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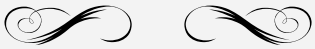

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*Dedicated in memory of Bernice and Irby Cooper*
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# Yehezkel's Unique Prophecy of the War of Gog[1]

Rabbi Hayyim Angel
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## Introduction

On Shabbat Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot we read Yehezkel's prophecy of the War of Gog as the Haftarah. In this essay, we will consider several facets of this prophecy in its natural context in Sefer Yehezkel.

The oracles of Gog in Yehezkel chapters 38-39 form a dramatic climax to a series of prophecies of restoration following the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. Some time after Israel returns to her land from exile, a coalition headed by King Gog from the land of Magog will invade Israel. God will dramatically intervene and defeat the coalition. God's name then will be sanctified before all humanity.

In rabbinic literature, this cataclysmic event is referred to as "the war of Gog and Magog." In the biblical text, however, Gog is the name of an otherwise unknown king[2] who hails from the land of Magog—one of Yaphet's sons (Bereshit 10:2). Like Gog, the land of Magog plays no role elsewhere in Tanakh.

This prophecy is commonly understood as messianic. Identifications of the enemies have changed with historical times, depending on the perceived threats of the era coupled with the hope that the messianic age was near. For example, some commentators (e.g, Abarbanel, Malbim) identified these events with great wars between Christianity and Islam. In 1977, Rabbi Moshe Eisemann explained the prophecy to allude to Nazi Germany.[3] In 1971, Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, offered a different slant:

> *Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia … But it didn't seem to make sense before the Russian Revolution, when Russia was a Christian country. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly.*[4]

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[1] A fuller version of this article originally appeared in *Sukkot Reader Volume II* (New York: Tebah, 2012), pp. 46-56.

[2] The only biblical reference to the name Gog outside of this prophecy is among the descendants of Reuven (I Divrei HaYamim 5:4), but this prophecy is about a foreign invader, not an Israelite.

[3] Moshe Eisemann, *Yechezkel / The book of Ezekiel: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah, 1977), pp. 580-582.

[4] Cited in Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), p. 476.

Despite the best efforts of commentators and politicians, however, Rambam prudently cautions that we cannot ascertain Gog's identity until the Mashiah comes (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2).

In this essay, we will consider the passage in its broader context in Sefer Yehezkel. We begin with several central issues in Yehezkel chapters 38-39. We then analyze the unique role of this prophecy in the larger unit of Yehezkel's prophecies of restoration and the book as a whole.

# Chapters 38-39

The armies of Gog invade Israel not as a punishment for sins, but rather to plunder a redeemed and peaceful nation. God intervenes, thereby demonstrating His power and glory to the nations and to Israel. Like the original exodus from Egypt, Israel will be entirely passive, while God acts in history as Redeemer.

The timing of the expected fulfillment of this prediction is the subject of debate:

*After a long time* (mi-yammim rabbim) *you shall be summoned; in the distant future* (be-aharit ha-shanim) *you shall march against the land…*
**Yehezkel 38:8**[5]

*This shall happen on that distant day* (be-aharit ha-yamim)…
**Yehezkel 38:16**

מִיָּמִים רַבִּים, תִּפָּקֵד--
בְּאַחֲרִית הַשָּׁנִים תָּבוֹא אֶל-
אֶרֶץ...
**יחזקאל לח:ח**

בְּאַחֲרִית הַיָּמִים תִּהְיֶה ...
**יחזקאל לח:טז**

The expressions of distance in time may indicate a period considerably later than the prophet. Additionally, this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. Consequently, many midrashim and later commentators understand the prophecy to refer to the messianic era. However, it is possible that Yehezkel predicts events that could have transpired shortly after he prophesied. Yehezkel links this prophecy to his other prophecies of restoration in chapters 34-37, and it appears that he expects those predictions to occur shortly (see 39:8).[6] It is possible that there was potential for all of Yehezkel's prophecies to have been fulfilled during his lifetime, even if they did not occur and were instead deferred to the messianic era.[7]

Commentators also puzzle over the uniqueness of the prophecy of Gog. Yehezkel appears to state that his prophecy is the fulfillment of a long history of earlier prophecies:

*Thus said the Lord God: Why, you are the one I spoke of in ancient days through My servants, the prophets of Israel, who prophesied for years in those days that I would*

כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹקִים, הַאַתָּה-הוּא אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי
בְּיָמִים קַדְמוֹנִים בְּיַד עֲבָדַי נְבִיאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
הַנִּבְּאִים בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם, שָׁנִים--לְהָבִיא אוֹתְךָ,

[5] Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).
[6] See Yehiel Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Yehezkel* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985), p. 304.
[7] The prophet appears to state that the full realization of his prophecies was dependent on some repentance on Israel's part: "[Now] you, O mortal, describe the Temple to the House of Israel, and let them measure its design. But let them be ashamed of their iniquities: When (or "if") they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the plan of the Temple and its layout…" (43:10-11, see Rashi ad loc.). For further discussion of unfulfilled or deferred prophecies of redemption in Tanakh, see Hayyim Angel, "Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1-12 in Context," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009), pp. 3-10; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 117-126.

*bring you against them!*
**Yehezkel 38:17**

עֲלֵיהֶם.
**יחזקאל לח:יז**

Several commentators attempt to locate earlier biblical prophecies that anticipate this prophecy. For example, Yeshayahu predicts the downfall of Assyria (Yeshayahu chapter 10), Tzefaniah predicts a Day of the Lord against wicked nations (Tzefaniah 1:14-18), and Yirmiyahu predicts a northern invader (Yirmiyahu 1-6). However, a king Gog is never mentioned in these earlier prophecies. Yirmiyahu's northern enemy, Babylonia, invaded in Yirmiyahu's lifetime as a punishment for Israel's sins. As discussed above, it is unclear if Yehezkel intended his prediction to be fulfilled immediately, and the invasion of Gog was not cast as a punishment for Israel's sins. More decisively, Yehezkel predicts that God will rescue Israel from Gog, whereas Yirmiyahu correctly expected the northern invader to inflict great destruction. It is evident that there is no direct precedent for Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog in Tanakh, even though several of its themes and formulations occur in earlier prophecies.

Hellenistic and rabbinic sources likewise recognized that there is no clear textual precedent for the war of Gog, so they inserted it into earlier texts. In the Torah, Bilam predicts "*ve-yarom me-Agag malko*" ("their king shall rise above Agag" [Bemidbar 24:7]). Instead of "Agag," the Septuagint reads "Gog." Similarly, the Septuagint inserts Gog into a prophecy of Amos regarding a locust plague:

*This is what my Lord God showed me: He was creating [a plague of] locusts at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout—the late-sown crops after the king's reaping* (ahar gizzei ha-melekh).
**Amos 7:1**

כֹּה הֶרְאַנִי, ה' אֱלֹקִים, וְהִנֵּה יוֹצֵר גֵּבִי, בְּתְחִלַּת עֲלוֹת הַלָּקֶשׁ; וְהִנֵּה-לֶקֶשׁ--אַחַר, גִּזֵּי הַמָּלֶךְ.
**עמוס ז:א**

In the place of "*ahar gizzei ha-melekh*" ("after the king's reaping"), the Septuagint reads "*ahar Gog ha-melekh*" ("after King Gog").

Rather than inserting Gog into actual verses, one Sage in the Talmud suggests that Eldad and Medad (Bemidbar 11:26-29) prophesied regarding Gog:

*R. Nahman said: They prophesied concerning Gog and Magog, as it is said (Yehezkel 38:17): "Thus said the Lord God: Why, you are the one I spoke of in ancient days through My servants, the prophets of Israel, who prophesied for years in those days that I would bring you against them!"*
**Sanhedrin 17a**[8]

רב נחמן אמר על עסקי גוג ומגוג היו מתנבאין שנאמר כה אמר ה' אלקים האתה הוא אשר דברתי בימים קדמונים ביד עבדי נביאי ישראל הנבאים בימים ההם שנים להביא אותך עליהם.
**סנהדרין יז.**

R. Nahman identifies Eldad and Medad's prophecy with Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog specifically to explain the elusive earlier biblical precedent to which Yehezkel appears to refer.

Perhaps the most likely reading of Yehezkel 38:17 is that Yehezkel is not referring back to his predecessors who predicted Gog. Rather, he is predicting what people will exclaim when his own

[8] Translations of Talmudic passages taken from Soncino.

prophecy is fulfilled in the future: "this is what Yehezkel had predicted long ago!" Rashi, Kara, Radak, and Yehiel Moskowitz[9] adopt this reading. If their reading is correct, then Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog is indeed groundbreaking, and Yehezkel does not claim otherwise.

In addition to the cataclysmic war, Yehezkel prophesied that the God-Israel relationship will then achieve its ideal state. The prophecy of Gog concludes:

וְלֹא-אַסְתִּיר עוֹד פָּנַי, מֵהֶם, אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַכְתִּי אֶת-רוּחִי עַל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹקִים.
**יחזקאל לט:כט**

*I will never again hide My face from them, for I will pour out My spirit* (eshpokh et ruhi) *upon the House of Israel—declares the Lord God.*
**Yehezkel 39:29**

Additionally, this change in Israel's spiritual fortunes contrasts with their previous state, when God hid His face as a result of Israel's sinfulness:

וְיָדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי בַעֲוֹנָם גָּלוּ בֵּית-יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל אֲשֶׁר מָעֲלוּ-בִי, וָאַסְתִּר פָּנַי, מֵהֶם; וָאֶתְּנֵם בְּיַד צָרֵיהֶם, וַיִּפְּלוּ בַחֶרֶב כֻּלָּם. כְּטֻמְאָתָם וּכְפִשְׁעֵיהֶם, עָשִׂיתִי אֹתָם; וָאַסְתִּר פָּנַי, מֵהֶם.
**יחזקאל לט:כג-כד**

*And the nations shall know that the House of Israel were exiled only for their iniquity, because they trespassed against Me, so that I hid My face from them and delivered them into the hands of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword. When I hid My face from them, I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions.*
**Yehezkel 39:23-24**

# Gog and its Precedents in Sefer Yehezkel

Although there is no direct biblical precursor to Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog, the prophecy draws substantially from earlier passages in Yehezkel. Yehezkel parallels Gog with contemporaneous nations who represent arrogance and evil. Similar to Gog, God also places hooks in Egypt's mouth (29:4; 38:4), a sign of divine power over that arrogant nation. Edom represents all evil nations who harm and plunder Israel. As part of the process of restoration, God will punish Edom and restore Israel (35:1-36:5). Yehezkel recapitulates these elements in the final war of Gog. Redemption of God's name occurs only when arrogance and evil are defeated—not only when Israel is redeemed.

# Gog in the Context of Yehezkel's Prophecies of Restoration

Yehezkel's prophecies of restoration envision a better leadership (ch. 34), Edom's ultimate defeat (ch. 35-36), the return of Jews to their land and God's purification of the nation (ch. 36), God's revival of "dead" Israel (37:1-14), and the reuniting of the northern and southern kingdoms (37:15-28). These prophecies are followed by the war of Gog (ch. 38-39).

Generally speaking, prophets speak of Israel's restoration as the final stage in the redemption process. If there are troubles, they precede the redemption. Following this dominant prophetic view, Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2) takes for granted that the war of Gog will be an earlier stage of Israel's redemption. Yehiel Moskowitz lists rabbinic sources that similarly place the war of Gog before the final redemption. In Yehezkel's prophecy, however, Gog's coalition invades to plunder a redeemed nation (38:8, 11, 14). This positioning is unique in prophetic literature.

[9] Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Yehezkel*, p. 309.

However, Yehezkel's presentation fits his consistent perspective that the primary redemption is not of Israel, but rather of God. Even after Israel returns to her land, God cannot ultimately be redeemed until all human evil is eliminated.[10]

Several midrashim poignantly capture the love, patience, and anguish that God experienced during His banishment from Jerusalem in Sefer Yehezkel:

*R. Aha said: "God's Presence may be likened to a king who left his palace in anger. After going out, he came back and embraced and kissed the walls of the palace and its pillars, weeping and exclaiming: 'O the peace of my palace, O the peace of my royal residence, O the peace of my beloved house! O peace, from now onward let there be peace.'"*
**Ekhah Rabbah Prologue 25**

א"ר אחא למלך שהיה יוצא מפלטין שלו בכעס משהיה יוצא היה חוזר ומגפף ומנשק בכותלי פלטין ובעמודי פלטין ובוכה ואומר הוי שלום בית פלטין שלי הוי שלום בית מלכותי הוי שלום בית יקרי הוי שלום מן כדון הוי שלם.
**איכה רבה, פתיחה כה**

*"Being bound in chains" (Yirmiyahu 40:1): R. Aha said: If it is possible to say so, both He and Jeremiah were bound in chains. As a parallel it is written (Yehezkel 1:1), "I was among the captives."*
**Ekhah Rabbah Prologue 34**

והוא אסור בזיקים, א"ר אחא כביכול הוא והוא אסור בזיקים, ודכוותיה כתיב ואני בתוך הגולה.
**איכה רבה, פתיחה לד**

On a deeper level, Sefer Yehezkel may be considered an "autobiography" of God during the period of the destruction. God goes into exile (chapters 8-11), driven away by Israel's sins. God must redeem Israel in order to sanctify His name even if Israel does not merit redemption (ch. 20, 36). The book's climactic vision is of a rebuilt Temple with God's Presence returning to it (ch. 40-48). The prophecy of Gog, which involves the eradication of human evil coupled with the worldwide sanctification of God's name, fits the unique message of the book. God is at the center of exile and redemption. Therefore, Israel's exile and restoration are ancillary to this process, rather than central to it.

It is fitting that the Kaddish prayer derives its opening formula, *Yitgaddal ve-Yitkaddash*, from the conclusion of chapter 38:

*Thus will I manifest My greatness and My holiness* (ve-hitgaddilti ve-hitkaddishti[11])*, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations. And they shall know that I am the Lord.*
**Yehezkel 38:23**

וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי, וְהִתְקַדַּשְׁתִּי, וְנוֹדַעְתִּי, לְעֵינֵי גּוֹיִם רַבִּים; וְיָדְעוּ, כִּי-אֲנִי ה'.
**יחזקאל לח:כג**

The Kaddish is a prayer for the sanctification of God's name as a result of divine exile after the Temple was destroyed. One Talmudic passage captures this spirit when discussing the Kaddish and its significance:

[10] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "Ezekiel: Priest-Prophet," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:1 (2011), pp. 35-45; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 122-133.

[11] This grammatical form is also found in Vayikra 11:44, *ve-hitkaddishtem ve-heyitem kedoshim*, you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy.

תניא, אמר רבי יוסי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך, ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליהו זכור לטוב ... ואמר לי: בני, מה קול שמעת בחורבה זו? ואמרתי לו: שמעתי בת קול שמנהמת כיונה ואומרת: אוי לבנים שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין האומות. ואמר לי ... לא שעה זו בלבד אומרת כך, אלא בכל יום ויום שלש פעמים אומרת כך; ולא זו בלבד, אלא בשעה שישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות ועונין יהא שמיה הגדול מבורך הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו ואומר: אשרי המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך, מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו, ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם.

**ברכות ג.**

*R. Yosei entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah appeared. … He asked me, "What did you hear in this ruin?" I replied: "I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove, and saying: 'Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world!'" He said to me: "… Not in this moment alone does it so exclaim, but three times each day it says this! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: 'May His great name be blessed* (yehei shemei ha-gadol mevorakh)*,' God shakes His head and says: 'Happy is the King who is thus praised in this house! Woe to the Father who had to banish His children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their Father!'"*

**Berakhot 3a**

Throughout his book, Yehezkel conveys glimpses of divine heartbreak and anger, but also an eternal hope for the future manifestation of God's glory. The ultimate redemption occurs when God returns to a rebuilt Temple and purified nation and land, with all human evil eradicated. When this occurs, God's name is sanctified and Yehezkel's vision of redemption has been fulfilled.

# The *Sholosh R'golim* and the Three Kinds of Love

Rabbi Benjamin Blech
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Sukkot is a holiday that does not stand alone on the Jewish calendar. It is part of a trilogy. Together with Passover and Shavuot it concludes the group known as the *Sholosh R'golim*—three festivals which are linked into a thematic unit.

The three historic holidays share a number with profound significance in Judaism.

We're all familiar with the penultimate prayer of the Haggadah that alerts us to the connection between numbers and concepts. "Who knows one?" asks the text, and responds, "I know one. One is our God in the heavens and on earth." The number two is identified with the two tablets on which the Decalogue was given. The number three is a reminder of our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The linkage is not meant to be gratuitous. It is the key to a profound insight of our sages: *Numbers resonate with hidden meanings—they are often meant to serve as codes for profound concepts.*

שָׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים, בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה, כָּל זְכוּרְךָ, אֶל-פְּנֵי הָאָדֹן ה'.
**שמות כג:יז**

*Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.*
**Exodus 23:17**

This verse is the source for the proper observance of the pilgrimage festivals. Three times a year Jews were commanded to make their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Three—just like the number of patriarchs. On the simplest level the link between the *Sholosh R'golim* and the *Avot* is obvious: The three festivals are meant to commit the Jews to the teachings of their three founding fathers.

But that alone is no more than a superficial understanding of the relationship between Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot and the patriarchs. To truly appreciate the intimate connection between them we need first to analyze another grouping of three that finds a prominent place in the Torah and in Jewish tradition. Its source is the mitzvah, recited twice daily as part of the Shma, that demands of us nothing less than the total love of God.

# "Love God"—How?

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your wealth.*
**Deuteronomy 6:5**

וְאָהַבְתָּ, אֵת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ.
**דברים ו:ה**

Biblical commentators long ago recognized the difficulty posed by this vaguely worded commandment. Love, after all, is an emotion. Judaism is primarily concerned with halachah, with deed and with a way of life. How is love to be transformed into action? What will demonstrate the extent of our commitment? How do we prove our passionate devotion?

The Torah follows the commandment to love God with three phrases: "With all your heart, with all your soul and with all your wealth." Here is a start to resolving our inquiry. But for clarity we need more than words. Ideally we would be served best by illustrations.

*And because the number of phrases meant to shed light on our responsibility is three, we have our first clue to the way we are meant to fulfill the mitzvah of love of God.*

The three phrases—with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your wealth—correspond to the three ways in which the patriarchs demonstrated their complete commitment to God. As the *Ba-al HaTurim* (Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher) on that verse brilliantly pointed out, the Hebrew word for "and you shall love," with but a slight rearrangement of its letters, is the same as the Hebrew word for "the ancestors": ואהבת. אותיות האבות

This is how the verse in the Torah commandment contains the solution to the problem of its vagueness. How shall we love God? Precisely because the mitzvah is unclear, the Torah alluded to three paradigms—the lives of the three patriarchs—to define the ideal love relationship. It is to them that the three phrases apply, in their historic sequence. "With all your heart" was Abraham. "With all your soul" was Isaac. "With all your wealth" was Jacob.

# The Love of Abraham

The daily morning prayers offer a brief review of Jewish history. We begin by quoting a selection from Nehemiah. The prophet quickly moves from the story of creation to the founder of Judaism:

*You are the Lord alone. You created the heavens and the heavens of heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and everything that is in them. And you bring life to all and the hosts of the heavens bow to you. You are the Lord, God, who chose Abram and took him out from Ur Kasdim, and made his name Abraham. And You found his heart faithful before you…*
**Nehemiah 9:6–8**

אַתָּה הוּא ה', לְבַדֶּךָ אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל צְבָאָם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הַיַּמִּים וְכָל אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם, וְאַתָּה מְחַיֶּה אֶת כֻּלָּם; וּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם, לְךָ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים. אַתָּה הוּא, ה' הָאֱלֹקִים, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתָּ בְּאַבְרָם, וְהוֹצֵאתוֹ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים; וְשַׂמְתָּ שְׁמוֹ, אַבְרָהָם. וּמָצָאתָ אֶת-לְבָבוֹ, נֶאֱמָן לְפָנֶיךָ ...
**נחמיה ט:ו-ח**

For this biblical summary of Abraham's greatness, one trait alone is singled out as the unique virtue that earned him the name change from Abram to Abraham, defining his mission as the

father of many nations: "And you found his heart faithful (*ne'eman*) before you." The heart is the source of faith. The Bible constantly relates the two. To have unswerving commitment is to have a *lev ne'eman*—a faithful heart.

Abraham was the one who grew up in the home of Terach, the idol maker. He witnessed paganism firsthand. He fearlessly destroyed the idols of his father and traveled from place to place to bring personal witness to the reality of monotheism.

To worship God and to love Him, it is obvious you must first believe in Him fully. It is not enough to suggest that there *may* be a God. Total commitment demands unwavering certainty. If you proclaim "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," then you must be prepared to shatter the false gods of your surroundings and to renounce the idols of your contemporaries. True love begins with a love as powerful as the one shown by the first of the patriarchs who was the living illustration of the commandment to love God "with all of your heart."

## The Love of Isaac

Some illustrations of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac portray an old man carrying an infant in his arms, ready to sacrifice his son in unquestioning obedience to God's commandment. That image is not true. Our sages relate that Isaac was 37 years old when the biblical incident took place. The meaning of the story therefore is not merely about a test of Abraham's faith. Isaac was already a mature, thinking adult capable of choosing his own response. Isaac knew that he was being taken to serve as a personal sacrifice to God. When the Torah tells us (Genesis 22:6) "and the two of them walked together," the implication is that they walked as one, in mutual recognition of what would transpire, both equally prepared to fulfill the incomprehensible commandment.

True, the Torah introduces the story with the words "And it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). Why call it "the test of Abraham" if Isaac was the one who knowingly and willingly would have to offer his own life? The answer is a profound and yet simple truth: Jewish thought teaches that it was a far greater test to force Abraham to kill than to ask Isaac to be killed. Isaac would die once. Abraham, had he been allowed to carry out the commandment, would have subsequently endured a lifetime of everlasting pain, for which death would have been a far preferable alternative.

Be that as it may, it was still Isaac who had to be prepared to die. He was ready to do so. Thus, in the biblical sequence illustrating the patriarchs' love of God, if Abraham was the one who showed us what it meant to believe with his entire heart, then Isaac demonstrated the next dimension of love. It is a love that ascended to the level of "with all your soul,"—a readiness to offer his soul back to the one who gave it. From Isaac we learned the mitzvah of martyrdom. And from Isaac we learned the great truth that if you believe in something fully, you must be prepared even to die for it.

When Rabbi Akiva, one of the 10 martyrs selected by Rome for public execution, knew that he faced his last moments on earth, he smiled while enduring the most painful torture. In response to his students who asked him how he could possibly accept his affliction in such manner, he said:

כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך - אפילו נוטל את נשמתך, אמרתי: מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו?
**ברכות סא:**

*All of my life I recited the words 'with all your soul' and could not be certain if ever the time came for me to demonstrate my willingness to fulfill them, that I would be able to do so. Now that I have the opportunity, I shouldn't fulfill it?*
**Berachot 61b**

Rabbi Akiva managed to merge Abraham's faith, with all his heart, to Isaac's willingness to accept martyrdom, with all his soul.

# The Love of Jacob

Believe in Him. Be prepared to die for Him.

What else could there possibly be?

It was Jacob who made a great discovery about the ideal way in which we are meant to serve God. It happened on Mount Moriah, the very spot on which the Temple would eventually be built.

Jacob had just fled from his home in fear of his brother Esau. Going to sleep at the site which would many years later assume such significance as the place of ultimate sanctity, Jacob had a dream:

וַיַּחֲלֹם, וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה, וְרֹאשׁוֹ, מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה; וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.
**בראשית כח:יב**

*He dreamt, and behold a ladder was set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the Angels of God were ascending and descending on it.*
**Genesis 28:12**

What was the meaning of this heavenly message? Jewish commentators identify the symbolic content of the dream with the essential message of Judaism. Indeed, the gematria of the Hebrew word for ladder, *sulam*, is identical to the word Sinai, the mountain on which God gave us the Torah—130. The ladder of Jacob's dream linking heaven and earth was meant to demonstrate that service of God doesn't call for the renunciation of all that is earthly; humanity's role is not to forsake this world but rather to sanctify it.

Christianity would teach that "my kingdom is not of this world." Those who seek to be holy would be counseled to cut themselves off from society, to enter a monastery, to renounce the pleasures of this world and to prepare themselves only for the next. Love of money was viewed as the root of all evil.

Not so in Jewish teaching. A man does not become a saint if he takes a vow of poverty. He becomes holy if he uses his wealth to enhance and sanctify the presence of God on earth. The angels of God ascend and descend the ladder—the very ladder which in Hebrew is numerically equivalent not only to Sinai but also amazingly enough to *mammon,* money—because what God asks of us is to find a way to bring about a mutually beneficial merger between heaven and earth, to infuse the profane with the sacred so that every part of creation can bring greater glory to God.

Symbolically, Jacob's dream was about Sinai and the proper use of material blessings. The metaphor of the ladder was meant to illustrate the ideal of holiness representing harmony between heaven and earth. The Christian crucifies the flesh in order to rise above it. The Jew sanctifies the flesh in order to elevate it. The Christian condemns wealth and takes a vow of poverty. The Jew controls wealth and seeks to utilize it in a way that will make the world a better place by spreading the message of Sinai.

Immediately after Jacob dreamt the dream, the Torah tells us:

וַיִּדַּר יַעֲקֹב, נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר: אִם-יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי ... וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן-לִי, עַשֵּׂר אֲעַשְּׂרֶנּוּ לָךְ.
**בראשית כח:כ-כב**

*And Jacob vowed a vow saying, if God will be with me … then of all that thou shall give me I will surely give the 10th unto Thee.*
**Genesis 28:20 – 22.**

The concept of tithing comes from Jacob, the Jacob who just had the vision of the ladder. Why would he have spoken of something as mundane as money immediately after experiencing the most sacred vision of his life? *Because that very vision enabled him to comprehend that one can and one must serve God even "with all your wealth."*

Is it necessary for the Torah to command loving God with one's possessions after it has already told us we must be prepared to die for Him? Remarkably enough, the Talmud tells us there are those whose money is dearer to them even than their bodies (see *Sanhedrin* 74a). It is not enough to be willing to die for a cause; harder still is the strength to continue to live for it by sacrificing one's wealth and possessions.

The three love commandments take us back to our three patriarchs. They serve as paradigms, living illustrations from our past to serve as role models for our relationship with the Almighty.

# The Love of Passover—"With All Your heart"

Let us now turn back to the *Sholosh R'golim* and see how this set of three resonates with the "love messages" of the three patriarchs. We will discover that the calendar is yet another way in which we are meant to reaffirm the commitments of the *Avot* as they exemplified the meaning of true love.

Passover was the first step in our relationship with God. Its purpose was to achieve belief:

וַיַּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיִּירְאוּ הָעָם, אֶת ה' וַיַּאֲמִינוּ, בַּה', וּבְמֹשֶׁה, עַבְדּוֹ.
**שמות יד:לא**

*And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.*
**Exodus 14:31**

Passover is the key to the first commandment focused on faith:

אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים.
**שמות כ:ב**

*I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.*
**Exodus 20:2**

Why did God bring 10 plagues upon the Egyptians before he took the Jews out of Egypt? Could He not have started with the most severe one first and do away with the need for the nine others? And why when Pharaoh was ready to comply and let the Jews go, did God harden his heart? God needed every single one of those plagues in order to bring destruction upon the 10 major idols of Egypt, just as Abraham shattered the false gods in the shop of his father, so that the Jews who left Egypt would know of a certainty that Hashem alone is God.

The message of Passover is *emunah*—complete and total faith—"with all your heart." Small wonder then that the Midrash tells us that when the three angels came to visit Abraham, Abraham was observing the holiday of Passover, although it was many years before the event it commemorates even took place.

# The Love of Shavuot—"With All Your Soul"

The acceptance of Torah at Sinai coupled belief to total commitment, even at the possible cost of one's life. The Jews stood "*under* the mountain"—God lifted the mountain over their heads and said if you obey the commandments, well and good, but if not I will drop the mountain upon you and you will not survive. Commitment to the law had consequences.

Some of God's commandments at Sinai were as incomprehensible to human understanding as the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Indeed, there is a midrash that mount Moriah itself was moved to the range of Sinai so that the story of the *akedah* be inextricably linked with *kabbolat Ha'Torah*:

*Where did Sinai come from? R. Yosi said, it was uprooted from Mount Moriah, like the challah (tithe) removed from dough, from the place where Isaac our forefather was bound. The Holy One, Blessed Be He said: Since Isaac their forefather was bound on it, it is proper for his children to receive the Torah.*
**Midrash Tehillim no. 68**

וסיני מהיכן בא, אמר ר' יוסי מהר המוריה נתלש, כחלה מעיסה, ממקום שנעקד יצחק אבינו, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא הואיל ויצחק אביהם נעקד עליו נאה לבניו לקבל עליו את התורה.
**מדרש תהלים מזמור סח**

Sinai and Shavuot, with its allusion to the need to emulate Isaac's willingness to offer one's life for God, add the component of "with all your soul" as the second message of the pilgrimage festivals.

# The Love of Sukkot—"With All Your Wealth"

Sukkot is the festival of the harvest. It is the time when Jews of old found themselves with the greatest wealth. Their granaries were full; they felt themselves rich beyond measure.

And with wealth came all the dangers of excessive material blessing. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses warned the people: "But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked" [32:15]—unbounded riches often create great and unmanageable temptation. Wealth can lead us to greed just as much as it can bring us closer to God.

Sukkot is the time when we are commanded to leave our homes, a key symbol of our possessions, to live in a fragile hut. It is meant to remind us that no matter our amount of our wealth, we live under the rule of the one above in the heavens who is ultimately responsible for

all of our blessings. The book from the Bible we read is Kohelet—written by Solomon, the wisest and wealthiest of all men—who shares with us his conclusion that:

*This is the last word: all has been said. Have fear of God and keep his laws because this is right for every man. God will be judge of every work, with every secret thing, good or evil.*
**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

סוֹף דָּבָר, הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע: אֶת-הָאֱלֹקִים יְרָא וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמוֹר, כִּי-זֶה כָּל-הָאָדָם. כִּי, אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֶׂה, הָאֱלֹקִים יָבִא בְמִשְׁפָּט, עַל כָּל-נֶעְלָם: אִם-טוֹב, וְאִם-רָע.
**קהלת יב:יג-יד**

The festival of the harvest is the time for us to put our possessions into proper perspective. It is the moment when we need to define the correct relationship between our faith and our finances. It is the holiday on which we need to dream Jacob's dream of the ladder in order to create the bridge between our bountiful goods here on earth and our spiritual values from heaven.

No wonder, too, that the very first mention of Sukkot in the Torah is in connection with Jacob:

*And Jacob journeyed to Sukkot and built himself a house and made booths for his cattle; therefore the name of the place is called Sukkot."*
**Genesis 33:17**

וְיַעֲקֹב נָסַע סֻכֹּתָה, וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בָּיִת; וּלְמִקְנֵהוּ עָשָׂה סֻכֹּת, עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם סֻכּוֹת.
**בראשית לג:יז**

How appropriate as well that the biblical reading for Sukkot comes from Deuteronomy chapter 14, beginning with the words "And tithe you shall surely tithe" [verse 22]—the mitzvah first practiced by Jacob in the aftermath of his dream of the ladder. This after all is the holiday dedicated to the proper fulfillment of the third and final love commandment —"and with all your wealth."

Three patriarchs, three ways in which we are bidden to express our love for God, and the *Sholosh R'golim,* the three pilgrimage festivals, all share in developing the identical theme of how to fulfill the mitzvah of ואהבת, to love God. The patriarchs are the paradigms of history. The three phrases that follow the love commandment are the guidelines incorporated into our daily prayers. The *Sholosh R'golim* are the annual reminders brought to us by the calendar. And every year, when we complete the cycle and absorb its threefold message, we know that we have brought into our lives *zman simchotenu*—a time for rejoicing.

# The Last Eight Pesukim in the Torah

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It would be quite an unusual autobiography that is so comprehensive that it describes the author's own death and burial; by the time the author has been buried, he has probably stopped writing. The Chumash, however, defies this premise: while not an autobiography, it was transcribed by one of its major protagonists, Moshe Rabbenu, who was nonetheless apparently able to record his own passing[1] and then continue writing for seven more *pesukim* (verses).

The Talmud[2] addresses this anomaly, and records two approaches in response: According to R. Yehudah (or R. Nechemia), these *pesukim* were actually not written by Moshe, but by Yehoshua. However, R. Shimon objects, noting that Moshe is instructed to "take the *sefer haTorah,*"[3] and that description would not be used if even one letter were missing. Rather, he asserts, until this point, G-d spoke, and Moshe repeated and wrote; from here until the end, G-d spoke and Moshe wrote the words "*bi-dema.*"

The common translation of *bi-dema* in this usage is that it means "with a tear," indicating that Moshe was crying, understandably, while receiving and transcribing the prophecy of his impending death. Some *rishonim*[4] indicate that the tear was actually the writing material, rather than ink; the Maharsha suggests Moshe did not want to use formal ink to write something that had not yet taken place and which could have the appearance of falsehood (*mechzi ki-shikra*).[5]

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[1] Devarim 34:5.

[2] *Bava Batra* 15a, *Menachot* 30a.

[3] Devarim 31:26.

[4] See, for example, Ritva and Rama to *Bava Batra,* and Rashi to *Bava Batra,* .s.v. *ho'il.*

[5] *Chiddushei Aggadot LaMaharsha, Bava Batra* 15. The Maharsha also understands Moshe's lack of verbal repetition as a function of this issue. This comment has led some to suggest that dishonesty is less of an issue in writing than in speech; however, the Maharsha's intent was presumably to note that while there was never a concern for actual dishonesty, since the words would come true, but since they had not yet come true, they *appeared* false when spoken out loud, a concern that would not apply to written words meant to be read later. See the citation of the Maharsha in R. Shalom Mordechai HaKohen's *Da'at Torah, Orach Chaim* 156; see also *Sefer HaMidot* of R. Nachman of Breslov, *Emet* 5 (compare, however, *Ha'arot* of R. Natan of Breslov). For an innovative interpretation of the Maharsha's comments, see R. Yitzchak Sternhill, *Kokhvei Yitzchak* 3:2:8 and 9. See also R. Meir Dan Plotzki, *Kli Chemdah, Parshat VeZot HaB'rakhah*; R. Chizkiyahu Fish, *Titten Emet L'Yaakov* 8; R. Eliezer Yehudah Waldenberg, *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* 15:12; R. Shimon Gabel, *Kli Golah* and *Sofrei Shimon* to *Berakhot* 43b; and see also R. Yehudah Assad, *Responsa Yehudah Ya'aleh, Yoreh Deah* 316. See as well R. David Avraham Mandelbaum, *Pardes Yosef HaChadash al HaTorah, Devarim,* II, pp. 1381-1382. For an extensive analysis of the Maharsha's

Others,[6] however, understood the term *dema* differently, as indicating *dimua,* or intermixture. In this view, Moshe wrote the words, which had not yet been actualized, in a jumbled form that would not be intelligible to the reader. Commenting along similar lines, the Gaon of Vilna[7] maintained that the two views in the Talmud were compatible, in that Moshe did write the words in their initial form, while Yehoshua rearranged the letters into a legible form and thus "wrote" them as well.[8]

The Talmud continues by asserting a halakhic implication of the fact that, whichever opinion is accepted, there is something unique about these eight *pesukim*. As such, they are granted a unique halakhic treatment: "*yachid korei otam*." The first of many mysteries contained in this brief phrase is a very basic one: what does it mean?

This simple question is not so simply answered. In fact, there are no fewer than six interpretations among the *rishonim*, some of which are reflected in halakhic practice to some degree, some of which have no such practical expression, some of which contradict each other, and all of which must be studied and explicated in order to arrive at a perspective on how Chazal and the *rishonim* related to this mysterious last passage of the Torah.

1. According to the RiMigash, cited in the *Shittah Mekubetzet* to *Bava Batra,* the intent is that these verses must be read together with earlier verses, without breaking before them (*ein mafsikin bahem*).[9] In this reading, the word "*yachid*" would mean "together" (*yachad*) [with other verses]. The reason for this, says the Ri Migash, is so as not to call attention to Yehoshua's authorship. While he does not expand on this, presumably the intent is that since the status of these *pesukim* is essentially, for practical purposes, the same as the rest of the Torah, it is unhelpful to confuse the populace by highlighting the irrelevant difference in their transcriptive history.

2. The *Shittah Mekubetzet,* before citing that view of the Ri Migash, also records in his name a completely opposite opinion, with an equally contrary rationale: The verses *must* be read separately, so that it *would* be highlighted that Yehoshua wrote them. In this reading, *yachid* means "alone."[10]

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comments in this context, see R. Dov Gedaliah Drexler in the journal *Beit Aharon Ve-Yisrael* XVIII:2 (104) pp. 26-35. [Some suggest that the *dema* was used instead of ink to address issues of *Shabbat;* see R. Avraham Yitzchak Glick, *Resp. Yad Yitzchak,* I, 136.]

[6] See Rama MiFanu, *Asarah Ma'amarot, Ma'amar Chikur Ha-Din,* ch. 13, as cited by *M'lo HaRoim* to *Bava Batra;* note, however, *Pardes Yosef HaChadash,* p. 1383-4.

[7] Cited in *Aderet Eliyahu.*

[8] See R. Mordechai Gifter, *Pirkei Torah,* II, pp. 334-340, who expands on this approach and explains how it can be harmonized with the text of the Talmud, which clearly implies the two views are in conflict with each other. See also R. Yitzchak Sorotzkin, *Gevurot Yitzchak al HaTorah,* II, 318.

[9] This could have been read to be the view of Rashi as well, who uses the same Hebrew phrasing in *Bava Batra*. However, the phrase is somewhat ambiguous and could also sustain other readings; note, for example, that Rabbenu Tam, cited below, uses similar phrasing to indicate a different view, which he understands to be in agreement with Rashi; indeed, Rashi to *Menachot,* s.v. *yachid,* takes this position explicitly. The Ra'avad, cited below, prefers an interpretation that uses this phrase as well.

[10] See also *Sefat Emet* to *Menachot.*

3. *Tosafot*[11] quotes the view of R. Meshulam that to read these *pesukim "yachid"* means that only the one receiving the *aliyah* should read from the Torah, without the accompaniment of an appointed *ba'al keriyah,* in contrast to contemporary practice, in which both men read together.

Rabbenu Tam, however, objects to this understanding, as it was not the practice in Talmudic times to have the simultaneous reading by two people; the contemporary usage of this method is only to prevent embarrassment on the part of an *oleh* who may not be capable of reading from the Torah, and is not a fundamental aspect of the reading itself. As such, it is unlikely that this is the intent of the Talmud's statement.[12]

4. Rabbenu Tam himself advocates another view, that "*yachid*" would mean the section should be read as one unified whole, without breaking it up into, for example, two sections of four *pesukim.* This is also the position expressed by Rashi in his commentary to *Menachot* and is recorded in *Shulchan Arukh.*[13]

5. The view of the Rambam[14] has received the most halakhic and analytic attention of all the opinions on the matter. In his understanding, *"yachid"* is used to mean the individual, as opposed to the community, i.e. a *minyan.*[15] Thus, as opposed to the rest of the Torah, these verses can be read without the presence of a *minyan.* This view is also cited by the *Shittah Mekubetzet* to *Menachot.*[16]

The Ra'avad objected to this opinion (preferring instead the interpretation "*shelo lihafskik bahem*"[17] and mentioning also a practice to follow the view associated with R. Meshulam). He considered the Rambam's opinion to be "very strange" (*inyan zarut hu m'od")* and asks a terse question: *ve-ha-tzibur heikhan halkhu?*—where did the *minyan* go?

However, as the *Kessef Mishneh* notes, the Ra'avad's position invites its own questions. Why is it so inconceivable that the *minyan* has "gone"—could individuals not have simply walked out (a possibility even more feasible when considering that it is Simchat Torah!)? Further, it is also possible that the Rambam is addressing a scenario in which there never was a *minyan* to begin with, and the question is whether at least these *pesukim* may be read from the Torah.

A number of *acharonim*[18] explain the Ra'avad's objection by noting some relevant halakhic background. There is a prohibition to leave a synagogue in the middle of the service, when doing so will render the *minyan* deficient. However, if this were to happen, the remaining members of

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[11] *Menachot* 30a, s.v *shmonah pesukim; Megillah* 23b, s.v. *tana.*

[12] See *Toldot Yitzchak al HaTorah* to *Devarim,* where it is recorded that in Provence the custom was in accordance with R. Meshulam.

[13] O.C. 428:7; see *Mishnah Berurah* #21.

[14] *Hilkhot Tefillah* 13:6.

[15] See also *Torat Chaim* to *Bava Batra.* See also Yechezkel From, in *Beit Yitzchak* 5741/5742, pp. 175-178.

[16] 30a, #22.

[17] See above, footnote 9.

[18] See, for example, R. Shlomo Wahrman, *Orot Chag HaSukkot* # 59 (and *She'erit Yosef,* IV, 32); R. Ya'akov Betzalel Zolty, *Mishnat Ya'avetz*, O.C. 72; R. Ya'akov David Ilan, *Masa Yad al HaTorah,* v. I, *Parashat VeZot HaBerakhah; Gevurot Yitzchak al HaTorah,* II, 317.

the erstwhile *minyan* would be permitted to continue the service.[19] Thus, the Ra'avad's question may be, since even other sections of the Torah may continue even after the quorum is lost, apparently maintaining a "*din tzibbur*" (the halakhic status of a *minyan*) even without the actuality of a *minyan*, "where did the [status of the] *minyan* go? This point is actually explicit in the *Sefer HaManhig,*[20] which notes that continuing to read from the Torah at that point would not constitute any kind of a deviation, as this is the rule with all sections of the Torah.[21]

As such, the *acharonim* who discuss this position offer suggestions as to what indeed distinguishes this section in the view of the Rambam. One possibility is that the general rule is that the service may only continue without a quorum if there is at least a majority of a *minyan* remaining, which is the position of the Ran[22] and recorded in *Shulchan Arukh.*[23] Accordingly, it is possible that while the rest of the Torah requires a majority to remain, this section may be read with even a smaller group remaining, or perhaps even one man, a literal "*yachid.*"[24]

Another possible distinction revolves around the question, raised by the *Kessef Mishneh,*[25] as to whether, if part of the *minyan* leaves, the license to continue extends to all of the *keriyat haTorah* that day, or only to an *aliyah* that has already been started. Perhaps the permissibility to continue only applied in the time when the entire *keriyat haTorah* was bracketed by one set of *berakhot.* When each *aliyah* is given its own set of *berkahot,* it may not be permissible to start a new *aliyah* without a full *minyan.* If so, the license to read the last eight *pesukim* as a separate *aliyah* without a *minyan* would be unique. The *Magen Avraham*[26] maintained that only the basic seven *aliyot* can be completed if the original *minyan* is no longer there; thus, a scenario can easily be envisioned where it would not be permitted to read this section, if not for its unique status, without a *minyan.*

Aside from the halakhic implications, it is necessary to understand the conceptual basis for the Rambam's view. Rav Soloveitchik[27] noted that the Rambam, when recording the unique status of these *pesukim,* focuses on a different explanation for that status than does the Talmud. The Talmud states that the *pesukim* are treated differently "*hoeil v'ishtani,*" "since they were

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[19] See *Megillah* 23b and *Tosafot,* s.v. *ein,* citing the *Yerushalmi; Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefilah* 8:6.
[20] *Hilkhot HaChag,* 62.
[21] See also *Pri Chadash,* OC 428.
[22] *Megillah* 14b in pages of the Rif, s.v. *yerushalmi.*
[23] *Orach Chaim* 55:2. It is possible, as noted in some of the above cited works, that this question is premised on a conceptual question: is the ability to continue without a full quorum reflective of the fact that a *davar she-b'kedushah* need only start with a *minyan,* but not necessarily maintain one for the derivation of the service (which would allow continuing even with a minority of the quorum remaining), or, rather, that a *tzibur* maintains its status as long as it retains a majority of its initial members. (See *Responsa Teshuvah MeiAhavah,* I, 31). R. Akiva Eiger (O.C. 55), assuming that a majority of a *minyan* is necessary, queried whether it must be six out of the original 10, or is it also viable to have five remaining, and then add a new man to the group to make six; this question is presumably intertwined with the previous one (see *Masa Yad,* ibid).
[24] See also *Keren Orah* to *Menachot.*
[25] *Hilkhot Tefillah* 8:6.
[26] 143:1.
[27] Quoted by R. Mordechai Willig, *"B'Inyan Keriyat HaTorah,"* in *Beit Yosef Shaul,* Vol IV (5754), pp. 163-164 and R. Herschel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav,* pp. 321-322.

differentiated [presumably in their transcription]. The Rambam instead attributes the distinction to the fact that the meaning of the *pesukim* is relevant only after the death of Moshe. R. Soloveitchik also noted the fact that for the rest of the Torah "G-d spoke, and Moshe repeated and wrote," while for these *pesukim,* "G-d spoke and Moshe wrote." He explained that in general, Moshe could only write that which he had relayed to the people as a commandment; only thusly did the content achieve the status of "Torah." Subsequently, it was written down, and became "*Torah SheB'Khtav*." The last eight *pesukim,* however, could not undergo such a process, as they were not yet factually realized.

Accordingly, these *pesukim* did not attain the sanctity of "*Torah SheB'Khtav,*" essentially for the reason highlighted by the Rambam.[28] This, in turn, impacts the requirement for a *minyan.* The need for a *minyan* in order to read from the Torah (distinct from the general need to have a *minyan* for a *"davar she-bi-kedushah*[29]) is to evoke a representation of the entire population of Israel, which was present when the Torah was originally given.[30] However, as these eight *pesukim* were excluded from that process, they are similarly exempted from the requirement of *minyan.*[31]

Following this approach, R. Mordechai Willig[32] suggested that this can also explain the view of R. Meshulam cited above. He suggests that even in Talmudic times, there was a practice to have two men read the Torah simultaneously, to evoke the original roles of G-d and Moshe. However, since these *pesukim* did not involve Moshe speaking, this passage should be exempted from that practice.[33]

6. While the Rambam's position may be the view that is most discussed, there is still one as yet unmentioned view that may have the most expression (at least, in a visible manner) in contemporary halakhic practice.[34] The Mordekhai[35] understood "*yachid*" in the sense of "*meyuchad,*" i.e. "distinguished" or "singular" and thus ruled that "*yachid korei otam*" means that

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[28] Rav Soloveitchik also suggested that this is the real reason Moshe cried: not for his impending death, which is the way of all flesh, but because of the realization that not all of the Torah would attain full sanctity at his hands. Compare also *Chiddushei HaGriz, Menachot* 30a, and *Gevurot Yitzchak al HaTorah,* II, 319. See also R. Avraham Yitzchak Baruch Gerlitzky, in the journal *Kovetz He'arot U'Biurim, (Ohalei Torah)* Vol XX, pp. 9-13.

[29] See R. Baruch Shimon Deutsch, *Birkhat Kohen,* 120. However, note *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Tefillah* 8:4, and *Kessef Mishneh* 8:5.

[30] See *Yerushalmi Megillah* 4:1 and Rosh, *Megillah* 4:1, regarding the obligation to read from the Torah in an atmosphere of *eimah.*

[31] See *Pirkei Torah,* ibid, for a similar approach, drawing on the position of the Rama MiFanu cited above. Note also that R. Moshe Shternbuch (*Moadim UZemanim,* VI, 79, and *Responsa Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* IV, 73) asserts that the Rambam's intent was not that one can fulfill the obligation of the reading of the Torah without a *minyan,* but that it is permissible to read this section of the Torah without a *minyan,* and without fulfilling any obligation. For an alternative explanation of the Rambam's opinion, see R. Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, *Responsa Divrei Yatziv, likkutim ve-hashmatot,* #22.

[32] *Beit Yosef Shaul,* ibid, pp. 164-168.

[33] A similar approach is considered by R. Yechezkel Lichtman in the Journal *Ohel Moshe,* 5753, pp. 38-39. For a different approach, see R. Ya'akov Ariel, *Responsa B'Ohalah Shel Torah,* II, 9:3.

[34] See R. Yom Tov Zanger, *Ma'adanei Yom Tov,* III, 41, who considers an actual case that was brought to him for a ruling, and is unwilling to rely on the Rambam for practical purposes.

[35] *Halakhot Ketanot* 955.

this aliyah should be given to a *talmid chakham*.[36] This does correlate with contemporary practice, which includes these *pesukim* in the honor known as "*chatan Torah*."[37]

Despite the correlation with practice, the *Chakham Tzvi*[38] found the Mordekhai's position to be baffling. Whichever Talmudic approach is accepted regarding the history of these *pesukim*, it seems clear that any differential status vis-a-vis the rest of the Torah would render these *pesukim* inferior, not superior. Why, then, should this *aliyah* be considered a distinguished one? It would seem, in relative terms, to have the lowest status of any *aliyah* in the Torah.[39]

R. Meir Dan Plotzki, in his *Kli Chemdah,*[40] endeavors to explain the view of the Mordekhai. He asserts that at this point, with the passing of Moshe Rabbenu, it is conceivable that despair may fall upon the Jewish people. Moshe has died, and his leadership and prophecy were unique in Jewish history. It is possible to come to the conclusion that his influence has died as well, and the Jews will never again benefit from G-d's providence as they did when Moshe was physically alive. The truth, however, is that Moshe's uniqueness notwithstanding, his torch has been passed to those who uphold his teachings, first to Yehoshua and then to all of those who have followed in that path until this very day. Thus, it is appropriate that the *aliyah* containing these words be given to a contemporary personification of these ideals, a teacher and student of Torah who can display the fact that the ideals and messages of Moshe live on.[41]

This perspective lends additional significance to the reading of this section on Simchat Torah. As the cycle of the Torah is completed, it is possible to get the impression that the Jews of our time are so far removed from the time of the giving of the Torah, and from Moshe's leadership, that we cannot attain the level of that generation. It is also noteworthy that there appears to be a debate among the *rishonim* as to why exactly *Ve-Zot Ha-Berakhah* is read on Simchat Torah.

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[36] See *Ta'anit* 10a.

[37] The Rama (O.C. 669) quotes the notion of granting this *aliyah* to a Torah scholar as a *"yesh omrim,"* but the later literature emphasizes the idea more strongly (see *Sha'ar Ephraim, Dinei Keriyat Simchat Torah,* and *Avnei Shoham* [Shlomowitz], *Chelek Chag HaSukkot,* #113). *Responsa K'naf Renanah,* 76, suggests that the practice is less important in the contemporary era when the *oleh* does not actually read aloud from the Torah, but certain distinctions should still be granted to this *aliyah,* such as not having more than one *oleh* share the *aliyah* (as is commonly done on Simchat Torah with the earlier *aliyot*).

[38] Responsa #13.

[39] See R. Yonatan Eibshutz, *Ya'arot Dvash*, I, p. 34, who understands this in the context of the earlier practice of only reciting *berakhot* at the beginning and at the end of the *kri'at haTorah.* Due to the unique character of the last eight *pesukim,* they required their own bracketing *berakhot,* and therefore should have a distinguished individual at the beginning, to parallel the *kohen*'s *aliyah* at the beginning of a standard *keriat haTorah.*

[40] *Parashat VeZot HaBerakhah.*

[41] A parallel approach can be found in *Resp. Yad Yitzchak,* I, 136, who writes that in truth, these *pesukim* were worthy of being sanctified fully by Moshe, but could not be for technical reasons. To make this point, the verses should be read by a Torah scholar.

It is interesting also that the *Kli Chemdah* also endeavors to explain the Rambam's view, that no *minyan* is necessary, in a way that does not render these verses inferior. He suggests that while a *minyan* is normally necessary during *keriyat haTorah* in order to evoke the *Shekhinah,* this is not needed for these *pesukim,* because, since Moshe did not repeat them, there was no interference between G-d's original expression of these words and their bestowal upon the Jews, and thus the *Shekhinah* is present on its own as a result. (Compare the extensive comments in *Netivot HaChaim, netiv* 12.)

While it seems self evident that the last *parshah* of the Torah should be read at the end of the cycle of the reading of the Chumash¸ and this is indeed expressed by *rishonim* and *poskim,*[42] there is another perspective also found in *rishonim,* that this section is read at the end of Sukkot to fulfill the requirement of reading from the Torah something that is relevant to the Yom Tov (*mei-inyano shel yom*).[43] In this understanding, the yearly cycle of the festivals should end with the public *berakhah* of Moshe to the people. For this reason, too, it seems important to emphasize that Moshe's influence survives his physical passing. It is an appropriate time to be reminded that Moshe's legacy continues to reverberate in the souls of the Jewish people, and for that inspiration to guide us as we usher in a new year.

[42] See *Chiddushei HaRan, Megillah* 31b, s.v. *le-machar,* and *Birkei Yosef,* O.C. 668.

[43] See Ran to the Rif, *Megillah* 11a s.v. *le-machar*. The *Meshekh Chakhmah* (*Hadran* at the end of *Chumash*) notes that this would be read even when a triennial cycle of Torah reading was used and the *Chumash* was not being completed that day; see his explanation there. See also R. Ephraim Greenblatt in the journal *Noam,* pp. 208-211 (and see also his comments, pp. 212-217, concerning the eight *pesukim*).

# Etrog Essentials

## And 8 surprising lessons on finding a spouse

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"Can we open the box? Is it beautiful? I want to take a look!" Of all the preparations for Sukkot, perhaps the most anticipated part is the selection and excitement surrounding the etrog—the "*pri etz hadar*" (the fruit of the beauteous tree), one of the *arba minim* (four species) commanded by Hashem in *Parshat Emor* (23:40) in celebration of the holiday.

Unlike the lulav, hadassim and aravos, where the visual differences in quality are less apparent to the uneducated, . and unlike the standardized pre-fab sukkot which remain relatively constant each year (except for the kids' creative new decorative masterpieces!), the etrog is carefully selected, shopped for and brought back home in eager expectation of the yom tov. And everyone has an opinion about its appearance and quality!

The interesting halachot, controversial history and fascinating tidbits surrounding the etrog are perhaps as colorful as the yellow fruit itself. As a hallmark of the *chag*, the search and purchase of the precious etrog takes much time and effort; and one takes great pride and cherishes the final selection. The halachic requirements and historical tales surrounding this mitzvah are fascinating, and can homiletically provide key life lessons for the "other" search that affects so many—finding a spouse.

## A Little Background

Mentioned as a possible fruit plucked from the *etz hadaas* (tree of knowedge) in Gan Eden,[1] the identity of the etrog is a tradition handed down from Har Sinai, and the Rambam says its identity has never been questioned.[2] As a citrus fruit, with the Latin name *citrus medica*, known as "citron" in English, it is related to the orange, mandarin, grapefruit and lemon, and was the first citrus fruit variety to arrive in the Mediterranean region.[3]

Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to take the etrog (and three other minim):

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[1] *Bereishit Rabbah* (15:7),

[2] Rambam, Commentary to the Mishnah, Introduction to Seder Zeraim. As a side note, the gematria of "*pri etz hadar*" is 660, the same as "*etrogim*."

[3] Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky, "The Extraordinary History of the Etrog," *Jerusalem Post* (Oct. 2005) available at www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/The-extraordinary-history-of-the-etrog.

*And you shall take for yourselves on the first day (of Sukkot) the fruit of the beauteous tree…*
**Vayikra 23:40**

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר ...
**ויקרא כג:מ**

The word "*hadar*" can mean several things. Of course, "*hadar*" is usually translated as "beautiful" though it can also be translated as "that dwells" from the Hebrew word "*dar*." The etrog is one of the only fruits that "dwells" on its tree for all seasons. Another view traces the word to "*idur*" (from the word hydro) meaning water. The etrog tree cannot survive on rainwater alone and needs additional water to be properly irrigated.[4]

According to Rashi, Hashem initially intended the fruit *and* bark of the trees in the Garden of Eden to have the same taste. While the other trees declined, the etrog still retains that unique quality.[5] The bark of the etrog tree and the etrog itself taste the same. In fact, the phrase "*pri etz hadar*" includes the word "*etz*" (tree), to demonstrate that the tree has the same flavor as the "*pri,*" (fruit).[6]

The etrog is indigenous to only a few areas in the world and can cross-pollinate very easily. To properly fulfill the mitzvah, it is essential to know that it wasn't grafted from a different species or is the offspring of a hybrid utilized to make the tree stronger.

There are a few basic qualifications for an acceptable etrog:[7]

- As mentioned, the tree upon which it grows cannot be grafted ("*murkav*") from a different species—i.e. it needs to be pure;[8]
- It must be defined as "*hadar*" (beautiful) according to objective Torah requirements. It should be free of certain types of blemishes, partially yellow and whole (e.g. no piece is missing) with an intact *pitom*—(see below for further discussion);
- The etrog should be not too large or too small; it's minimum size is approximately the size of a hen's egg;
- The shape should not be round; instead, it should be broader at the bottom and narrower towards the top;
- There has to be no halachic reason not to eat the etrog (e.g., land ownership should be unquestionable, i.e. not stolen; the fruit can't be "*orlah*"—produced in the first three years).[9]

Besides these requirements, additional elements ensure that it be top quality, "*mehudar,*" making it even more exquisite than "*hadar.*" These include the *pitom* being aligned with the stem, that the etrog be free of other markings in the upper third of its body, and that there exist bumps and ridges to differentiate from the smoothness of a lemon.

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[4] *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).
[5] Rashi, Bereishit 1:12.
[6] *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).
[7] These laws are summarized in ch. 648 of *Shulchan Aruch* and its commentaries.
[8] While the Gemara and Rishonim do not address this question, the Acharonim dealt with it at length and gave different reasons to disqualify an *etrog ha-murkav* from use on Sukkot. For an extensive discussion on the matter see "*Etrog Ha-murkav*" – "The Grafted Etrog," based on a shiur by Harav Yehuda Amital available at: www.vbm-torah.org/sukkot/suk64rya.htm
[9] *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).

Chazal also learn from the extra word "*ulekachtem lachem*," "and you shall take for yourselves," that the etrog must belong to you.[10] It cannot be stolen or even purchased on credit. It is also an individual mitzvah that can't be done by someone else on your behalf—*you* must pick up the etrog yourself to fulfill the commandment.

## *Mah Pitom*!

The requirement that the *pitom*, the stamen, be present on a kosher etrog has undoubtedly been the source of heartache and anxiety through the years. It has also ensured that the fruit be treated delicately, often wrapped in silken flax.

The top of the etrog (the "crown") is the "*pitom,*" comprising the style (*dad*)—the central, stick-like portion at the bottom—and a rounded portion on the very top called the "stigma" (*shoshanta*). Other citrus fruits usually do not preserve the *pitom* in the same way as the etrog does. The bottom of the etrog, the "*oketz,*" has an indentation that is the point where the stem is attached to the fruit.

Some etrogim lose the *pitom* in an early stage of their growth, and are considered kosher by most poskim. Whether an etrog is kosher if the *pitom* is knocked off at a later stage is dependent upon whether it was a result of trauma, what the resulting indentation looks like and whether the *dad* (style) remains on the fruit.[11]

Interestingly, it is a little easier to find etrogim with a perfectly preserved *pitom* since a discovery in the 1970's by Professor Eliezer E. Goldschmidt of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a world-renowned horticulturalist and etrog expert. He found that spraying the trees with the synthetic auxin, Picloram, prevents the fall-off of the *pitom*.[12]

If the *pitom* falls off after the first day of Sukkot (or after the first two days outside of Israel), many poskim will allow its use for the other days, although it is controversial whether a *bracha* should be recited.[13]

## Historical Happenings

Numerous coins and mosaics exist from the Roman and Byzantine eras, and even from the Bar Kochba revolt, which prominently display an etrog. A recent significant archaeological dig on an ancient palace's garden in Kibbutz Ramat Rachel found remnants of etrog pollen on the plaster walls, which offered proof of early etrog cultivation as far back as post-Bayit Rishon era (about 538 BCE).[14]

Still, the citron/etrog tree is not easy to grow and doesn't thrive outside temperate climates. With the added restriction that the delicate tree cannot be grafted to a stronger base, such as a

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[10] *Masechet Sukkah* (29b).

[11] Y.M Stern, *The Halachos of the Four Species*, p. 25, Feldheim Publications, 1993.

[12] Personal correspondence with Prof. Goldschmidt, July 9, 2013.

[13] *Mishna Berurah* 649:36.

[14] Rinat Zafrir, "Jerusalem Dig Uncovers Earliest Evidence of Local Cultivation of Etrogs," *Haaretz* (February 12, 2012), available at: www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/jerusalem-dig-uncovers-earliest-evidence-of-local-cultivation-of-etrogs-1.410505.

lemon tree, cultivating an etrog orchard is difficult and tedious work. The steep price made ownership of the etrog a luxury for many Ashkenazi Jews in years gone by, and stories abound on the difficulties individuals and communities faced in fulfilling the mitzvah.

Two "halachic adventurers," Dr. Ari Zivotofsky and Dr. Ari Greenspan, have extensively studied the captivating history of the etrog and related anecdotes.[15] Some of their most interesting tidbits include:

- In 1329, the victorious faction in Florence, Italy, issued written decrees restricting commerce in etrogim when they conquered Pisa, in an effort to corner the market in this lucrative business.
- A touching story in mid-15th-century Germany tells of several communities banding together to purchase a single etrog. They cut it into several pieces and distributed the portions to surrounding towns and villages. Unfortunately, the leading posek considered the pieces to be invalid because they weren't whole and even more important, because they arrived dried out, shriveled and smaller than the requisite *shiur*.
- Bohemian Jews had to pay a huge annual tax (40,000 florins) to Empress Maria Theresa in the 1700s for the right to import etrogim into that region.
- The infamous "Corfu Etrog War" of the mid-19th century resulted in one of the fiercest halachic debates across the Jewish world in that era. Rabbis across Europe and America aligned themselves in opposite camps pronouncing judgment on the purity of the exquisitely beautiful etrogim raised on the Greek Island of Corfu. Nasty allegations were raised by competitors since they couldn't fathom that one can produce such a hardy, large and beautiful looking specimen with an intact *pitom* without grafting. Livelihoods and fortunes were wiped out. Thousands of etrogim were dumped in the ocean to raise prices while the debate raged. The acrimonious battles persisted for decades, ending only in 1891 when a blood libel begun by the non-Jewish Greek farmers against Jews on the island provided further ethical and political reasons to boycott the Greek etrogim.
- With the cultivation of Israeli-grown etrogim in the late 19th century, complete with halachic endorsement by Rabbi Avraham Isaac Hacohen Kook (then Chief Rabbi of Jaffa), Eretz Yisrael etrogim became increasingly popular. The "Fruit of the Goodly Tree Association" promoted the purity of the Israeli etrog, and famed Lithuanian Rabbi Yechiel M. Epstein, author of the *Aruch Hashulchan*, recommended using the Israeli etrogim because of the importance of specifically buying from the Land of Israel. Rabbi Hezekiah Modena (19th century, Israel) wrote a memorable line to describe such fruits: "If Israel's etrogim are not the loveliest on earth, they will be the loveliest in Heaven."

Nowadays, etrogim from the Holy Land remain in high demand, though Yemenite, Moroccan and California etrogim are also available. Interestingly, there is a Presbyterian farmer in

[15] Ari Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan, "The Story behind the Esrog," *Jewish Observer* (October 2008), available at: halachicadventures.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/2008-JO-esrog.pdf and Greenspan and Zivotofsky op. cit.

Scottsdale, Arizona, working diligently to make a viable commercial enterprise from this Jewish mitzvah with his newly planted citron orchards.[16]

# Why Etrogim Relate to Relationships

A few days before Sukkot about two years ago, my husband brought home his prized etrog. I know he spends time searching for just the right one and is always excited to return with his "find." Good wife that I am, when I opened the box to take a peek at the fruit, I immediately critiqued his selection. "What? You call **that** beautiful?" I inquired delicately. "It is all lumpy, a little heavy on the bottom, has ridges down the side and a greenish tint." With perfect patience and a wry smile, he replied that, "you simply don't know the definition of beauty. It isn't what you **think** is attractive… it's the Torah's definition of what makes an etrog '*mehudar.*' These ridges, lumps and particular shape are actually the optimal features for a beautiful etrog."

After I quickly changed the conversation (and determined to make jelly out of that yellow specimen in the not-too-distant future), the fascinating analogies to relationships suddenly hit home. At the YUConnects office at Yeshiva University, our educational programs include guiding young adults on values that will lead to long-term healthy relationships. We engage in vibrant discussions on important attributes to seek in a spouse, offer counseling in deciding "the right one," and cultivate lessons for maintaining *shalom bayis* (marital harmony). There were clearly striking correlations to the esteemed etrog.

If anyone has been to the market in Mea Shearim Erev Sukkot, or similar markets worldwide, they would witness thousands of pious Jews scrambling in their quest to select beautiful kosher *arba minim*, with a prime focus on finding the "perfect etrog." Some people wait until the last minute, some are overly picky and others decide to put all their resources and time into the endeavor.

Certainly, not all analogies drawn from the halachic and historical research will apply to long-lasting relationships; we do not recommend slicing and sharing a spouse with the rest of the community, nor do we "*posul*" (invalidate) an individual for a birthmark on their upper torso!

Still, the holiday of Sukkot is replete with comparisons to the loving relationship Hashem has with Bnei Yisrael. The sukkah itself is compared to the chuppah. This time of year is the re-igniting of the passion for the observance of the mitzvot after the repentance period of *Aseret Yimei Teshuva* and Yom Kippur.

With that in mind, pursuit of obtaining the "*mehudar*" fruit, coupled with general halachic guidelines in the care of the etrog, has lessons for us all. The following observations will make you stop, think, and view the etrog—*and hopefully, your spouse*—with greater appreciation:

### 1) Beauty is in the Eye of the Torah—Then the Choice is Yours!

As mentioned, "*mehudar*"—beautiful features—are defined by the Torah. What may not appear to be important is considered precious if it meets proper halachic ideals.

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[16] Chavie Lieber, "Down on America's Next Big Etrog Farm," *JTA* (Sept. 23, 2012), available at: www.jta.org/2012/09/23/life-religion/down-on-americas-next-big-etrog-farm.

However, the preferred shape and style vary greatly between cultures. Some notable kinds include the **Moroccan** classic "hourglass" shaped ridge, commonly called the "gartel," favored by many Chassidim; the popular **Chazon Ish** selection that has many ridges; the larger **Yemenite** kind; and the greener Italian **Yanover** variety. Each of these is acceptable; each is sought after by different kinds of Jews and ultimately cherished.

So, too, in a search for a spouse there are various characteristics and personalities that are suited for different people. Some qualities should be essentials: honesty, integrity, devotion and compatibility of religious/Torah values. Our sages have offered guidance and taught us about critical qualities that will be important for long-lasting bonds—but they don't include tablecloth colors or the style of hat. Nonetheless, our particular preference on the actual look, personality or form can certainly vary and we are justified in seeking mutual attraction, lumps and ridges included!

**2) Hang in There—Maturity Matters**

Another meaning for the word "*hadar*" is "dwelling," since the *pri etz hadar* etrog remains on the tree even after it ripens. Season after season, the etrog endures and doesn't fall off like other fruits. Part of the etrog's appeal within the Jewish concept of beauty is the resolve of the fruit to "hang on" and withstand the elements trying to bring it down.[17]

Naturally, maturity in entering a marriage is an essential trait. So is perseverance. When two people commit to matrimony, their personal determination to make it last is a key barometer whether it will stand the test of time. Much like the etrog, admired for its ability to "hang in there," a crucial criterion for a spouse should be their fortitude to partner together season after season.

3) **Fragrance and Flavor**

The etrog is also unique in that it has both fragrance and flavor. Unlike the other *minim* (species), which have none or only one of those characteristics, the etrog contains both qualities and is therefore compared to a person with both Torah knowledge (flavor) and good deeds (fragrance).

When seeking a soul-mate, one certainly should look for the person who will encapsulate ***both*** attributes, not just a bright intellectual type. Instead, seek someone who performs "*chesed,*" acts of kindness. Similarly, an observant Jew cannot rest on his acts alone; everything is based on understanding Torah principles so that a solid foundation will help build a strong Jewish home.

4) **The Heart is Where it's At**

Each of the *arba minim* is also compared to a body part: the lulav is the upright spine, the hadasim are the eyes and the aravot the mouth/lips. While all come together to serve Hashem in this mitzvah, the etrog is the centerpiece—the caring and compassionate heart.[18]

With all that is written about beauty, values and qualities to seek, ultimately it is that inner sensation/emotion that guides one person to another. Let the heart rule; it is usually not wrong.

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[17] See R. Joshua Shmidman, "The Etrog: Jewish Beauty and the Beauty of Jewishness," *Jewish Action* (Sept. 26, 1997), available at: www.ou.org/jewish_action/09/1997/the-etrog-jewish-beauty-and-the-beauty-of-jewishness.

[18] Vayikra Rabbah 30:14

5) **Check out the Roots**

Halachic authorities are strict about requiring careful examination regarding the source of the etrog orchards to ensure no cross-pollination or grafting of the citron tree with other trees. Rabbinical certification that the tree is not "*murkav*" (grafted) authenticates that the base of the tree wasn't grafted with a lemon tree to make cultivation easier.

Just as we inquire about the genetics of our etrog, genetic testing for compatibility relating to genetic diseases is important in the dating process. Utilizing the numerous open-testing venues available today such as Yeshiva University's Program for Genetic Health (yu.edu/geneticheath) enables a couple to make informed decisions about the relationships they pursue.

**6) No Microscope Please**

When searching for an etrog, it is appropriate to make sure there are no holes or marks, especially on the upper third of the fruit. However, if a mark is visible only via a microscope but not to the naked-eye, the etrog is 100 percent acceptable.[19] "*Lo nitena Torah le'mal'achey ha'sharet*" ("The Torah was not given to the ministering angels"), means that the Torah's laws do not demand anything beyond ordinary human capability. Minute imperfections don't count.

This has many obvious comparisons to relationships. Not only shouldn't one examine so closely to uncover tiny flaws, but it may not always be best to check, re-check and check again every reference and opinion about a person. No one is perfect and no one benefits by microscopic inspections.

**7) Handle with Care**

To prevent piercing the rind or breaking off the *pitom*, an etrog must be handled delicately, wrapped in silken flax or soft foam. Contact with a sharp object can invalidate the etrog and render it useless for the holiday.

Relationships may not be *quite* as fragile, but that is no reason to proceed with abandon. Words and actions truly pierce the heart and can be very destructive. Even unintended passing remarks can't be withdrawn, and the resulting hurt may be difficult to mend or can even be irreparable. If only we all would treat our loved ones as well as the etrog in the silver box…

8) **Never Too Early to Daven**

The *Bnei Yissachar*[20] cites Chazal who tell us to daven for a beautiful and kosher etrog on Tu B'shevat, when trees first produce sap, many months before Sukkot. He states that the Hebrew phrase in the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 1:1, is "*Rosh Hashana l'Ilan*" ("the tree"), written in the singular, not "*l'ilanot*" ("the trees"), to give tribute to the only fruit that is physically used in observance of a mitzvah, the etrog. It is never too early to daven for Hashem's help in finding the right etrog, even in the winter month of Shevat.

With all the guidelines, research and advice offered on finding a "*zivug*" (mate), nothing compares to proper davening to the Almighty. Some parents even begin their prayers the moment their child is born since Divine intervention is what ultimately brings two partners

[19] R. Stern, op. cit., pg. 22.

[20] *Shevat* no. 2.

together. As Hashem is the matchmaker for us all, heartfelt supplications for the special someone will be heard and answered *l'tovah* (for good). May the search for the perfect etrog to honor Hashem be a zechus to find the "perfect-for-you" soul-mate with beautiful qualities both on the outside as well as within.

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# Sukkot and Emerging Adulthood

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## Introduction

Sukkot is a meaningful holiday full of rich symbolism. Additionally, Sukkot is a unique holiday in that it is one part of two groups of Jewish holidays. In *Pachad Yitzchak*, Yom Kippur 8:8, Rav Yitchak Hutner points out that Sukkot is both the last leg of the *Shalosh Regalim* (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot) and the Tishrei holiday cycle, and in both of these roles, Sukkot has the characteristic of being a time of transition. In the first role, as part of the *Shalosh Regalim*, Sukkot is connected to leaving Egypt, and it celebrates the time Bnei Yisrael wandered in the desert prior to entering the Land of Israel and being a full-fledged nation. In the second role, following Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Sukkot serves as the bridge that an individual undergoes between the *teshuva* (repentance) process of the Yamim Noraim and the mundane world of the every day. While both of these roles portray Sukkot in a different light, they both contain a similar theme—that of developing our national and individual identity as members of G-d's nation.

## Emerging Adulthood

The qualities of the transition of Sukkot bring to mind the time of life most associated with transition, which is late adolescence and what is being termed today as "emerging adulthood." By examining some of the necessary elements involved in progressing through this stage of transition, and its parallels with the holiday of Sukkot, we can gain interesting insights that are relevant for all stages of life. In the last decade, there has been growing research on this population and how adolescence and adulthood have changed. In the late 1990s, Jeffrey Arnett coined the term "emerging adulthood" to refer to the young adult population, aged 18-28, and he has made the case that, in many ways, the developmental and behavioral tasks that were traditionally associated with adolescence now continue well into early adulthood, and that the ways of defining adulthood are different than they were even 30 years ago. Whereas adulthood used to be defined as being financially independent and having a family of one's own, now adulthood is defined more in terms of being able to make independent decisions, knowing one's values, and taking responsibility for one's actions (Arnett, 2000). In his famous theory of development, Erik Erikson stated that identity formation was the main task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and research indicates that for many people, this task is now becoming the

focus of the next stage of life, that of emerging adulthood, thus making "identity exploration a defining feature of this stage."

## Identity Formation in Emerging Adulthood

Having a coherent and strong sense of identity has been shown to be associated with many positive outcomes, including general wellbeing, a higher sense of self efficacy, less depression and anxiety, and general happiness with one's life (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, Ritchie, 2013). There are two factors, among others, that are borne out in the research as being crucial in the formation of a solid and coherent self-identity; those are meaning-making, which is connected to commitment, and creating and maintaining attachments with loved ones.

## Meaning Making and Identity

One model of measuring identity is termed narrative identity, and it focuses on the way in which a person tells the story of his life. This model posits that identity is slowly formed when a person experiences events, and especially turning-point events, and then reflects on them, actively makes meaning out of them and then makesthen makes a commitment as a result (McAdams, 1993).

Several studies have looked at storytelling and how one talks about an experience as a step in forming an identity. Two types of stories emerge: self-explanation and entertainment. Self-explanation stories contain meaning, lesson-learning and the attainment of insight, as opposed to entertainment stories that revolve around a factual description of the events of the story without much, if any, analysis of those events. In one study, researchers examined the ways in which students who went on a trip to volunteer with orphans recounted their trip, and then the researchers measured their level of volunteer behavior later on. They found that the volunteers who talked about their experiences using themes of personal growth, understanding about themselves, and changes they have seen in themselves, as opposed to just relating positive experiences or more limited lessons about what they saw, were more likely to continue to volunteer in the future. Such reflective statements included, "I now know the kind of person I am, that I am stronger than I thought" or "I now see that I really feel fulfilled when I help people and I understand more about how I dealt with things in the past and how I want to deal with them now." In sum, when a person reports being changed or transformed and connects this change or transformation with their own characteristics, it indicates that new goals are being drawn and strong commitments to action and values are being made (Cox & McAdams, 2012).

In another study about storytelling, the focus was on turning points. Turning points are events that are highly emotional, often have some difficult component, and can involve achievement, relationships, or mortality (examples include graduation or a first job, beginning or ending of a relationship and the birth or loss of a loved one). Emerging adults were asked to talk about turning points in their lives and were measured for how much insight about themselves and transformation was discussed. The study found that emerging adults derive more meaning from events involving relationships than those revolving around achievements. It also found specifically that turning a negative experience into a positive one was associated with meaning and that people with a more optimistic view and belief in their abilities found it easier to make

meaning of events (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Individuals with higher meaning-making in their stories were associated with a more stable sense of identity. In sum, these studies and many others indicate that meaning-making is connected to a stronger sense of identity as seen in making commitments and having a strong sense of self.

## Identity and Attachment

In addition to meaning-making, another element that contributes to strong identity formation throughout life and even during emerging adulthood, is the area of attachment. Attachment refers to the connection that one has with caregivers and loved ones and how he can utilize these connections during times of stress. Emerging adults with a secure attachment state of mind view attachments positively and are able to rely on loved ones while beginning to find independence. Secure attachment state of mind is associated with countless positive outcomes, including being able to cope with difficult tasks, having better and more intimate relationships, stronger self-esteem and less depression and anxiety (Scharf, Maysleless, Kivenson-Barron, 2004). How is secure attachment achieved? It often is associated with authoritative parenting, as opposed to authoritarian or permissive parenting (Marsiglia, Walczyk, Buboltz, Griffith-Ross, 2007). Homes with authoritative parenting are typified by warmth, discussion of values, explanation of reason for rules and tolerance for individuality. During the transition of adolescence and young adulthood, parents in these homes are able to walk the perennial tightrope that balances love and limits, rules and flexibility, and supportive understanding with high expectations. They can no longer be involved in every decision and have to allow internalization of parental values without external coercion. Since young people who are exposed to this type of parenting or mentoring feel strongly supported, they are more able to explore the world around them. As such, parenting and teaching in this way affords young people the opportunity to make choices and build their own identity. [Research indicates that authoritative parenting and secure attachments are correlated to a more coherent sense of self in emerging adulthood.]

In sum, research shows that meaning-making and attachments play a large role in identity formation, as Erik Erikson summarized: "Parents must not only have certain ways of guiding by prohibition and permission; they must also be able to represent to the child a deep, and almost somatic conviction that there is a meaning to what they are doing (Erikson, 1950)." I would like to suggest that this is a model we can find taking place in Sukkot in its two roles as well.

## Identity and Sukkot: Meaning-Making

When viewed as part of the holidays of Tishrei, Sukkot serves as a stamp to end the Tishrei holidays and the process of repentance that have taken place during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, **and parallels the meaning-making aspect of identity formation.** The teshuva process is a perfect **turning-point event** because it is emotional; it is about relationships and has the inherent potential to turn positive into negative. The extent to which the repentance process will have a meaningful impact on our lives, on our identity as Jews, will depend on our willingness and ability to **narrate or tell a story** of the teshuva we just performed on ourselves in a meaningful and transformative way. Sukkot is the holiday of unbridled joy because we have recommitted ourselves to our internal values and beliefs and we have a clean slate, a new chance.

This is not a new version of oneself, but a clean and polished one, one that needs to be connected to our past and our future. Will we ask the questions about what we learned about ourselves, what caused us to want to change, and how we hope to maintain this change. Will we engage in immediate commitments to further solidify our gains? Living in the sukkah allows us the space and the time to reflect and to work hard to internalize for ourselves the meaning and solidify our commitment of our repentance process.

In fact, in *Orot HaTeshuva*, 14:30, Rav Kook states that Sukkot serves to solidify the gains made during the Ten Days of Repentance by putting the newly attained goals and spiritual heights into everyday practice. The holiday of Sukkot deepens the **meaning**, and therefore the impact, of the process of repentance in many ways. For example, the very act of running immediately after Yom Kippur to build a sukkah embodies the idea that one's values are only solidified if they are turned into action, and the immediacy of the action is a **sign** of that commitment. (Additionally, the sukkah itself represents living in a new, spiritual home, and makes the statement that in life, as well as in prayer, one is newly committed to G-d.) Last Lastly, one can say that Sukkot serves as a unique space between the total immersion in holiness of a Yom Kippur and the more mundane activities of everyday life. This time of transition allows for reflection and internal dialogue in which one can build upon what was just experienced during the *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*. As such, as the last leg of the Tishrei holidays, Sukkot emphasizes our internalization, commitment and meaning-making of the process of repentance, to identify ourselves as *avdei Hashem*, servants of G-d.

# Identity and Sukkot: Attachment

On the other hand, when viewed as part of the *Shalosh Regalim*, Sukkot is connected to Yetziat Mitzrayim and the development of Bnei Yisrael as a nation and can be seen as **highlighting the attachment aspect of identity.** The verses in Vayikra (23:42-43) expresses this idea, stating, "You shall dwell in sukkot (huts) for seven days … in order that future generations may know that I made the Bnei Yisrael live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt." In relation to leaving Egypt, Sukkot is a time of transition figuratively and literally. It is the physical time of transition from slavery to independence, from living in Egypt to eventually living in the Land of Israel. It is also the time of transition developmentally, in the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and G-d. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, on the above verses, pointed out that the Bnei Yisrael were required to transition themselves from the total dependence on G-d while witnessing overt miracles, to an internalized understanding that their reliance on G-d must be complete even while not witnessing overt miracles. When G-d removes these overt miracles, man has more free choice in regard to his belief and actions, and, therefore, his faith in G-d and fidelity to his mitzvot require more active decision-making and a greater commitment. As such, the holiday of Sukkot is a time of transition and change in **attachment** of Bnei Yisrael to G-d. **Just like emerging adults need the support and love to form attachments and the distance and limits to internalize their own values, so, too, the Bnei Yisrael needed that from G-d.**

Further, we know that the sukkah represents the Clouds of Glory, according to R. Eliezer (*Sukkah* 11b). The Clouds of Glory are emphasized for their protective nature during the time of transition for the Bnei Yisrael in the desert. The *Kli Yakar* (Vayikra 23:43) beautifully

describes the Clouds as the sign to the Bnei Yisrael of the constant protection of G-d and His presence in our midst. The Clouds of Glory represent our dependence on G-d during our time of transition in the desert. The image of the sukkot as being the Clouds of Glory has many parallels to authoritative parenting. The Cloud is a constant presence, yet it is not overpowering. It is not obvious all the time, but it is always there. It moves and ebbs and flows, but it is neither rigid nor fixed. The Clouds of Glory provide protection, but they also hover from a distance. We also know that the Cloud turned to a pillar of fire at night. Why? When the day turned into night, then the Cloud, the loving gentle presence, turned into a bright, strong guiding light. Just as Bnei Yisrael needed the light of G-d at night to make them feel safe when things really were frightening or the uncertainty was overwhelming, so too people need the strong guidance and support of loved ones, at difficult times, to become even more visible and clear.

In sum, there is much that we can learn from Sukkot and from the research on emerging adults and adolescents that can teach us new ways of interacting with young adults and can help us to deepen our own spiritual identity. In dealing with emerging adults in our lives, we can try to provide support, but encourage independence, as they attempt to slowly transfer external voices of guidance and instruction to internal voices, just as the Shechina traveled from overt miracles to the Cloud of Glory and eventually to the Mishkan in the hearts of the people. Parents and teachers can allow for opinions to be shared, but set limits when necessary, and encourage loved ones to view events in their lives as part of their own narrative and story. In terms of our spiritual development, we can all benefit from focusing both on our dependence and connection with G-d through building *emunah*, and on ways to increase meaning in our lives. We can aim to view events as possible turning points, situations that can influence values and priorities. Finally, we can talk about events in terms of lessons and insights we gained, and encourage meaningful questions and thoughtful storytelling from all those around us. With these insights we can hopefully enter the new year with renewed inspiration and understanding.

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# *Chanukat ha-Mikdash*: A Sukkot Celebration

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The *haftarot* for *chag Sukkot* seem to have little to do with Sukkot. Several deal with wars *be-acharit hayamim*, the end of days, and one—the *haftarah* chosen for the second day in the Diaspora—takes us back to the inauguration of the Temple in the days of King Shlomo. I invite you to spend a few moments studying the latter and to grapple with me as to why this *haftarah* (Melachim Alef 8:2-21) was chosen for Sukkot.

With the work on the magnificent Temple completed, Shlomo invited the people to what was the largest celebration in Jewish History—the completion and inauguration of the Mikdash. The celebration took place (verse 2) "*be-yerach ha-eitanim*"—understood by the commentators to be the month of Tishrei—"*be-chag*"—on the holiday of Sukkot.

Well, there you have it. Someone looking for but a surface connection between *haftarah* and holiday is welcome to stop here. Doesn't it make sense that each year, on the anniversary of the inauguration, we should mark the day? Perhaps. But this approach sidesteps a larger question: why, after all, was the Temple inauguration held on Sukkot? Was that simply the day that the final bricks were laid? The final permits from the Department of Buildings came through? The Talmud (*Bavli, Moed Katan* 9a) rejects that possibility. Chazal suggest that the Temple was completed some 11 months earlier—in Cheshvan; however, the celebration was not held until Sukkot. Why wait until the following fall? And why Sukkot?

A similar delay seems to have occurred with the Mishkan. The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:2) points out that the Mishkan was ready to open on the 25th day of Kislev, but that its inauguration was delayed until the first of Nisan. One inauguration was pushed to nearly coincide with Pesach—the next, to overlap with Sukkot. Why? And why was the Mishkan celebrated in Nisan and the Mikdash in Tishrei?

Ramban (*Shemot* 40:2) explains that Nisan ushers in the spring (at least in Eretz Yisrael and the Northern Hemisphere!) and represents beginnings. G-d took us out of Egypt in the spring because there is no more appropriate time to inaugurate the Jewish nation. It is not that Pesach is in the spring because that's when G-d freed us from slavery; instead, G-d chose the spring for Pesach because their themes overlap.

What then does Tishrei—the fall—represent? And why is Sukkot commemorated in the fall? The author of *Arba'ah Turim* and others have already pointed out that Sukkot, which marks the

miraculous journey of the Jewish people through the desert, truly belongs right after Pesach! The *Tur* (*Orach Chayyim* 625) explains that if Sukkot were celebrated in warm weather, one might mistake the retreat to the sukkah as something done for shade alone. Ramban (ibid) suggests a deeper answer. If the spring represents beginnings, the fall is about making preparations for a long process of continuity, after which a fading world can be rejuvenated and come back to life. Fall is not about glorious beginnings—it's about the struggle for survival and rebirth.

The Jewish people were taken out of Egypt in the spring. But their survival in the brutal wilderness was far from secure. The sukkot represent the ongoing Divine protection, both in the desert and through the wilderness of history that allows us to survive, and one day reach the Promised Land. The theme of Sukkot parallels the theme of the fall. There will be a time of uncertainty, of travelling through a sort of wilderness. But G-d assures us that another spring will come.

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch develops this idea further in *Horeb* (2 *Eidot*, chap. 23). He explains that Pesach marks the birth of our physical existence as a nation. Its "*atzeret*," Shavuot, marks the creation of our spiritual relationship with Hashem. In the same way, on Sukkot, we celebrate the continued preservation of *Klal Yisrael*, while on Shemini Atzeret we thank Hashem for our continued spiritual existence.

Rabbi Yissaschar Yaakovson, most famous for his five-volume work on *tefillah* (*Netiv Binah*), points out the parallel between Mishkan and Mikdash (*Sefer Chazon le-Mikra,* pp. 399-401). The Mishkan was our first shared home with G-d. It was new and exciting—but insecure and temporary. As Ramban points out earlier in Shemot (introduction to *Parshat Terumah*), the Mishkan allowed us to continue the "spark" and connection with G-d that was present at Sinai. And yet—the Mishkan—our traveling temple—was always destined to find a permanent home in Israel. That permanent home for G-d's presence is celebrated not in Nisan, but in Tishrei, the time of the year that the natural world comes to a state of rest.

The careful reader is left with one final concern. I seemed to have pulled a "fast one" over on you. On the one hand, I have explained that the sukkot, which travelled through the desert, represented the lasting protection of G-d for His people. At the same time, the Mishkan, which also traveled through the desert, becomes the model of a *temporary* relationship! How can Rav Yaakovson have it both ways?

The answer lies in the difference between the *galut* and *geulah* experiences. The sukkah represents the kind of permanence that we can achieve in the exile. The journey through the desert was long and arduous. A full redemption it was not. And yet, there was no doubt that even in the wilderness, G-d was watching over us. The *galut* experience—wandering through the wilderness of the Diaspora—will never allow us the protection of a sturdy home. And yet, hiding above the *schach* of our temporary dwellings, Hashem makes sure that our perilous journey continues through history.

The redemptive experience of *Eretz Yisrael* is as different from *galut* as the freedom of the desert was from the Egyptian slavery. Our permanent spiritual home is so much more than just a

portable sanctuary. The Mishkan allowed us to continue the Sinai experience for hundreds of years—but did so as a bridge to bring us to *Eretz Yisrael*. The Mikdash is the final step of a long process.

May we merit moving from our temporary sukkot to the *Sukkat David* in Jerusalem.

# The Wisest of All Books: Interpreting Koheleth

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From the dawn of biblical interpretation, the Book of Koheleth has rightfully garnered the prestigious reputation as the most mysterious and elusive text in Tanakh. The confusing nature of Koheleth's poetry has earned itself a range of interpreters and interpretation exceeding all its biblical colleagues.

*Chazal* and contemporary biblical scholars alike have engaged in courageous attempts to salvage a meaningful and sensible explanation of the author's baffling words. The gamut of interpretation is crowded with an assortment of options; exegetes, allegorists, literalists and mystics leave no stone unturned. While it may be the case that many biblical passages generate a myriad of readings, with Koheleth, no matter how brilliant the commentary, somehow the riddle of the words remains unsolved. The bewildered reader is frustrated with antithetical conclusions: Does Koheleth counsel piety or joy, hedonism or asceticism? Is Koheleth the most moving Messianic prophecy or a Song of Skepticism? Is it a work of theology or philosophy?

True to its message, the very enterprise of interpreting Koheleth appears as futile as its opening remarks proclaim: "Vanity of vanities, says Koheleth, vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"

## Koheleth and Tanakh

Connected with the book's esoteric confusion is Koheleth's exoteric inconsistency. Featured within the biblical canon, even a cursory tour of Tanakh reveals Koheleth's enigmatic status. Koheleth's canonization or biblical status has been the subject of controversy since the discussions of the early rabbis in Yavneh and continues to attract scholarly attention. As a branch of 20th-century philosophy Koheleth would be appropriately placed next to the critical works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but contrasted with the enumeration of *mitzvoth* in the Torah and the resolute faith expressed by our great prophets, Koheleth is noticeably anomalous. A common

sentiment of modern academic biblical interpretation is that the author of Koheleth is an outsider completely free of tradition, whose book is no more than a skeptical note on classical Jewish belief.

Despite Koheleth's apparent skepticism and agnosticism, many of its other proverbial musings are completely in consonance with the general thrust of Tanakh. The range of theological topics alluded to in the book, in which Koheleth shows himself to be entirely at one with traditional belief, is clearly discernible. Echoing classical, Jewish theological tenets, Koheleth assumes that there is one God who created the world (3:11) and has sovereign power over it (3:14; 6:10; 7:13; 9:1; 11:5), a God who is wholly transcendent (5:2), exalted above and different in nature from his creatures (6:10). The world that He created was a good world (3:11). Man was created from the dust (3:20) and animated by his Creator with breath (3:19); he is, however, a weak creature (6:10). It is through his own fault that his nature has become corrupted (7:29; 8:9), so the world is now beset with evil (4:3; 9:3), hardship, frustration and injustice (2:11; 3:16; 4:1). Man must die, and like the animals revert to the dust (3:19-20; 12:7). Human life, while it lasts, is a gift of God (3:13; 5:19), and should be lived to the fullest (9:10), and as far as possible with enjoyment, for that is God's intention (3:13; 5:19). That it is man's duty to worship this God is also taken for granted (5:1).

On all these matters Koheleth's teaching is clearly dependent on, and in accordance with, the normative biblical tradition. Taken as a whole this is good, plain Jewish doctrine; the biblical parallels are obvious and unmistakable.

To be certain, the sum of this collection does not dilute the ethos of humanism, pessimism and anthropocentrism that pervade Koheleth's message and isolate it from other biblical texts. Koheleth's resignation that one fate awaits all mankind (2:14-16; 6:1-6), his recommendations of pleasure and self-satisfaction (8:15; 11:9) question the established Israelite moral hierarchy of righteous and wicked, wisdom and folly, and ultimately champions life's futility. No matter the collection of biblical parallels in Koheleth, a reading of Koheleth as just another branch of Israelite wisdom, continuing the sapiential path of Proverbs, is equally as problematic as the scholarly dismissal of Koheleth

Here then lies the difficulty of assessing the Book of Koheleth. On the one hand, it utilizes the same jargon and draws from the identical lexicon as other biblical works of wisdom. But on the other hand, it both explicitly and implicitly deviates from its forerunners. In fact, it is this internal tension of the book and not its apparent heresies that motivate the rabbis to entertain suppressing Koheleth. The Talmud states:

*Rab Judah, son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory…*
**Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b**[1]

אמר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה...
**תלמוד בבלי, שבת ל:**

[1] Translation: I. Epstein (ed.), *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed* IV (London, 1938), p. 72.

# Koheleth and *Chazal*

The puzzling identity of Koheleth is substantiated further through a perusal of its rabbinic interpretation. For good reason the prevailing assumption is that *Chazal* symbolically interpret Koheleth's words to better comport with the normative theological character of the Torah. Despite its canonical status, the rabbis never appear to be completely comfortable with their approval of Koheleth's text.[2] This becomes all the more evident in midrashic interpretations utilized to explicate Koheleth's ostensibly sacrilegious content.

A snapshot of this rabbinic attitude is evident in the following few examples:

ר' תנחומא אמר ר' נחמן בריה דר' שמואל בר נחמן ור' מנחמא ואמרין לה ר' ירמיה ור' מיישא בש"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק כל אכילה ושתיה שנאמר במגילה הזאת בתורה ובמעשים טובים הכתוב מדבר, א"ר יונה בנין אב שבכולם שנאמר והוא ילונו בעמלו בעולמו בעולם הזה ימי חייו לקבר וכי יש מאכל ומשתה בקבר שמלווין את האדם לקברו אלא אלו תורה ומעשים טובים.

**קהלת רבה ב:כד**

*R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Nahman, the son of R. Samuel b. Nahman, and R. Menahama said: All the references to eating and drinking in this Book signify Torah and good deeds. R. Jonah said: The most clear of them all is,* A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labour—*'amalo (Eccl. 8:15). The last word should be read as 'olamo (his world)—in this world;* All the days of his life (ib.) *alludes to the grave. Are there, then food and drink in the grave which accompany a man to the grave? It must then mean Torah and good deeds.*

**Koheleth Rabbah 2:24**[3]

Unwilling to accept Koheleth's hedonistic implications, the rabbis understand King Solomon's material references as allusions to Torah study.

Another symbolic interpretation is motivated by Koheleth's cynical attitude toward the monotony and repetition of life. Verse 1:4 reads:

דּוֹר הֹלֵךְ וְדוֹר בָּא, וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת.

*One generation passes away, and another generation comes, but the earth endures forever.*

Commenting on this verse, the rabbis completely reject the meaning as referring to a repetitive universe:

כדור הולך כן דור בא הולך חיגר בא חיגר, הולך סומא בא סומא, שלא יהו אומרים אחרים המית ואחרים החיה דכתיב אני אמית ואחיה.

**קהלת רבה א:ד**

*As a generation passes away so it comes (at the Resurrection); i.e. if one dies lame or blind he comes lame or blind, so that people shall not say, 'Those He allowed to die are different than from those He restored to life.' For it is written: "*I kill and I make alive*" (Deut. 32:39).*

**Koheleth Rabbah 1:4**

[2] For example see M. *Yadaim* 3:5, B. Talmud *Megillah* 7a, *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus ch. 28.1, *Avot de Rabbi Natan* A, Chapter 1, and *Koheleth Rabbah* 1.3.

[3] Translation: Freedman and Simon (ed.), *The Midrash* 8: *Ecclesiastes* (trans. A. Cohen) (London, 1939), pp. 71-72.

No matter the original intention of the text, the Midrash here utilizes the imagery of the passing generation and the coming generation as an opportunity to expound upon *tihiyat ha'metim* (resurrection of the dead).

There are numerous other examples of this exegetical method,[4] but for our purposes, evidence of a contrary exegetical approach is far more interesting. Similar to the internal contradiction of Koheleth's religious character, the same divergence exists in its rabbinic interpretation. While the discomfort with Koheleth is well documented in some rabbinic sources, surprisingly several other passages and commentaries indicate a considerable comfort with Koheleth's literal meaning.

Reflections on the futility and vanity of life ring throughout Koheleth's chapters, and one would expect traditional interpreters to debunk such an attitude toward God's precious gift to humanity. To our surprise, however, the Midrash concedes to Koheleth's observations:

אילו אחר אמר הבל הבלים אמר קהלת וגו' הייתי אומר זה שלא קנה לו ב' פרוטות מימיו הוא פירת בממונו של עולם ואומר הבל הבלים אלא זה שלמה שכתוב בו ויתן המלך את הכסף בירושלם כאבנים ולא היו נגנבות שהיו אבני עשר אמות ואבני שמונה אמות, ומשקלות שהיו בימי שלמה של זהב היו שנאמר (שם /מלכים א'/ י') אין כסף לא נחשב בימי שלמה למאומה לזה נאה לומר הבל הבלים, למה אמר הבל הבלים ראה העולם והעתיד להיות בסופו.

**קהלת רבה ג:יא**

*… If another had declared, Vanity of vanities, said Koheleth (Eccl. 1:2), I might have said that this man who had never owned two farthings in his life makes light of the wealth of the world and declares, Vanity of vanities'; but for Solomon it was appropriate to declare 'Vanity of vanities' because of him it is written, And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones (I Kings 10:27) … Why then did he say 'Vanity of vanities'? He saw the world [as it is] and what would finally be.*

**Koheleth Rabbah 3:11**

Similarly, another Midrash acknowledges the monotony of life that Koheleth incessantly laments. Verse 5:14 states:

כַּאֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ, עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לָלֶכֶת כְּשֶׁבָּא;
וּמְאוּמָה לֹא-יִשָּׂא בַעֲמָלוֹ, שֶׁיֹּלֵךְ בְּיָדוֹ.

*Just as he came naked from his mother's womb, so must he depart. He can take none of his wealth he earned along with him.*

The pessimism articulated in this verse is actually expanded in the Midrash to reflect the universal human experience of life and death:

לשועל שמצא כרם והיה מסוייג מכל פנותיו והיה שם נקב אחד ובקש להכנס בו ולא הוה יכיל מה עבד צם תלת יומין עד דכחיש ותשש ועאל בהדא נקובא, ואכל ושמן, בעא למיפק ולא יכיל מעיבר כלום, חזר וצאים תלת יומן אוחרנין עד דכחיש ותשש וחזר היך מה דהוה ונפק, כד נפק הוה אפיך אפוי ואיסתכל ביה

*This is like a fox that found a vineyard that was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he tried to enter, but was not able. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he was thin and weak, and he went through the hole. He ate and grew fat. When he wanted to leave, he could not fit through the hole. Again he fasted three more days until he grew thin and weak as he had done before and then left. When he departed, he turned and looked and*

[4] See comments on 1:3,1:7, 3:9, 5:10, 9:8 for example.

*said: Vineyard, vineyard! How good are you, and how good are the fruits inside! Everything inside you is wonderful and praiseworthy. But vineyard, what benefit comes from you? Just as one goes inside so does one depart! Thus also is this world.*

**Koheleth Rabbah 5:14**

אמר כרמא כרמא, מה טב את ומה טבין אינון פירין דבגווך, וכל מה דאית בך יאין ומשבחן, ברם מה הניה ממך, כמה דבר נש עליל לגוויך כך הוא נפיק, כך הוא דין עלמא.

**קהלת רבה ה:יד**

Apparently, *Chazal* do not deny the verity of Koheleth's words.

To further our claim, one more example will suffice.[5] The yielding of the rabbis to Koheleth's irrefutable claims is no more evident than in the following comments on verse 9:2:

The same fate happens to the righteous—*this refers to Noah … They say that when he came out of the ark, a lion attacked him and injured him so that he limped.* And to the wicked— *this refers to Pharaoh. They say that when Pharaoh came to sit upon Solomon's throne … he did not understand its mechanism, and a lion attacked and injured him so that he limped. This one died with a limp and this one died with a limp; hence the same fate happens to the righteous and wicked.* To the good—*this refers to Moses …* And to the pure—*this refers to Aaron …* And to the unclean—*this refers to the spies, who gave an evil report about the land of Israel and did not get to enter it. These (Moses and Aaron) spoke of the goodness and praiseworthiness of the land of Israel, yet they did not get to enter it.*

**Koheleth Rabbah 9:1**

הכל כאשר לכל מקרה אחד לצדיק, זה נח ... אמרו כשיצא מן התיבה הכישו ארי ושברו והיה צולע, ולרשע זה פרעה, אמרו כשבא פרעה לישב על כסא שלמה ... לא היה יודע מנגניקון שלו והכישו ארי ושברו והיה צולע, זה מת צולע וזה מת צולע הוי מקרה אחד לצדיק ולרשע, לטוב זה משה ... ולטהור זה אהרן ... ולטמא אלו המרגלים שאמרו דבה רעה על הארץ ולא נכנסו לארץ, ואלו אמרו טובתה ושבחה של ארץ ישראל ולא נכנסו בה.

**קהלת רבה ט:א**

The acceptance of the Midrash that in reality good and bad, righteous and wicked await similar fates is a poignant reminder that Koheleth's ruminations cannot be dismissed irrespective of one's theological slant. *Chazal* then cannot be relegated, as they are by many, as reinterpreting the literal meaning of Koheleth's text. On the contrary, the rabbis' dualistic interpretation beautifully preserves the polarity of Koheleth's ambiguous teachings. The legacy of Koheleth's honesty continues to have a voice even in the rabbinic era. The findings in the Midrash reveal that the rabbis, who at times interpret Koheleth's words symbolically, are the same ones who at other times revere his conclusions as eternal truths. Perhaps there are ideas that cross the proverbial line, but there are other welcomed concepts that help complete a healthy range of legitimate perspectives. In the rabbinical *weltanschauung* incongruous views can exist in harmony.[6]

[5] Other examples of Koheleth's literal interpretation in *Koheleth Rabbah* can be found on the comments to vss. 1.18 and 2.19.

[6] Because of the scope of the paper more examples of Koheleth's influence or congruence with rabbinic views would be excessive. See Talmud B. *Brakot* 57a, Yer. *Kiddushin* 4:12, and Mishna *Abot* 3:13,15 for rabbinic expressions in agreement with Koheleth's truisms.

# Conclusion

Such a reading perhaps best explains the rabbis in the Talmudic passage referenced earlier. The rabbis (B. *Shabbat* 30b) discuss the possibility of suppressing Koheleth because of its many contradictions, but the Talmud replies:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Because its beginning is religious teaching (lit: words of Torah) and its end is religious.* | ומפני מה לא גנזוהו - מפני שתחילתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה. |

The Talmud, it would seem, echoes our perspective: because the skepticism and cynicism of Koheleth are sandwiched with religious teachings, its unorthodoxies are tolerated and even respected. The rabbis do not propose discarding the heterodoxies in favor of the orthodoxies;[7] rather they acknowledge a very daring, yet authentic existence that simultaneously expresses deep faith and conviction in God, while also appreciating the profound existential queries that confront each individual.

Interestingly then, Koheleth, as one of the final books of Tanakh, occupies a very prominent role in our understanding and interpretation of the Torah. Writ large, Koheleth's significance lies in its very complex outlook, one that characterizes its singularity and takes a very bold stand about what it means to be a religious Jew. Both in its literal and rabbinic interpretations, Koheleth does not relegate wisdom to blind faith and obedience, it rather emits a culture of free expression and thought contained within particular guidelines. As a closing segment of our Torah, Koheleth is anything but the black sheep of Tanakh. Beneath the mystery of its words, Koheleth acts as a beautiful commentary on the layered persona of the religious experience. Replete with contradictory expressions and interpretations, coupled with its provocative insights into life, Koheleth's place in the biblical landscape serves to validate and value the volatility, inconsistencies and uneasiness of our own religious lives. According to the wisest of all books, the exemplary religious life is surely not one of stagnancy and routine, but one that achieves its vibrancy through serious thought, provocative questions, and honest inquiry. A life of Torah and *mitzvoth*, according to Koheleth, must also be a life of learning.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Koheleth is read at the end of a very long season of holidays. The reading of Koheleth sets the tone for the arduous road ahead when the heightened spirituality of Elul/Tishrei has faded. Koheleth provides the courage to accept a world that is complex and at times absurd and full of contradiction, while at the same time adhering to those religious values and ideas that are the hallmarks of the Jewish people.

[7] See B. Talmud *Hagiga* 3a-b, Tosefta *Sotah*, 7 where R. Eleazar b. Azariah's homily on Koh. 12:11 argues that the Torah is fruitful and multiparous-open to different interpretations.