, where the modern city of Fallujah, Iraq is located.

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Every Jewish man is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether his body is healthy or he is afflicted by difficulties, whether he is a young man or an elderly whose strength has diminished. Even a poor person who collects charity, and even a husband and father, must set times for himself to study Torah during the day and the night, as it says, “recite day and night” (Joshua 1:8).

According to the Rambam’s understanding of the *misva*, all men have an obligation to learn Torah, no matter what his personal financial situation is (wealthy or poor) condition of health or age. No dispensation is offered to hire someone to fulfill one’s own obligation for studying Torah. Relinquishing one’s own obligation with the intention of having someone else perform it for you, is questionable at best. This limitation extends, even when speaking about the obligation of a father who is obligated to teach his child Torah. While the *halakha* allows for the hiring of a teacher for his child,¹⁰ the father cannot abrogate his responsibility entirely. For even when one pays a hefty tuition for weekly Torah classes, on days such as Sundays, winter and summer vacations the obligation returns to the father to teach his son Torah.

Most important to this conversation, is the need of a serious analysis of the purpose of the entire corpus of commandments. Are the *misvot* a ‘means to an end’ or an ‘end in themselves.’ Those of us who see the *misvot* as a ‘means to the end’ of becoming the most perfect person through the study and performance of *misvot*, cannot except the efficacy of a system that allows another to study and perform the *misvot* for another. For then no change occurs to person himself. Nor do I think the *midrashim* cited above want us to extend the lesson of Yisachar and Zebulun to this end. The responsibility of establishing fixed times for the Torah, קובע עתים לתורה, applies to each member of our people. Through the study of the Torah and performance of the *misvot*, our people come to learn proper ideas, and traits for the betterment of ourselves and society at large.¹¹ Only if we all do so ‘individually,’ as members of a larger group, can we hope to achieve status of an עם קדוש, a sanctified nation.

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¹ Examples of *semikhat pesukim* can be found very often in Rashi. Traditionally this literary device is used to hint to meaning within a larger context.

² See Ber. 30:16-20, 35:23, 46:13,14. Yisachar is the fifth child of Leah and Zebulun is the sixth.

³ בראשית רבה פרשת ויחי פרשה צט

י (מט, יד) יששכר חמור גרם, יששכר מביא בחמור וזבולון באניות שנאמר והוא לחוף אניות. ד"א יששכר חמור גרם, חמור גרם אותו וכי מגין היתה לאה יודעת שבא יעקב? אלא נהק החמור ושמעה קולו ויצאת לקראתו. ד"א יששכר חמור גרם, כשם שהחמור טוען את המשא כך יששכר טוען את התורה, רובץ בין המשפטים, אלו התלמידים שיושבים בארץ לפני חכמים, שנאמר (תהלים סח) "אם תשכון בין שפתים", וירא מנוחה כי טוב, זו תורה, דכתיב (משלי ד) "כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם", ויהי למס עובד, מהו מס זו? הלכה שהיו טועים בה היו מבקשים מידם, וכן הוא אומר (שופטים ה) "בעמק שלח ברגליו", בעומקה שללכה.

⁴ It is interesting to note, that this is the true etymology of the fifth sons name according to the *peshat* itself. Recall that Rachel requests the *dudaim* from Leah in exchange for the opportunity to sleep with Ya'qob. The child that is the fruit of this opportunity in none other than, Yisachar!

⁵ The *peshat* itself is clear about the vocation of Yisachar. As cited above נָתַשׁ שְׁכָמוֹ לְסִבְלָהּ, וְיָהִי לְמַס־עֲבָד trans. "and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant under task-work".

⁶ How far the *Midrash* wanted us to take the first message seems to be the point currently being contested in Israel, in dealing with the draft into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) of those who wish to learn Torah, at the exclusion of all else.

⁷ Rashi, Sukkah 38:

⁸ רמב"ם הלכות אישות ג"ד-י"ט

⁹ Cited in Menahem Kasher, Torah Shelema vol. 1 page 1819, footnote # 193. Special thanks is given to the members of the Sephardic Rabbinical College for this set of books upon my wedding. Much of this essay is based on the footnote previously cited.

¹⁰ רמב"ם הלכות ת"ת א:ז

¹¹ Rambam MN III:13

PARASHAT VAYIGASH - UNDERSTANDING MIDRASH

Mr. Leo Esses

Joseph and Judah and the *Midrash*

In the final confrontation between Joseph and Judah, before Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, Judah, aware of who he is standing in front of, and the life threatening situation he and his brother are in, is extremely polite and only indirectly hints at the injustice that Joseph has done to them. The *midrash*, however, records the same confrontation in quite a different fashion:

Judah said to Joseph: "From the very beginning you came to us with false accusations. First you told us we were spies...then you accused us of stealing your goblet...if I take out my sword, I will fill all of Egypt with corpses."

Joseph replied: "If you take out your sword then I will wrap it around your neck."

Judah: "If I open my mouth, I will swallow you up."

Joseph: "If you open up your mouth, I will close it with a stone..."

Judah: "You have judged crookedly regarding us."

Joseph: "Crookedness is for those who are crooked. There is greater corruption of justice than the selling of your brother."

Judah: "The fire of Shechem burns within me."

Joseph: "It is the fire of Tamar, your daughter in law...I will put it out!"

Judah: "Now I will dye all of the marketplaces in Egypt with blood."

Joseph: "You were dyers before, when you dyed your brothers coat in blood and said to your father, 'he is torn in pieces.'"¹

Judah called to his brother Naphtalie and said: "Go see how many markets there are in Egypt."

Naphtalie leapt forth (instantaneously) throughout all of Egypt and returned. "Twelve," he said.

Judah turned to his brothers: "I'll wipe out three of them, and the rest of you will take one market each and spare no one."

His brothers replied: "Judah, Egypt is not Shechem. If you destroy Egypt, then you are destroying the world."²

How are we to understand these texts in conjunction with Judah's monologue in the *humash*? Did this conversation between Joseph and Judah actually take place? Was Naphtalie able to travel throughout all of Egypt in a flash? Were Judah and his brothers really capable of wiping out Egypt by themselves?

Did Judah really threaten to kill Joseph and all of Egypt? What are the Rabbis of the *midrash* trying to tell us?

The *midrash*, which comments on almost every word of the Torah, has become so intrinsically interwoven with the actual biblical text that rarely, if ever, is an explanation given on any sentence, conversation, or event in the *humash*, which does not incorporate some of its ideas. Seldom is a Torah class given or an article on *humash* written that doesn't draw from a *midrash* to prove a point. The more general and important question thus becomes: how are we to look at and understand what the *midrashim* are really all about?

In his commentary on the Mishnah,³ the Rambam discusses at length this critical question:

It is important for you to know that there are three classes of thinkers who differ in their interpretation of the words of

the sages, of blessed memory.

The first class comprises of the majority...they understand the words of the sages literally and do not think there is any hidden meaning in them at all...To them, all the impossibilities are necessary occurrences. This class is poor in understanding and one should pity their foolishness...they think they are honoring and exalting the sages, but they are actually degrading them to the lowest depths. It is this class of thinkers that destroy the splendor of the Torah and darkens its brilliance. If only they would remain silent since they do not understand, or they might at least say, 'we do not know what the sages meant to convey by this statement, or how to interpret it.'

The second class is also numerous...they also understand the words of the sages literally. They call these statements foolish and slander that which should not be slandered. They consider themselves to be intellectuals and wise philosophers but these thinkers are even more stupid than the first class. It is a curse worthy of being cursed because they oppose men of great worth.

The third class of thinkers is comprised of so few it is hardly appropriate to call them a class. These are the individuals who have a clear conception of the greatness of the Sages and the excellence of their

"How precious these midrashim are that one can only bemoan the fact that for the most part the wisdom they contain remain undecipherable."

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Artist Rendition of Maimonides

intellect. They are also convinced that that which is impossible, is impossible and they know that the Sages, peace be on them, did not speak words of nonsense. It is also clear to them that their words have both superficial and deeper meanings and that all of their statements which speak of impossibilities were said in the manner of riddle and parable, for this is the method of the great sages. They interpret scriptural passages and remove them from their literal meaning by using parables.

He concludes:

If you belong to one of the first two classes do not pay any attention to my words because they will not be pleasant to you at all. They will harm you and you will despise them. But if you belong to the third class, when you come across their sayings which seems to conflict with reason, you will pause over it because you know that it is a riddle or parable. You worry about finding the truth and the correct interpretation.

The situation that the Rambam was deeply troubled with over 800 years ago still exists today. In the past several years, many English translations of the *humash* and *Tanakh* have been published, together with lengthy excerpts from the *midrashim*. These books have become increasingly popular and are widely read. The *midrashim* are quoted and are taken literally without any attempt to interpret or explain any deeper meaning as to what the Rabbis were trying to teach us. There are, however, serious minded individuals who are constantly seeking to fathom the Divine wisdom in our sacred Torah and the profound insights incorporated in the attendant *midrashim*. As

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such, they fall within the third class of thinkers, which the Rambam has described.

Nehama Liebowitz,⁴ one of the leading contemporary Bible commentators, provides us with a possible interpretation to the *midrashim* cited above. One that is more understandable and more meaningful than a simplistic literal one. One that attempts to teach us something about ourselves as well as impact our behavior. There really is no dialogue between Joseph and Judah taking place in these *midrashim*, she comments. Rather, the rabbis are depicting the conflict and anguish taking place within Judah himself.

When Judah says to Joseph "You have judged crookedly regarding us," and Joseph replies "Crookedness is for those who are crooked. There is greater corruption of justice than the selling of your brother." The rabbis are personifying Judah's conscience. The inner voice of remorse, which has plagued him at this turning of the tables, and reminding him of the injustice that he inflicted on Joseph.⁵ When Judah threatens Joseph about dyeing the markets of Egypt with blood, he is reminding himself about how he dyed Joseph's coat with blood. His guilt is so pervasive that he begins reminiscing about Tamar. That was another time in his life where he acted unjustly.

"The more general and important question thus becomes: how are we to look at and understand what the midrashim are really all about?"

Judah's monologue in the *humash* carefully proceeds point by point and builds up into a climax with Judah appealing to Joseph's conscience to have compassion for an old man with a broken spirit who has lost one of his sons. Similarly, in the *midrash* Judah's guilty conscience builds up and climaxes with Judah being so frustrated and overpowered with guilt that he threatens to wipe out all of Egypt, which as Naphtalie comments, would affect the entire world. In this beautiful *midrash*, our rabbis are teaching us in the most imaginative manner, that we are fully accountable for our actions, even with the passage of time. Unless we work towards improving and refining our character, any unjust deeds which we have done does not simply go away.

How precious these *midrashim* are that one can only bemoan the fact that for the most part the wisdom they contain remain undecipherable. Were we to understand and properly explain what our rabbis were trying to convey in employing the *midrashim*, we would be more worthy of that which is said about us as a nation;

For this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations which shall hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'⁶

Mr. Esses has studied at The Sephardic Institute For Advanced Learning and Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. He has been involved in Jewish Education for over 30 years.

¹ *Tanhuma Vayigash ch. 45*

² *Tanhuma Vayigash ch 44:5*

³ *Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah Sanhedrin, Introduction to Chapter 10*

⁴ *Studies in the book of Genesis; Vayigash: Vayigash 2 "The rope has followed the bucket" (World Zionist Organization, 1981).*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *Deuteronomy 4:6*

ISRAEL SPOTLIGHT

Mrs. Kady Harari

Dear Everyone,

This month marks the 15th year since our Aliya.

From an empty house with a tiny round plastic table in the middle of nothing and the window sill as a refrigerator, to 120 boxes later being emptied by our nephew Salomon and his friends, one of whom happened to be the future husband of our niece Michal (who soon followed us here!), to the hundreds upon hundreds of yeshiva kids and people who pass through these doors, to the *semachot* that we've had, to Sharon and Elie spending a year here, living through wars, intifadas, strikes, unity, solidarity, to Pesah with the Harari's, Yom Ha'asmaut BBQ's, watching niece after niece make aliya and then Mom H., to top it off, to our friends that we've made from all corners of the earth...

To list the highlights would be impossible, because a day doesn't pass without some kind of highlight. It is a *zechut*, a privilege, a blessing, a responsibility, an honor, to be able to say that we live in Israel. I thank God consciously, every day, for it.

Shabbat shalom,

Love, Kady Harari

Mrs. Harari lives in Jerusalem, Israel

MAQAM OF THE WEEK

Mr. David Betesh, DDS

For *Shabbat Vayigash* (Genesis 44:18-47:27), *Maqam Bayat* is applied to the prayers according to some sources. According to Arabic sources, the definition of the word '*Bayat*' is an oath of allegiance to an emir when one sells themselves and pledges their loyalty. In our case, the *Bayat* is performed by Judah, speaking on behalf of his brothers, who sells himself completely to Joseph (the emir) and declares loyalty to him. Similarly, *Maqam Bayat* is used at a *Bar Mivvah*, because one makes the *Bayat* commitment to observe the *misvot* and declare loyalty to God. According to other sources, *Maqam Mahour* (Shrem source) or *Sigah* (Damascus source) should be applied. *HAZZANUT* (Hacham Moshe Ashear): *Nishmat: Shabehu El Romemu* (page 243). *MISHMARA: Vayigash*, 2 Samuel 19-end, Psalms 107-119, *Mishnah Kelim*.

On *Shabbat Vayehi* (Genesis 47:28-50:26), *Maqam Hijaz*, which is named after the Arabian Peninsula, is applied to the prayers according to all Aleppo sources. According to the tradition of Aleppo, this *maqam* is reserved for sad events. It is warranted here, because we read about the death of Jacob. According to Hazzan Gabriel A Shrem A"H, *Maqam Bayat* should be mixed in with *Maqam Hijaz* in order to differentiate this from *Shabbat Hazon*, which is viewed as sadder. *PIZMON: Im Hakham Libekha Beni* (page 486). *ALIYOT*: The sixth aliyah (49:13-18) is reserved for a member of the *Bet Din* (Jewish court), because of the words "*Dan YaDin 'Amo*." In addition, the Blessing of Joseph (49:22-26) aliyah should be repeated many times. *MISHMARA: Vayehi*, 1 Kings 1-6, Psalms 120-136, *Mishnah Bekhorot*

Courtesy of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project, www.pizmonim.com



Sephardic History

PART II: CONVERSO ACTIVITY IN THE AMERICAS

Mrs. Natalie Mizrahi

Long before North American settlement, South America and the Caribbean proved to be the training ground of emancipation for the expelled Sepharadim. The center of trade would shift from the Indies to the New World. Spain, Portugal, England, and Holland all vied for an edge. As experienced international merchants, the Sepharadim, known as Portuguese Merchants in order to obscure their Jewish identities, would help tip the scales.

“As experienced international merchants, the Sepharadim, known as Portuguese Merchants in order to obscure their Jewish identities, would help tip the scales.”

Christopher Columbus, many believe, could have been a converso who happened to be an explorer. Speculation also holds that the Genoese captain was the illegitimate son of a Spanish Prince. Was he, in his heart seeking new lands for a possible Jewish mother's people? Many find the coincidence that his ships, after months of preparation, and even public ridicule for his proposed adventure, set sail on August 3, 1492, one day after the Jewish population was expelled from Spain.

What is known is that sailing with Columbus were some recent conversos. Luis de Torres and Rodrigo Sanchez who spoke Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaladean (Aramaic), and were to serve as translators once the boats reached Japan.¹ Sanchez was a relative of the treasurer of Aragon and appointed by Queen Isabella herself to serve as the voyage Superintendent or Veeder. Alonso de la Calle was a sailor of Jewish lineage, as was the ship's physician. Maestre Bernal was the ship's surgeon. The astronomical tables used on the expedition were the work of a then famous Jewish cartographer, Abraham Zacuto, in the hands of his pupil, an adherer of the Jewish faith.² Ostensibly, if Columbus had no interest in the Sephardim or the survival of Judaism, what were all these Jews doing on his ship?

In those days sailors were known to be superstitious. Every day, as the trade winds carried them west, they marked each half hour with the turning of the sand-glass and shouting prayers to the heavens to protect them. In this environment, perhaps Columbus was simply hedging his bets with the strange Hebrew initials (bet-heh) upon his ship's log- of which he interestingly kept two; one was personal, the other made public.

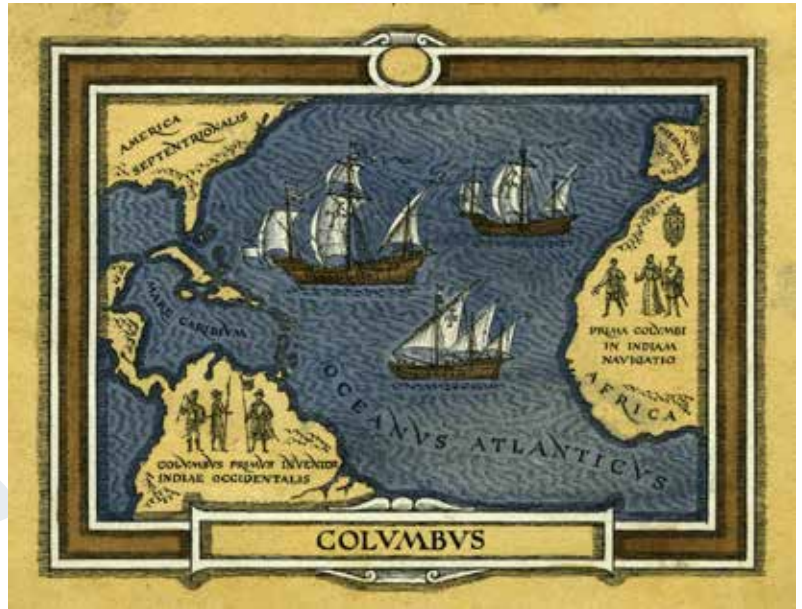
When the isles of the Caribbean were reached, the interpreters made slow headway with the indigenous natives. The Spanish priests among them however, worked fast. Crosses were planted all along the shores of the ships' route. Claimed for Christianity, unsuspecting and then resilient natives were burnt alive right from the start. One Aerowak chieftain, it was reported, refused the last minute baptism offered him before the funeral pyre. He was told, as was custom at every auto da fe that if he agreed to be baptized he would mercifully be strangled before being consumed by the fires. He would then have the honor of meeting Christ in heaven.

He told them, the commonly held story goes, “I do not want to meet any more Christians.”

On paper, New Christians were, for obvious reasons, prohibited from emigration to the Caribbean Isles, later termed New Spain (they might bolt). That didn't mean the population however, was not on the move. Portugal, when it allowed the Inquisition to operate there, saw massive numbers actually flee back over the border to Spain.³ In some cases, the populations of entire towns emptied. Over time, successful, middle-class New Christians were seen as an increasing threat to the landed aristocracy. In 1581 Spain and Portugal officially united and the last quarter of the 16th century witnessed an intensity of royal and ecclesiastical activity against crypto- Jews on account of the Protestant Reformation taking place in Northern Europe. As later documented by the Mexican Holy Office of the Inquisition, the descended progeny of those same towns show up in the Viceroyalty of New Spain in the Americas. In this the route of their Marrano grandfathers was revealed.⁴

In Mexico as in the Mother country, Inquisition fervor would wax during times of political or religious unrest, and then suddenly wane. For example, between 1589 and 1604 Mexican Inquisitors tried almost 200 individuals for the crime of judaizante- practicing and proselytizing Judaism.⁵ Then they suddenly lost interest until Portugal seceded from the newly forged union in 1640.

These American crypto-Jews achieved financial success in the mercantile trades and enjoyed an unmolested religious life in New Spain as long as they outwardly behaved as Christians. At home they were Jewish. They prayed in Hebrew, kept the Sabbath and fast days, buried their dead according to Jewish custom, circumcised their sons and married only one another on the promise that they uphold the secret heritage. Women prepared the homes for the Sabbath, cooked their meals ahead of time and lit candles.⁶ While there was a certain level of toleration for their practices, their numbers are not known because they took great pains to cover their tracks. Proof of their existence comes from the meticulous Inquisition Records investigating the lives and histories of those who were caught and incarcerated.



An Illustration of Christopher Columbus' Journey to the New World

“...the pirate describes how his Spanish grandfather was put to death in 1765 for being a Jew.”

The Holy Office of the Inquisition was established in Mexico in 1571. It later complained to superiors in Madrid:

In this land there are a large number of Portuguese, growing day by day, almost all merchants, a frugal people, and very industrious, most of whom are confessed Judaizers. And as we understand that the Inquisitors in Spain have arrested and punished some of those Portuguese who have traveled to Castilla as a result of the joining of kingdoms, it is also possible that they have crossed to the Indies.⁷

A crackdown ensued which included the arrest of Luis De Carvajal, the Portuguese Governor of Nuevo Leon, and even penetrated deeper into frontier territory with the arrest of Gasper Castano De Sosa, the lieutenant governor who had taken flight with colonists in tow. No friars or priests, requisite for colonization efforts were present in his illegal colony. This proved to be the first settler foray into New Mexico that would become part of the U.S. Southwest. Captured, De Sosas protested his innocence, yet he and Carvajal had Jewish roots.

In 1821 Mexico won it's independence from Spain. The Holy Office still functioned however and the last auto de fe occurred in 1826. The crypto community by then had existed completely outside any Jewish mainstream yet maintained the habit of giving children secret, Biblical names. Historians discovered that post Spanish rule a sudden influx of Biblical names were registered with local baptismal parishes. The same effect happened in New Mexico after 1846 when the territory was lost to the United States.

Brazil, which was named after the Brazilwood found and coveted there by Europeans, may have been first developed by a converso, Fernando de Noronha who was given a ten year monopoly and land grant.⁸ Jamaica was granted to the heirs of Columbus who insisted on a guarantee that the Inquisition not be allowed on the island; Hernando Cortes, the famous Conquistador, may have had as many as one hundred or more conversos among his ranks. This may have been a result of having been born in the once influential Jewish enclave, Medallin.⁹ Undoubtedly, many of his contemporaries converted and the more

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adventurous of them enlisted- at least one of which, Hernando Alonso, died at the stake in the first Mexican auto da fe for Judaizing in 1528. This however was not before he had been granted huge land tracts while others of his rank did not. So he was guilty of being a Jew, but previously had been rewarded for it. This was because in many of these situations it was understood that useful crypto-Jewish friends or colonists were to be tolerated as official policy as long as they overtly behaved as Christians.

At other times, Sepharadim were not invited to settle the new lands such as Cuba, San Salvador and Jamaica, but found their way there nonetheless. This was achieved by securing passage on a ship owned by a converso; or one could sign on as a sailor, who did not need a license or permission to travel. Neither did a servant- so in many cases a converso lucky enough to earn a license by whatever means would sign on numerous fellow conversos as household staff.¹⁰ The Bishop of Cuba complained "Practically every ship is filled with Hebrews and New Christians." The goal of the exodus was to stay one step ahead of the Inquisition.

"The Bishop of Cuba complained, 'Practically every ship is filled with Hebrews and New Christians.'"

Crypto-Jews were careful to follow some simple safety guidelines when choosing a place of worship: sand floors to obscure the sounds of people gathering, and readily available escape hatches. The most fortunate scenario was when control of the colony was wrested from the Spanish or Portuguese and the Sephardim liberated. England was consistently at war with Spain and therefore not about to repatriate defecting citizens back to their abuse, especially not citizens who were often the backbone of the colonies economy. The Dutch and French colonies too, proved safe havens and these were naturally the most ideal places to settle once out of the Iberian grasp.

One interesting character to emerge from this time not only secured his own independence but that of the United States of America. Jean Lafitte called himself a privateer, but due to his plundering and black market trade along the Atlantic and Caribbean coast, Lafitte was very much in the New World pirate tradition. However in respect to the Battle for New Orleans in 1815, he is referred to as a hero. Because he aggravated enemy ships, (he never attacked an American ship) he was subsequently pardoned for his escapades by President Jackson.

In a tradition dating back centuries,"¹¹ governments at war had the authority under international law to license independent operators to snatch the merchant cargos of a declared foe." By doing so, he writes, the Continental Congress in 1776 was able to rally a privately contracted naval force without paying for it. "To receive a congressional commission a privateer posted a bond of up to 5,000 pounds as an assurance that captives would not be mistreated and that the privateer would not knowingly raid American shipping or that of neutral governments. In return 100 percent of any prize captured went to the privateer ship.

Fortunes were made; for the privateers, their investors, the ship builders, and the agents. More significantly in terms of history, during the American Revolution the official Continental Navy captured 198 enemy vessels while the privateer fleet captured an impressive 2300.

The leap from wandering sea merchant with no nation to call home to private mercenary followed in a long albeit quiet practice. Always ambiguous about his origins, Lafitte socialized with southern gentry, many of whom were his land based customers. His brother Pierre, who lived in New Orleans, provided the business front. From 1803 to 1814, the pair ran a vast oceanic smuggling ring. They were well regarded in the Cajun marshlands however, for keeping Southern settlers and merchants well supplied in remote areas when the government could not. To this day the Lafittes are hailed as an integral part of the establishment of New Orleans.

Part of the pirate mystique was Jean Lafitte's many purported origins. He was supposed to have fought for Napoleon; was the son of royalty executed on the French guillotine, but perhaps closer to the truth, he was a Jewish refugee fleeing Spanish oppression. In a journal attributed to his own hand, the pirate describes how his Spanish grandfather was put to death in 1765 for being a Jew. His mother fled to Haiti, and married a Frenchman. The pirate's journal explains that he was raised in his grandmother's kosher home.¹²

The details seem too explicit and frankly out of range for a typical swashbuckler of the day,¹³ perhaps verifying their truth. Further, Professor Edward Bernard Glick, formerly of Philadelphia's Temple University, and a lecturer on "The History of Piracy" serendipitously met a religious Swiss Sepharadi whose family lore is that they are relations of Jean Lafitte:

Our family, originally named Lefitto, lived in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries. When Ferdinand and Isabella re-conquered Spain and expelled the Muslims and the Jews in 1492, most of the Jews fled to North Africa. Others went to the Balkans or to Greece and Turkey. But some Sepharadi Jews, my ancestors among them, crossed the Pyrenees and settled in France, where Jean was born in about 1780. He moved to French Santo Domingo during the Napoleonic period. However, a slave rebellion forced him to flee to New Orleans. Eventually, he became a pirate, but he always called himself a privateer, because that label has a more legal ring to it. In 1814, the British sought his aid in their pending attack on New Orleans. However, he passed their plans to the Americans and helped General Andrew Jackson beat them in 1815. A grateful Jackson, not yet president, saw to it that Lafitte and his family became American citizens.



Late 19th Century Artist's Depiction of Jean Lafitte

Today there is a town named Jean Lafitte, as well as a Jean Lafitte National Historical Park in Southwestern Louisiana.¹⁴

With the spread of Protestant and democratic views in North America and Western Europe, the acceptance of religious freedom became a right. As a consequence, Jewish refugees needed to resort to subterfuge or mercenary tactics in order to live freely less and less. Their quest coincided and even abetted the emancipation of a hemisphere.

Mrs. Mizrachi is a community based writer and current marketing coordinator at Gesher Yehuda Yeshiva

¹ Morais, Henry S., *The Jews of Philadelphia From the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time*, Philadelphia, 1894

² Ibid pg 5

³ Interestingly, the economy of Ciudad Rodrigo, a Spanish city close to the border with Portugal in 1492, was so devastated "that within months the Catholic Monarchs proclaimed that all Jews who wished to return could do so with full restitution of the goods that they had abandoned when they left" as long as they converted to Catholicism, which they did at least on the surface. Ibid Hordes, pg. 138.

⁴ Hordes, Stanley M., *To The End of The Earth: A History of Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*, Columbia University Press, 2005 pg. 33

⁵ Ibid Hordes pg. 34

⁶ Ibid Hordes, pg. 48

⁷ Ibid, Hordes, pg 79, from the records of the Mexican Tribunal 1587, found in Archivo Historico Nacional, Madrid.

⁸ Kritzler, Edward, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean*, Doubleday, 2008, pg 38

⁹ Ibid . Kritzler pg 47

¹⁰ Ibid Kritzler pg 47

¹¹ June, 2008, *Pirates of the Revolution*, American History Magazine, Robert H. Paton

¹² See appendix for an inscription from Lafitte's personal Bible.

¹³ Online sources on Lafitte citing (Sharfman, Harold I., *Jews on the Frontier*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago. 1977. pp. 132-145).

¹⁴ Edward Bernard Glick quoting Melvyn Lafitte of Geneva.

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We should not wait for our inner Joseph to come and demand explanations, but rather muster the courage to address our mistakes immediately, contemplating, repenting, apologizing, and making amendments, thus assuring that even if we make a mistake we don't live in error.

Rabbi Ovadia is currently dedicating his time to writing his books.



Tanakh Study

LESSONS IN SEFER SHOFTIM

Rabbi Joseph Mizrachi

Over the last several months I have been relentlessly pursued by Jesse Salem to keep a promise I made over a year ago. He started a wonderful project that currently has over one thousand people learning one chapter of Tanakh a day. The project is snowballing as more and more people are discovering the richness and beauty of our holy texts and setting aside a few minutes with the goal of completing the entire corpus of material over approximately two years. I was honored that he asked me to record the lessons on the book of *Shoftim*.

Those involved in this great project have just completed the book of *Shoftim*. It is a unique book for several reasons, one of which is the many varied personalities we encounter. The word “*Shoftim*” is often incorrectly translated as “Judges.” Even a cursory look at some of the protagonists will convey a clear message: these men (and one woman) were not all exactly what we might imagine a judge would be. Certainly, Yiftah and Shimshon do not portray piety and righteousness as do other characters in Tanakh like Yirmiyahu or Shemuel Hanabi. The word correctly translated is a better fit with “Military Leader.”

“There must always be a lesson to be learned, some moral message to be gleaned.”

We believe, as Jews, that there is definite purpose to our Tanakh, it cannot ever be just a random series of disconnected events. There must always be a lesson to be learned, some moral message to be gleaned.

That lesson, I believe, does not reveal itself until the final chapters of the book. The two last stories are the Idol of Michah and the Concubine in Gibah.’ Both describe an unholy, toxic blend of Torah values with Canaanite ones. Although we see that blend clearly in the story of Yiftah who sacrifices his daughter, it is stressed in the last chapters.

These stories of consecutive *Shoftim* throughout the book, tell the story of the earliest history of our people in our own land. In our infancy stages, we have no king, no standing army, and no central leadership or government. A familiar pattern emerges: a virtual ping pong game between G-d and his people. Things are going well, we sin, G-d sends in the oppressor de jour, we suffer, we scream for help and in comes the Shofet of the generation to quell the problems, there is quiet and we move on. There is no permanency in the leadership, and prophecy or contact with G-d is on a need-to basis. The cycle repeats itself again and again.

In the Idol of Micha story, we encounter a Levite who is offered an upgrade to become a Priest. The young man does his job so well that he is adopted by the tribe of Dan to be Priest for the entire tribe! It is not until the last verse that we learn that he was indeed the grandson of no less than Moshe Rabbenu. The shock value is obvious. If the grandson of our greatest prophet did not internalize the Torah, if he did not “Get it,” how then can we expect any better from common people?! The story makes us feel that the Judaic/Canaanite cultural diffusion is laughable and ridiculous.

The final story also illustrates the blending of cultures but with tragic and grave results. The concubine cheats on her husband and leaves him. The man goes to bring his concubine home and his father-in-law extends him all manner of traditional “Children-of-Abraham” hospitality. When the couple leave to return home the compassion of the in-laws is in sharp contrast to the welcome they receive on a stopover in the Benjaminite city of Gibah.’ The man and his wife are invited to stay in someone’s home for the night and before long the house is surrounded by an angry mob. They pound on the door and demand that the male guest be taken out and sodomized. The compromise is that instead of him, they rape his concubine to death overnight. There is a call for justice and most of the tribe of Benjamin is wiped out. The story uses almost exactly the same language as

the Torah uses to describe the events of Lot in Sodom. It clearly shows how toxic the blending of Torah and paganism can be and where it inevitably leads. Throughout both stories we are reminded by the prophet that there is no king in Israel and that anarchy prevails. Indeed it is the rule of the day throughout the 450 year span of the book.

From inception, the nation of Israel had an uninterrupted chain of leaders. Moshe passed the baton of leadership to Joshua and it abruptly ends. The All-Mighty basically leaves us to our own devices and we have to sort of figure it out on our own.

How did we do? Apparently not very well at all.

The final two stories mentioned did not take place at the end of the period, but probably at the very beginning. Their placement at the end of the book is therefore very significant and purposeful. The reader is being shown in no uncertain terms that we are in need of a centralized government, an army and a king. It teaches us that we need the guidance and occasionally the goading to keep the Torah. It brings home the message that a diluted sense of the Torah is not an innocuous, inane thing, but rather a deadly force that creates a Sodom like environment that causes suffering and death.



A Tanakh

We must take this advice to heart. We face daily challenges to our faith and a slow incursion of cultural diffusion from the world around us. While some adoptions are positive, others can be tragic. The tradition of Sephardic Jewry has always been to adapt and to absorb the best elements of our host cultures. Some of our finest achievements as a people and as a culture are “Judaized” versions of Muslim or Christian culture. The science of Hebrew grammar was learned from Arabic, our Pizmonim are almost entirely Arabic tunes. The world of the 21st century has presented great challenges to Judaism and to Jews; to filter the good from the bad is probably the greatest challenge our leadership has faced in two thousand years. Despite our best efforts intermarriage is soaring and our youth drift further and further away each day. The challenges we face are external as well as internal. As parents and educators we must go back to our roots, to basics. The 24 books of our Tanakh present the opportunity for each of us to inspire and educate, to inform ourselves and develop. Most of all it enables us to pass on the beauty of our holy Torah. Only through a firsthand knowledge of the texts can we possibly hope to pass them on to the next generation.

“Only through a firsthand knowledge of the texts can we possibly hope to pass them on to the next generation.”

I urge all our readers to join this incredible journey and log on for a few minutes each day and listen to the various teachers and make your way through the Tanakh. It will benefit our families, our Community, and Am Yisrael for many years to come.

Rabbi Mizrahi is pursuing a PhD in Jewish History and currently teaches in Congregation Beth Torah and Yeshivah of Flatbush Middle Division

IDF SOLDIERS SPEAK AT AVENUE N SEPHARDIC CONGREGATION

Mr. Joe Tricot

On Shabbat afternoon, December 6th, a delegation of six Israeli soldiers visited the Avenue N Congregation to open up about their experiences during their tenure with the IDF. The soldiers were all current reservists with the IDF and all had an individual story that resonated with the entire audience.

The first soldier, Naftali, introduced the IDF delegation and thanked everyone for the warm reception he and his friends received during their stay with us. Naftali, a charismatic, young IDF medic who is completing studies in medical school, discussed the inspiration he receives whenever he is thanked for his service in the IDF. He spoke about the brutality of the enemy he has seen firsthand as a medic, and the struggle to understand the evil behind a terrorist's desire to harm innocent Israelis.

Speaking next was Yoel Fraenkel, a first cousin of Naftali Fraenkel, one of three kidnapped Israelis who was kidnapped and ultimately murdered by Palestinian terrorists. Yoel spoke about the outpouring of support given to his family after the shocking news of his cousin reverberated with Jews around the world. Yoel spoke about his station in Hebron, a southern city, and the job of defending the city in the event of a Palestinian attack via underground tunnels.

Nadav, another IDF medic and a Denver, Colorado native, spoke about his experience overtaking the Turkish flotilla in 2010. Nadav spoke how his unit first entered the ship without any lethal weapons to ensure that humanitarian supplies the ship actually did carry, reached Gaza, not the weapons. Seven of Nadav's fellow soldiers were wounded as a result of vicious attacks by the "peace activists" aboard the flotilla. Nadav did not just provide medical support to the IDF soldiers wounded, he also spoke about the medical care he and his team afforded to the injured flotilla members who were callously beating IDF soldiers just a few moments earlier, a fact rarely reported since the altercation occurred.

Raphael, a Melbourne, Australia native spoke about his experience this past summer in Operation Protective Edge. During his assignment on the Gaza border, he recalled lamenting over how he was aching to go into heated battle sites inside Gaza, to support his brothers in arms. Although he did not make it inside Gaza, Rafi still bravely patrolled the Gaza-Israeli border to ensure terrorists tunnels were spotted and stopped in their tracks. Raphael also noted his experience at a nearby Kibbutz where Israeli citizens, a majority of whom who could not go into battle, contributed to the war effort in their own ways. Some even setting up food stands near Israeli patrol units, like his, so the soldiers can replenish themselves- although, Rafi playfully noted, the food he and his friends have had during their stay here is no match for the food back home.

Roy, another Operation Protective Edge veteran, spoke about the preparedness that everyone in Israel must typify 24/7. He spoke about the time he first heard that he was going to be called up from the reserves into battle. Roy was vacationing with his wife and two kids in Eilat when he was told he had to immediately report to his commander and prepare for duty. To him this meant stopping everything, like most Israelis do every day; disrupting time with your family to go and help stop the rocket and terrorist threats at its source, the Gaza strip. He spoke about the friendly fire incident that occurred in Gaza that he was a part of. It was an incident where miraculously, no Israeli soldiers were injured despite his unit laying fire to a house their intelligence said contained enemy combatants.

Conclusion:

In the opening segment, Naftali spoke about the struggle to find meaning in the heart of pure evil. In the joint "Statement on Atrocities,"¹ issued by Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin in 1943, the mention of Jews was conspicuously absent, despite the notorious fact that millions had been murdered by then. The unimaginable murder of seven million Jews seemed inconceivable at the time, so the sentiment of pretending it did not exist echoed across the citizens and leaders of the world. Like Naftali says, the struggle to understand the purpose of terrorists is real, but that is because often times there is no meaning or sense in the face of inconceivable evil. There is no understanding of walking into a house of prayer and slaughtering innocent people, as has happened in Israel a few weeks ago, along with countless other attacks perpetrated on the Jewish people for over a millennia. Naftali stressed their importance of bringing light to fight wherever there is darkness. That is why we owe every soldier immeasurable gratitude for their role in compassionately securing not just the State of Israel, but the future of Jewish people around the world.

Mr. Tricot is currently studying in Baruch College

¹ See Further "Statement of Atrocities" fact cited from here: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/opinion/roger-cohen-for-isis-slaughter-is-an-end-in-itself.html?_r=0



IDF Soldiers Viewing the Temple Mount and City of Jerusalem



In Memorium

REMEMBERING RABBI DR. EZRA LABATON

Mr. Joey Tabush

How does one fill a void that can not be filled? What words can be used when no words suffice?

Just like everybody else, I had a special, unique relationship with Rabbi Labaton. He was my Rabbi, my Teacher, my Mentor, and my Friend. And he redefined each one of these roles in his own unique way. I would like to speak today about the impact the Rabbi had on me, and how that has led me to spending the past year poring through his library, and endless boxes of his classes and notes.

I am awed by the stories and memories that have been shared. How can one person maintain such meaningful and personal relationships with so many people? The adjectives we use to describe him are not hyperbole or overstatement. Incredible. Amazing.

Last year, as we mourned the Rabbi's passing, these incredible stories that continued to be told, highlighted the void he had left behind. I remember going to pay respects. I told Mrs. Labaton I had so many things I wanted to share with the Labaton family. "Write a letter," she asked. I went home that night, and every night for the following month, and tried to write something but couldn't. I recalled his role and impact on so many different parts of my life, but could not find the right words.

One of Torah's ideas the Rabbi spoke about most, and exemplified daily, was Man's Creation *B'selem Elokim*, in the image of God. He often said that he once saw a T-Shirt he wished he had bought. It said "I know I'm special, because God don't make no junk." How pure his character was, always finding value and beauty in every person. It was this quality



Rabbi Labaton's Library

that enabled him to form the relationships he did. He never gave his thoughts or opinions without carefully considering his audience. "What is this person really asking? Where is the window in which to capture the mind, or other cases, the heart?" He taught us that IQ encompasses more than just the intellect. One must also possess a strong Moral IQ and Emotional IQ.

What struck me most about his ability as a teacher was his enormous range. Be it a room of academics or a classroom of children, the Rabbi taught via his "Model for Impacting the World through Torah Study." His goal was to creatively open spiritual doors and dimensions. He believed that as individuals, and collectively as families, we should share a vision of what Judaism is all about. He taught that Torah would ultimately lead us to achieve a vision of our place in the World.

Growing up, the Rabbi and Mrs. Labaton formed a bond with my parents that brought Torah values into our home, and showed me what it meant to "find yourself a Rabbi." From my Bar Mitzvah, to my wedding, to the births of my children, the Rabbi was there. When I moved to Brooklyn I saw the Rabbi less, but always kept in touch. I went to his classes when possible and called him in between. His perseverance and endless devotion to his students were awe-inspiring.

When I had a question; about Judaism, or just about life, I called the Rabbi. He always had the appropriate message at the right time. We spoke about religion, family, history, and philosophy. The philosophy conversations in particular, excited him the most. When he spoke about working on his thesis, he expressed an intellectual love: instead of 'reading' or

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‘studying’, he used terms like “Getting to know the Rambam,” and “spending time with the Rambam’s son.” When I asked him about a 17th century philosopher, the excitement almost jumped through the phone. He responded “He’s a good friend of mine.” His passion defined everything he did. With each question I asked, he responded not with an answer, but with a question of his own, always challenging me to think critically. With each phone call he gave me a list of books to read and asked that I please call him again soon.

“When I had a question; about Judaism, or just about life, I called the Rabbi. He always had the appropriate message at the right time.”

Between calls I listened to some of the Rabbi’s classes that were around online. Rabbi Hidary had a few dozen online, as did David Betesh. We continued our intermittent phone calls, and I did my best to read what I could. Last October, at his suggestion, I began reading “Principles of the Jewish Faith,” by Louis Jacobs. The Rabbi had misplaced his old, out-of-print copy. He was so excited when I found two used copies online, and he couldn’t wait to re-read and discuss it. Despite his condition worsening, he urged me to continue calling him.

I had grown used to seeing the Rabbi persevere time after time. I was spoiled by his strength. I was not prepared for the end. For so many years, we looked to him to guide us through difficult times, both personally, and as a Community. Here we were without our leader.

Feeling this void, I gave up on writing the letter for a while, and went back to reading the book we had begun. With each chapter I was left with questions and talking points I wish I could address. I thought back to the earlier conversations we had, and I imagined his response to each new thing I had to say. I imagined the challenges he would issue and I felt the pressure to make sure I was thinking critically. I thought about the ‘Reading List’ I keep on my phone, which by this point had a few dozen books I hope to one day read. This was the Rabbi’s way of attacking a subject. To be a “Fearless Reader.” To read the widest spectrum of books he can find on any given topic.

To pursue Truth without boundaries.

I began listening to more of his classes online. If we couldn’t have our conversations anymore, at least I’d listen to some old classes I had missed out on, and absorb whatever of his wisdom was available to me. I listened to him reinforce his famous “Ideas, Ideals, and Values.” Every part of Torah fell under this umbrella. He pursued his mission of *Tikun Olam*, through *Hesed, Tzedakka, u’Mishpat*. He sought to build a model with which to impact the world. He had no idea the reach of his model.

Around this time, Bobby Dweck and his son Victor, created the first draft of RabbiLabaton.com, where they began posting tributes that were being sent in. I offered to help. I had no idea at time the treasure that would await. Together with Bobby and his brother Richie, we collected as many audio recordings as we could. Richie went through hundreds of them, listening to each, categorizing, and posting them on the website and iTunes. To date, these classes have been downloaded nearly 10,000 times, in over 30 countries. Indeed, the impact of the Rabbi’s Ideas, Ideals, and Values continue to spread in concentric circles.

While listening to the classes, whenever he recommended a book, I added it to my list. A little while later, I posted this list to the website, calling it ‘The Rabbi’s Bookshelf.’ The response was fitting. Dozens of people wrote in with more titles to add.

“One of Torah’s ideas the Rabbi spoke about most, and exemplified daily, was Man’s Creation B’selem Elokim, in the image of God.”

As the list grew, I eventually asked Mrs. Labaton if I could help archive the Rabbi’s entire library. I had not been in the Rabbi’s office since the Synagogue was renovated. There is only one thought I could imagine someone having when walking in, “Wow.” For those unfamiliar, the best way to describe it is that, there are books everywhere. From floor to ceiling, wall to wall. No windows. Just a door to get in, and bookshelves everywhere else. When he couldn’t fit anymore

on the shelves, he made stacks on the floor. If I had to take a guess, there's at least two thousand books there, organized by topic, with his favorite topics in the bookcases closest to his desk.

Even now, The only thing I can think is "Wow." This word, this feeling, of "Wow," was a favorite concept of the Rabbi's. "Wow" meant you were stricken emotionally, and that you understood the impact of the moment. He taught me that if you don't say "Wow," you are missing what it's all about.

The impact of the room was so overwhelming, that before touching anything, I had it photographed. The panorama pictures, which are on the website, are mesmerizing. Papers overflow each shelf. Articles accumulated over the years, are clipped together with relevant books. Each book's binding is worn from multiple readings, and many have their margins filled with four-and-a-half decades of notes. His desk, the

"His passion defined everything he did. With each question I asked, he responded not with an answer, but with a question of his own, always challenging me to think critically."

scattered, variable mess, is a mark of genius.

As I began to sort through his archives, my "Wows" became even greater. Every article, newsletter, and notice from various Rabbinical Councils was covered with his notes. He underlined key points, left comments where he disagreed, and graded them as he would his students. The very best articles were marked "excellent" at the top. And there were thousands of articles, dating back to 1970's. "Oh" remarked Mrs. Labaton, almost casually, "he didn't like to throw things out."

And that was just the articles. Then she showed me his file cabinets, filled with his speeches. Every single one for thirty years. She was right. He never threw anything out. Most people who speak publicly for a living would say that after 30 years they could write a speech in their sleep. Not Rabbi Labaton. Always seeking to excel and to perfect his craft, he labored over every speech. He cherished each opportunity to

challenge us, to engage us, and to guide us. His form was consistent. Always hand written on 11x14 legal paper, with the date in the top left corner, and the Parasha and topic in Hebrew at the top. Always two pages. No more, no less. Each unique in content, but uniform in sincerity and wisdom.



*Rabbi Dr. Ezra Labaton A"H
1950-2013*

He also kept the notes from every shiur. Not only those he gave, but those he attended as a student himself. I remember going through them this summer, seeing the smile on Mrs. Labaton's face when she found the Rabbi's notes from a class given in 1978 by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. "This was a great class," she recalled with a smile.

But unlike someone who stockpiles things for the sake of accumulation, the Rabbi's library and archives represent a discourse of brilliance, a testimony to his unwavering commitment and his unshakable standards of intellectual honesty. Having the privilege to work on such a project has shifted my perspective, I now focus less on the void. For everything the Rabbi gave us, is nothing short of a Treasure.

As for the words I seek, I once again look to my Teacher. Rabbi Labaton had an array of adjectives to describe amazement. Extraordinary. Outstanding. Fascinating. Incredible. Awesome. But when I reflect on his impact, even these words do not suffice. For they disrupt the beautiful silence that echoes, when all I can think is "Wow."

This piece was originally a speech delivered at Rabbi Labaton's Arayat.

Mr. Tabush currently lives in Brooklyn, NY with his wife and three children.

In his spare time, he maintains www.RabbiLabaton.com as well as the Labaton Library & archives.

He can be reached at Joey@Lucky21.com.



Sephardic Rabbis

RABBI HASDAI CRESCAS

Rabbi Yosef Bitton



Plaza Mayor de Seville

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340-1411) was born in Barcelona, Spain in the winter of 1340. He was a rabbi, a philosopher and a statesman. A student of the famous Rabbi Nisim Gerondi, also known as the Ran. One of his colleagues and friends was the famous Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshat, the Ribash.

In the year 1370 he was assigned by the King Pedro IV de Aragon to adjudicate certain cases concerning Jews, and received legal queries from Jews throughout the Kingdom of Aragon and abroad.

With the accession of King John I, *el cazador*, in 1387, Rabbi Crescas became even more familiar with the royal household. In 1389 he moved to Zaragoza, seat of the main royal court, and served there as the rabbi of the city. In 1390 he was empowered by the throne to act as judge of all the Jews of the Kingdom of Aragon.

Things changed dramatically for the Jews of Spain in the year 1391. The cause of the violence was the incitement of a Christian monk named Ferrán Martinez. The priest's speeches of hatred toward the Jews raised public expectations of a mass conversion of Jews and sparked popular riots. Angry crowds entered the Juderias, the city's Jewish section, attacked its residents and pillaged their houses and businesses. On June 6, 1391, rioters entered the Juderia of Sevilla, blocked the two exits from the quarter, and set it on fire. An estimated 4,000 Jews were killed that day. Most of those who survived converted or left the city.

The pogroms soon extended to Aragon and all over Spain. Hundreds of Jewish communities in Valencia, Majorca, and Catalonia were destroyed, thousands of Jews were killed, and more than 100,000 were converted by force to Christianity. Despite Rabbi Crescas' efforts to have his family protected, his only son was murdered in the riots of Barcelona. He wrote (in his introduction to *Or HaShem*) about his murdered son, who chose to die as a Jew rather than convert: "My only son, a twenty years old bridegroom, a lamb without blemish, was sacrificed among other martyrs, for the sanctification of the name of God..."

רבים קדשו שם שמיים ובתוכם גם בני יחידי, חתן בן כ' שנה, שה תמים העליתיו לעולה, אני אצדיק עלי הדין ואתנחם לטוב חלקו

After the pogroms of 1391 Rabbi Crescas devoted himself to the reconstruction of the devastated Jewish communities of the Kingdom of Aragon. He also secured passage for thousands of *conversos*, Jews that had adopted the Christian religion under duress, to sail for places outside Christendom, like North Africa or the Land of Israel, where they could return openly to Judaism. Among them was the Ribash, who escaped to Tunis.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas died in Zaragoza in 1411.

"After the pogroms of 1391 Rabbi Crescas devoted himself to the reconstruction of the devastated Jewish communities of the Kingdom of Aragon."

HIS BOOKS

Rabbi Crescas' life was very intense and he had a very limited time for writing. As part of a campaign to combat the Christianizing literature aimed to convert the Jews, he wrote in Catalan his *Refutation of the Christian Principles*. A translation of this book into English was done by my friend, Professor Daniel Lasker, of Ben Gurion University.

The most famous book of Rabbi Crescas is *Or HaShem*. In it Rabbi Crescas praises the immensity of Maimonides' work but disagrees with him in many areas. One example: according to Maimonides, the opening words of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God" (Ex 20:2) constitute the positive commandment to believe in the existence of God. Rabbi Crescas, by contrast, argued that to believe in the existence of God cannot be a commandment itself. It must be a presupposition for the other commandments. Before one can speak of a divine commandment one must be convinced of the existence of a Divine Commander. For Rabbi Crescas, belief is involuntary, and one can only be reasonably commanded to do what one has the power to choose to do. Therefore, he thinks that the belief in the existence of God is a preamble for all the other commandments, but not a commandment in itself.



Map of Spain

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VAYHI

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

Shabbat Table Talks

Value: Awareness of the Long-Lasting Effects of Wrongdoing

When we wrong someone, the effects of that wrong can last a very long time. This is especially true when we wrong or hurt someone close to us. Although the person might appear as if he has forgiven us, he might harbor some feelings of pain or worse, some desire for revenge. Before we decide to wrong someone, we must be aware of the long-lasting effects of our actions. This awareness will make us more careful and cause us to decide not to hurt another person.

Background:

After seventeen years of living in Egypt, supported by Yosef, Ya'aqob died. He had requested of his children to bury him in the Cana'an. After Ya'aqob's children returned from burying their father at Me'arat Hamakhpela, they had a scary thought. What if the only reason why, for these seventeen years, Yosef did not punish us for what we did to him when we were much younger is that Ya'aqob was alive. Now that Ya'aqob is no longer alive, Yosef might take revenge for the wrong that we did him. This following text is their plan to solve the problem.

Text: Beresheet 50:15-18 (NJPS)

When Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said: "What if Yosef still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" So they sent this message to Yosef, "Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Yosef, 'forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the servants of the God of your father." And Yosef was in tears as they spoke to him.

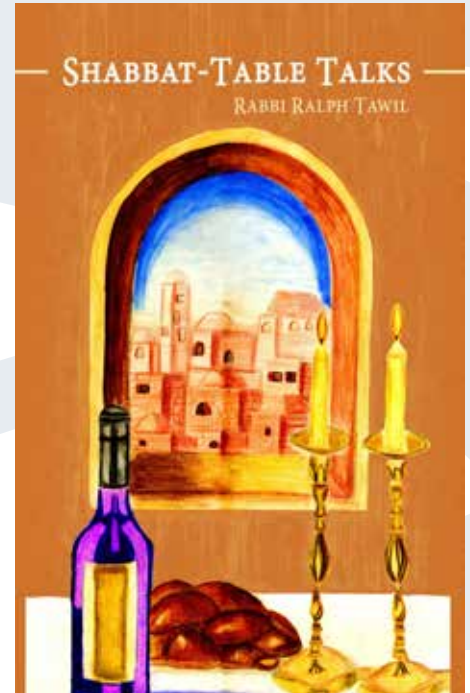
His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves."

Discussion:

Did Ya'aqob really tell his sons to tell Yosef to forgive them for what they did to him 39 years previously, or did they make up the story because they were afraid of what Yosef would do to them now that Ya'aqob was dead?

Poll all the people at your table. Ask them to answer without explanation, for now, whether they think that Ya'aqob really commanded this, or whether they think that the brothers made up the story. After you have asked everyone for their opinion, ask several people on either side of the question to explain their positions, using supporting statements in the portion that was just read.

Let the discussion continue for a few minutes with you moderating in a neutral way by asking questions to both sides, such as "Do you think that Yosef's brothers would lie?" or "If Ya'aqob really felt this way why did he not tell Yosef this directly?" or "Why does the text begin by saying that the brothers thought that Yosef would take revenge on them?"



*Shabbat Table Talks
by Rabbi Ralph Tawil*

Let us see what some of the Rabbis of the Talmud said:

Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon said that it is permitted for a person to “alter” for the sake of peace, as it is said: “Before his death your father left this instruction....” (Yebamot 65b)

This rabbi is of the opinion that the brothers had altered and changed the truth in order to have peace with their brother Yosef. We will discuss whether and when you should do this at another time. For now, let us think about how the brothers felt.

For seventeen years, Yosef had been supporting them, giving them everything that they needed. Yosef did this even during the time when there was a famine. Yosef provided for every member of their families, even for the little children, every day for over 6,000 days. Yet this was not enough for the brothers to know that he had forgiven them. They were still afraid that he felt some anger towards them and that he wanted to take revenge. The brothers, who had done something wrong to Yosef, were still afraid that he would try to get back at them. That is why, according to R. Elazar, they had to change the truth in order to get Yosef not to do them any harm.

“Before we decide to wrong someone, we must be aware of the long-lasting effects of our actions.”

Think about this the next time you are about to do something that hurts someone else. The person might remember it for a long time, even though it looks like he has forgiven you. Be aware that if you wrong someone, you will be worried for a very long time if he really has forgiven you. The feeling of guilt could remain with you and might even make you change the truth—which is not a good thing to do. When you think about this, decide that it is better not to hurt someone else.

This is true especially if you hurt someone close to you. The pain that it might cause him is even greater. The following fable expresses this idea. (A fable is a story that has some things that cannot happen, like a talking tree or animal, but it has an idea that is true.)

Deep in the forest, a woodcutter was cutting down a stout old pine. With each blow of his ax, the giant tree shuddered and cursed the cold, hard steel that splintered its side. It was a tough old tree. After a while, the woodsman inserted a large, wooden wedge into the cut in order to pry the trunk apart. He pounded at the wedge; amid a great ripping and splintering, the noble pine toppled and hurtled toward the ground. As it fell, it groaned:

“How can I blame the ax, which is no relative of mine, as much as this wicked wedge, which is my own brother?”

(William J. Bennett, *The Moral Compass* [1995: Simon and Schuster], p. 86)

What is the idea of this story? (Pain caused by an outsider is not as bad as pain caused by someone close to you.)

Before we hurt someone, especially someone close to us, we must remember that their pain and our guilty feelings could last a very long time.

Rabbi Ralph Tawil is presently the principal of Yavneh School in Qiryat Tiv'on, Israel.

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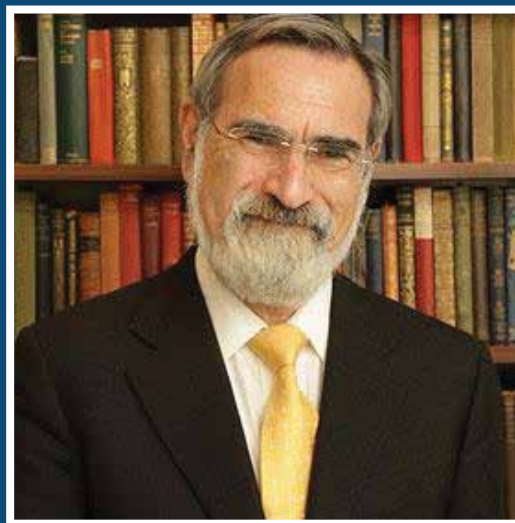
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