

Danny Siegel's

Jewish VIP's-Values, Ideals, and Principles

45 Brief Torah Insights/דברי תורה
About The Distinctive Jewish Values, Ideals, and Principles
For Living Life as a Jew and as a Human Being
Based on Jewish Texts and Their Commentaries



To be is to stand for. *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל*

I don't know anyone who lives and breathes a Torah of love and dignity more than Danny Siegel. For most of my career, I have been inspired and encouraged by the wisdom he shares, the Torah he translates into the language of the heart. I envy you if this is your first encounter with one of the great soul-teachers of our time. Don't wait another moment!"

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson,
Roslyn and Abner Goldstine Dean's Chair,
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, American Jewish University

When Danny Siegel teaches a Jewish text, it's a roller coaster ride: There are twists and turns that you never expect, and the trip is exhilarating and life-expanding. This collection is a case in point: It's full of well-known texts that you will see in a completely different light, or relatively obscure citations that unveil the Jewish spirit at their heart. Each of these chapters is a spiritual gift to be savored by grateful reader, because at their core are those ultimate Jewish religious questions: "What am I supposed to be doing? What is my unique role in bringing about a kinder, more compassionate, and more loving sort of world?"

Rabbi Neal Gold, A Tree with Roots

Danny Siegel is a Jewish VIP in the usual meaning of that acronym and as proposed in the title of this inspiring new volume. As in previous writings, Danny extracts passages from a wide range of sources, enriching them through his poignant insights and moving translations. All of his work gets to the soul of a text and transports it to the soul of the reader. This book is no exception, but it is exceptional.

Rabbi Dr. Stephen Garfinkel
Faculty Emeritus, Jewish Theological Seminary

When Danny Siegel teaches Torah, he inspires us to be better human beings. Read this book!

Marty Lockshin,
University Professor Emeritus, York University

When I read Danny's divrei Torah I am reminded of Rav Gunther Plaut z'l and his introduction to the Torah translation he wrote:

"The Torah is ancient Israel's distinctive record of its search for God. It attempts to record the meeting of the human and the Divine, the great moments of encounter... The Torah tradition testifies to a people of extraordinary sensitivity."

Danny is one of those sensitive souls who writes in a constant dialogue with God and His Torah. The commandments of the Chumash, the tales of our spiritual ancestors, the stories of the Talmud, and the values-tapestry woven from holy words are his inspiration. His midrashic poetry and prose are not merely a continuation of that tradition – they are an innovative imperative in the realm of mitzvot.

Epi,
מְחַנֵּךְ/Mechanech-Jewish Educator

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**46 Brief Torah Insights/דברי תורה
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For Living Life as a Jew and as a Human Being
Based on Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Halachic Texts
And Their Commentaries**

To be Jewish is to be an idealist. *Unknown Source*

Rava said:

**See how foolish people are — they stand before a Sefer Torah
but do not stand before a great person. (*Makkot 22b*)**

A Blessing

***Brachot 17a
Eruvin 54a***

**May your eyes sparkle with the light of Torah
and may your ears hear the music of its words.
May the space between each letter of the scrolls
bring warmth and happiness to your soul.
May the syllables draw holiness from your heart,
and may this holiness be gentle and soothing
to you and all God's creatures.
May your study be passionate,
and meanings bear more meanings
until Life itself arrays itself before you
as a dazzling wedding feast.
And may your conversation,
even of the commonplace,
be a blessing to all who listen to your words
and see the Torah glowing on your face.**

*This Anthology is dedicated to
Rabbi David Weiss Halivni
My Rebbi*

The cover: A photograph taken in the mid-late 1930's of a group of women newspaper reporters standing with Eleanor Roosevelt outside some mansion in New Jersey. At that time, my mother, Edythe Silberblatt, was a reporter for the Asbury Park (NJ) Press. The reporters had just interviewed the First Lady, and then came out for a group picture. My mother is standing to Mrs. Roosevelt's immediate right. Many historians consider The First Lady the great תקדצ/Tzadket-Righteous person of the 20th Century for her persistent and wide-ranging efforts to create קדצ in America — a just and fair society. My mother greatly admired Mrs. Roosevelt, and her passionate desire to do good became a profound aspect of my mother's life and everyday actions. (Photo: The Asbury Park Press)

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Most English translations of Biblical passages are from The Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh*, 1985, with permission.

Any adaptations are completely my own.

*I owe a special debt of gratitude to Arnold Draiman
who suggested and arranged a blog place for me
in the Israeli online newspaper Times of Israel —
which is the origin of this anthology of Divray Torah.*

*I would like to thank
Rabbi Jack Riemer, Rabbi Michael Klayman, Dr. Michael Stulberg,
Jan Zlotowicz, Mark Stadler, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Merle Gould,
Rabbi David Ellenson, Rabbi Bennett Miller, Rabbi Donald Rossoff,
Rabbi Moshe Edelman, Rabbi Ron Hoffberg, Rabbi Arthur Rulnick,
Rabbi Jonathan Porath, The Gondos Family, Rabbi Jack Paskoff,
Rabbi Bradley Artson, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, William Novak,
Rabbi James Michaels, Rabbis Bill and Jim Lebeau, Rabbi Joel Soffin,
Rabbi Neal Gold, Rabbi Michael Safra, Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz,
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz, Richard Moline, Rabbi Arnold Samlan,
Rabbi Jan Kaufman, Rabbi Steven Glazer, Rabbi Gary Greene,
Rabbi Gary Charlestein, Rabbi Bernie Rotman, Trevor Ferrell,
Rabbi Mark Greenspan, Arthur Kurzweil, Rabbi David Shneyer,
Joy Rothenberg, and Rabbi Irving Elson,
my great-niece Sarah Wilcox,
and the inspired and inspiring educators
Beth Huppin Bennett, Anne Andrew, and Janis Knight
for their many Torah-thoughts in many of my Divray Torah
and they consistently enthusiastic encouragement
for this project.*

*And to my niece Debbie Wilcox — תודה רבה/Todah Rabbah
for helping prepare this manuscript,
— and several friends who want to remain anonymous —
for their encouragement, technical and other useful suggestions,
and for the many insights into various Divray Torah
all of which have been incorporated into this anthology.*

*I also want to pay tribute to the memory of to those individuals
whose teaching and guidance played
such an important role in my life:
Rabbi Noah Golinkin, Rachel Reinitz, Harold Schlaffer,
Dr. Morton Siegel, Blanche "Tanta Bluma" Davidson,
Abraham and Shulamit Gittelsohn, Sandy and Eleanor Orr,
Professors Moshe Held, H.L. Ginsberg,
Nahum Sarna, and Shalom Paul ;
Allan Gould, Mark Sternfeld, Rabbi Mordy Kieffer,
and Rabbi Mark Loeb,
זכרונום לברכה/Zichronam Livrachá,
May their memory be for a blessing.*

Books by Danny Siegel:

1. Doing Good (Amazon, 2022)
2. Jewish VIPs - Values Ideals and Principles
3. Radiance - Creative Mitzvah Living, The Selected Prose and Poetry of Danny Siegel (The Jewish Publication Society, 2020)
4. From the Heart – Love Poems (2012)
5. 1 + 1 = 3 and 37 Other Mitzvah Principles For a Meaningful Life (2000)
6. Healing: Readings and Meditations (1999)
7. Heroes and Miracle Workers (1997)
8. The Humongous Pushka in the Sky (Children's Story, 1993)
9. After the Rain (Children's Story for Adults), 1993
10. Tell Me a Mitzvah (Children's stories, Kar-Ben Copies, Inc., 1993)
11. A Hearing Heart (poetry, 1992)
12. The Meadow Beyond the Meadow (poetry, 1991)
13. Mitzvahs, (1990)
14. Family Reunion: Making Peace in the Jewish Community, (1989)
15. Munbaz II and Other Mitzvah Heroes, (1988)
16. Gym Shoes and Irises: Personalized Tzedakah, (1981)
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18. Angels (essays), (1980)
19. Where Heaven and Earth Touch: An Anthology of Midrash and Halachah
20. Book One, (1983); Large Print Edition, (1985),
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24. Source Book: Selected Hebrew and Aramaic Sources, (1985)
25. The Unorthodox Book of Jewish Records and Lists
(humor, co-authored with Allan Gould), (1982)
26. The Lord Is A Whisper at Midnight: Psalms and Prayers, (1985)
27. The Garden, Where Wolves and Lions Do No Harm to the Sheep and Deer
(poetry), (1985)
28. Unlocked Doors: The Selected Poems of Danny Siegel 1969-1983, (1983)
29. Before Our Very Eyes: Readings for a Journey Through Israel, (1986)
30. Nine Entered Paradise Alive (poetry), (1980)
31. Between Dust and Dance (poetry and prose), (1978)
32. And God Braided Eve's Hair (poetry), (1976)
33. Soulstoned (poetry), (1969)

Table of contents

Preface by Arnie Drainan

Foreward by Beth Huppin

Two Stories

Introduction #1

Introduction #2

American Values, Ideals And Principles

And How Some Of Them are Actualized in American Society

Refining and Expanding Our Understanding of

Jewish and Secular VIP's-Values, Ideals, and Principles

Making It Easier To Read My Divray Torah

1. One Additional Potentially Productive, Meaningful, And Permissible Method Of Studying Torah
2. How Sherlock Holmes Helped Me Get All A's in Bible At The Jewish Theological Seminary
3. Five Crucial Yiddish Words To Keep In Mind When Studying Torah And Searching for Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Principles

Some Texts About

Jewish VIP's — Values, Ideals, and Principles

- (Aleph) Our Jewish Values — Talmudic, Midrashic, and Halachic texts
(Bet) In the Halachah
(Gimel) Some Misunderstood and Misplaced Jewish values
(Dalet) Our Jewish values — Biblical texts

Torah and Mitzvahs — Comparison and Contrast

Halachah and Jewish Values

4. The Jewish Bookmark
5. The Jewish Value of **כבוד/Kavod-Dignity - #1**
A Few Simple Halachic Adjustments
6. The Jewish Value of **כבוד/Kavod-Dignity #2**
Two Simple Suggestions for the Synagogue:
Dr. Maurice Raynaud and the Jews
And **ברכת המזון/Birkat HaMazon** for Yom Kippur
7. Before Breakfast
The Jewish Value of **בעלי חיים צער/tza'ar Ba'alay chaim-**
The Caring Treatment of Animals

8. Selling a **ספר תורה/Sefer Torah**: A Devaluation of Our Most Sacred Text?
9. Ancient, Big Changes
10. Four Jewish Topics I've Been Thinking About
11. Precedence: An Unexpected Talmudic Opinion
12. **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu**
13. **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** and Beyond
14. Preparing and Parting Jewishly
15. Greeting Other People
16. **שכחה/Sheechecha**
17. An American Jewish Breakthrough of the First Order:
The Adult Bat Mitzvah

Jewish Values
From The Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Halachah

18. The Six Questions
19. AlephBet 20. Three Brief Words of Torah
21. Something Old, Something New
22. Just Exactly What Happened On Mount Sinai?
23. On Being a Teacher
24. Meltdown and *Tchatchkas*
25. "Making" Rabbis and "Buying" Friends
26. Talents

Why a Jerusalem Street's Name Was Changed Twice

27. Two things to Consider When Thinking About Your Self-Image
28. Lost and Found
29. Maggie Kuhn, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the Talmud
30. Unquestionably The Greatest Love Line In The Midrash
(Some Jewish Aspects of Blessings and Loss)
31. The Flashlight in Rabbinic Literature
32. The Speed Of Light, Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, And You
33. **סימנים/Simanim**-Memory Aids
34. Boker Tov, Lylah Tov
35. Seven Years and 153 Days (1-4)

Biblical Texts
(As Often Interpreted [And Sometimes Rewritten]
By the Talmud and Midrash)

36. How A Sheepdog Helped Save The Jewish People
37. Nobody Asked Me To, But If They Had,
I Would Have Written These Love Stories Differently
38. Two Things Most Of Us Didn't Know About Father Abraham
39. Amos and Moses
40. Fire By Us and By Them
41. Uncle Walt, Jacob's Daughter Dinah, Esther, and Job
42. A Particularly Challenging Verse In The Book of Psalms

- 43. A Specific Contemporary Situation Where The Torah-Lesson Is Crucial
- 44. On Why It Is So Important To Keep
Your Annual Appointment With Your Optometrist
- 45. Orpah, Ruth's Sister-in-Law

Concluding Thoughts
Ezekiel's Vision of the Dry Bones

Preface

by Arnie Draiman

I first heard Danny Siegel teach about Tzedakah, Israel, and Jewish text in the 1970s. I immediately became a *chassid* (“groupie,” in slang), and enjoyed reading his books, and learning with him during his summers in Israel and on other occasions. Danny was a virtual fountain of Torah knowledge and so much more. If I may take a page out of his overflowing bag of teaching tricks and use some lofty language and then explain the origin, Danny is a polymath, or more appropriately, a pantomath. Neither has much to do with math, but “polymath” is from the Greek *polymathēs*, “having learned much”; and pantomath, also Greek, “having learned all.”

And yes, Danny has achieved this despite his well-known learning disabilities and attention deficit issues. As he is fond of quoting Mitzvah hero Samantha Abeel, LD can also mean “Learns Differently”.

We are lucky that Danny has chosen to use his creativity coupled with his sharp and critical understanding of texts (both Jewish and not) for the world of Tzedakah, giving, and kindness. His brilliance shines through in his poetry, in his Torah study, in his lectures, and more.

Danny and I would discuss various traditional Jewish texts from the Torah or Talmud (or even more obscure sources including one of his favorites, *Avot D’Rabbi Natan*), batting around every possible angle of the meaning of a word in Hebrew or Aramaic, the syntax of a particular sentence, and seeing the deeper possibilities of creating your own Midrash (a rabbinic-style exegesis on the text, using various hermeneutical devices to really get at its *kishkas*, the gut meaning). Danny would search out any possible understanding of the text, and even offer to buy lunch or ice cream for those sitting with him if anyone came up with a laudable “*chiddush*” (new take on a text).

From Danny is where I learned the words exegesis and hermeneutics, and others like hendiadys, hapax legomenon, metathesis, and more – all ways to better understand the text. The more I learned, the deeper in I fell into the refreshing waters of Torah, Talmud, Midrash, Halacha, etc.

Yes, I officially worked with and for Danny as his “Mitzvah Man in Israel” for about 30 years - and I could write an entire book about our Mitzvah work. But here, in this volume, we are talking Torah (not just the “Big 5” as Danny might call them, but any Jewish text and value), so I will confine my thoughts to that. All of Danny’s books discuss Torah texts, thoughts, ideas, and philosophies – whether interwoven into his poetry or in his words of Torah.

Frequently, we would share a very small insight via email either from the *Daf Yomi*, the daily study of one page of the Talmud, or from elsewhere. It was always a great minute of Torah with Danny, and fulfilled a little bit of my desire to learn more.

Being the *chassid* of Danny’s that I am, I would read and re-read his books frequently. (Danny often says that I know his material better than he does!) A few years back, I wanted new material, and asked Danny if he would be interested in writing an online blog where he could post any piece of Torah on any topic, even expanding on these very short email insights. He jumped at the opportunity, and I offered to edit, add graphics, and do the logistics involved in running the blog site. So, for relatively selfish reasons on my part, we all get to share in new Danny creations.

Here we have a volume filled with Jewish Jewish Values, derived from our Jewish sources, and some influenced from or coupled with outside sources as well. Finally, I want to say that Danny has been a good friend (*Yedid Tov* in Hebrew) for many many years. “Yedid Tov” in gematria (the Hebrew numerological game play of letters and numbers) is 45, and Danny presents us here with 45 golden words of Torah for all to enjoy.

Each word, each paragraph, each page brings a certain Ziv (radiance) to the faces of us who read and absorb the content with a new, additional understanding *chiddush*.

We take our cue from the morning prayers, where we say “*HaMechadesh Betuvo Bechol Yom Tamid*” referring to God continuously, daily, renewing Creation through His Goodness – Danny teaches us that people can realize their being created in God’s image, and continuously study the text and get new meaning out of it.

And for that, we are grateful.

Foreward *by Beth Huppín*

Growing up in Spokane, WA, a one-synagogue town far from centers of Jewish life, my Jewish education was limited. Camp Solomon Schechter and regional youth group events supplemented Jewish experiences in my home and synagogue. Once, I attended a regional middle-school Shabbaton in 8th grade. The guest teacher was Danny Siegel.

I knew about the importance of visiting sick people, of inviting newcomers to our home for Shabbat and holiday meals, and generally of caring for members of the community in whatever ways needed. I didn't yet know there were Hebrew terms for these actions or that Jewish texts could help us think about how best to care for others. At that Shabbaton, Danny taught texts that opened my eyes to this possibility. Imagine my joy at learning that there are Jewish texts that speak to the lived values I observed in Spokane.

Central to Danny's teaching approach is the idea that everyone has the potential to look at a text, see it in a new light, and come up with a novel and important interpretation. (See Dvar Torah #21: *Something Old, Something New*.) Without a formal Jewish education as a child, I had never seen these texts, but that didn't prevent him from expecting me to share insights. He opened the door to a method of text study that wasn't about the correct answer, but, rather, he would ask: "What do *you* see here that could help you live a more meaningful, compassionate life?"

Before the Jewish community developed programs for children with divergent physical, emotional, or intellectual needs, Danny understood the wondrous gift of these differences within the community. (See Dvar Torah #22, *Just What Happened on Mount Sinai*.) He taught us to embrace human variety as a window into understanding new depths of Torah.

Over the years, Danny remained my teacher. I remember his stack of notecards with Jewish texts that intrigued him. He shared those notecards with students, asking us for our thoughts. He never told us what the texts "meant." He showed us that the texts themselves respond to bigger questions. He engaged us in understanding those questions and the possible human insights that came from them. The text became a prompt for thoughtful discussions about how to live in meaningful connection with others and in an honest relationship with our own passions and gifts.

For years, I followed his lead, also collecting texts on notecards. These remain among my favorite texts. I am grateful to Danny for opening my eyes to them and to their potential. As I developed my own style of teaching Jewish texts, two very important lessons from Danny stayed with me:

1. A crucial goal of studying texts is to help us become kind and caring people.
2. Everyone has something unique to offer to an examination of any text.

Many of the texts from those original notecards of his became the basis for his book, *Where Heaven and Earth Touch*. I was delighted to find some of those same texts in this book. It is exciting for me to return to them now with his commentary, based on his careful listening to so many different responses to his teachings. With this book, Danny has come full circle, looking again at many of the texts that he taught in the early years and using his unique approach to examining new texts.

Danny changed the way that large segments of the Jewish community think about the ultimate goals of these texts. He always asks how a text can teach kindness, compassion, caring for others, being true to ourselves, and making space for others to do the same. The questions remain: What does it mean to truly care for others? How can we make space for role models of different types? Where and when can we find space and time to hear voices that often are overlooked?

In Dvar Torah #31, *A Flashlight in Rabbinic Literature*, Danny shows us the power of thanking and acknowledging our teachers. In this brief introduction, I know I speak for over 50 years' worth of educators and students whose lives were changed by Danny's Torah teachings in thanking Danny for his Torah. If you are one of those people, you'll smile with recognition and enjoy new insights as you read this book. If you've never been exposed to his teachings, take your time to slowly take in his approach and ideas. And, as Danny would expect from you, be sure to add your own thoughts and questions to the mix.

Two Stories That Will Help Explain The Purpose of This Anthology

Contrary to accepted practice, please read my notes first, then read the story.

(Aleph) Rabbi Israel Salanter washes his hands before a meal

Rabbi Israel Salanter (1809-1883), founder of the Musar movement that stressed the relationship between Torah study and ethical living, was once a guest in someone's home. When Rabbi Salanter went to ritually wash his hands before the meal, the host followed so that he could observe how The Great Rabbi performed the Mitzvah. Though the Halachah suggests using a quantity of water beyond a certain minimum, Rabbi Salanter used the least amount required. The host then asked why he had used only the minimum required.

Rabbi Salanter explained that he had seen the maid exhausting herself bringing the buckets of water from a well in the valley up the hill to the man's house.

Rabbi Salanter explained that it would be unconscionable to add to her burden.

(Bet) Rabbi Aryeh Levin selects an אתרוג-Etrog

Rabbi Aryeh Levin (1885-1969) was a well-known **צדיק/Tzaddik-righteous person** in Jerusalem. Though (in contemporary terminology) ultra-Orthodox — you can see his long, full, white beard, and traditional clothing on in photographs on Google— he was universally admired. Some would say that “beloved” is more accurate. The entire spectrum of Jews — including secular ones — recognized his exceptional Jewish and human qualities.

In addition to his innumerable other acts of kindness and compassion, because of his activities with Jewish prisoners the British had arrested — some of whom were condemned to death — he was known as “The Rabbi (or “The Father”) of the Prisoners”. One time he stretched his body out in the road in front of the British High Commissioner's moving vehicle. When the British government's most senior official in Palestine got out of the car and approach Rabbi Levin, he asked why he had done such a dangerous thing. Rabbi Levin told him that they were going to hang a certain prisoner, and he pleaded to have the sentence said aside. Rabbi Levin, in fact, is, credited with saving the lives of a number of the prisoners.

But this a different story, one that took place shortly before Sukkot. Rooms and tents around Jerusalem are set aside for Jews to select their **אתרוגים/etrogim** for the holiday. The Halachah describes many details about even the most minute defects and blemishes that might make it unfit for use for the Mitzvah. Particularly scrupulous individuals examine several of them extremely closely until they are Halachically satisfied.

I was there once.

The atmosphere was electric, noisy, and “wild” is the best word I know to describe it. It was like a Macy's Black Friday sale.

One year when Rabbi Levin went to buy his **אתרוג/etrog**, many people surrounded him to observe *how* he would make his selection, and *which one* he would choose. He picked up one **אתרוג/etrog**, put it down, then took another, went back and selected the first one, then paid and left — all in less than five minutes.

Although the crowd that had surrounded him dispersed, one man decided to follow Rabbi Levin, hoping to understand the Rabbi's behavior.

The man followed Rabbi Levin to an old age home, and waited 90 minutes until he came out, so he could ask.

Rabbi Levin explained that the Torah uses the Hebrew root **הדר**-*beautiful* only twice: (1) The Talmudic sages interpreted the phrase in Leviticus 23:40

פְּרֵי עֵץ הָדָר

peri etz hadar-the beautiful tree-fruit

to refer to the **אתרוג** and (2) Leviticus 19:32

וְהִדַּרְתָּ פְּנֵי זֶקֶן

vehadarta pnay Zaken-You should bring out the beauty of an Elder's face

by your respectful interaction.

Rabbi Levin explained that the **אתרוג**-*Etrog* was only a fruit. The person in the nursing home was a human being, and, therefore, he should devote much more time relating to him.

Notes:

A. *The Torah-Giant Rabbi Daniel Sperber, beyond his purely scholarly work, has concentrated in several of his books on Menschlichkeit. He has absolute command not only of the accumulated texts in the millennia of our vast Jewish literature, but also all of ancient Greek and Roman life. His ability to compare and contrast these two areas of his knowledge is frequently crucial for understanding what the Jewish texts are teaching. In 2014, Rabbi Sperber published "On the Relationship of Mitzvot between Man and His Neighbor and Man and His Maker" to explain which values in many situations take precedence. The terms "Mitzvot between Man and His Neighbor" and "Man and His Maker" are traditionally referred to as "בין אדם לחברו" and "בין אדם למקום".*

In addition to the many astonishing examples that he presents from the Halachah, he also includes stories of several Torah-Greats of the previous couple of centuries (e.g., Rabbi Hayyim Halevi Soloveitchik, The Chafetz Chaim, and The Netziv of Volozhin. Rabbi Sperber describes how each one dealt with specific situations and how they acted on their understanding of the Halachah (Heavenly or human) in order apply it to extraordinary circumstances. I have paraphrased the two stories above and others from Rabbi Sperber's book in some of my Divray Torah – with his kind permission, of course.

B. *I relate these stories to illustrate the Rabbis' values and how they acted on these values. They are not meant as a criticism of Halachic and Orthodox Jewish practice. Both rabbis lived within the framework of Halachah, but had to evaluate and balance the needs of a human being in relation to God's Halachic demands according to Orthodox interpretation.*

Rabbi Sperber's book relates several other stories illustrating the precedence that human needs takes over Halachic ritual in certain specific individual situations as described in the two stories above.

Introduction #1

(Aleph) I am a devoted student of Torah. I derive great joy from studying the texts.

BUT — I am especially passionate about the values that Torah teaches about being Jewish and human and how to treat other people.

(Bet) This anthology explores Jewish VIPs-values, ideals, and principles derived from our rich classical texts — The Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, and their multitude of accumulated commentaries — from more than three millennia ago to modern times.

Values are the basis of our principles and actions.

A. Values and principles give us direction, set priorities in our lives, and provide us with a sense of usefulness, purpose, and meaning. They help define what matters in our lives as Jews and human beings.

B. They guide us in making the right decisions and in clarifying which of the choices we make takes precedence.

C. We act on our values either *(1)* by our own initiative because of our natural inclination or disposition, or *(2)* in reaction to something we encounter which is wrong, unjust, unfair, in some other way detrimental, or just “out of sync” with what seems Jewishly or humanly right, just, and fair.

D. Jewish values also define us, both our character and our identity, as a Jewish person.

A list of specific Jewish values, how they function, and interact is found in Introduction #2.

Introduction #2

Aleph — A Partial and Incomplete List Of Some Jewish, Secular, and General values

1. Some Examples Of Jewish Values:

קדושה/*kedusha*-holiness, קידוש השם/*Kiddush HaShem*-sanctification of God's name (beside by martyrdom), *Menschlichkeit*, תורה/*Torah*, מצוה/*Mitzvah*-doing good for the benefit of others, צדקה/*Tzedakah*-caring actions benefiting others with a portion of our money, גמילות חסדים/*Gemillut Chassadim*-personal beneficial actions towards others with our time and effort, מצוות-and-*Menschlichkeit*, ישראל/*Yisrael*-Israel, ברכה/*bracha*-blessing, a blessing, כבוד/*kavod*-dignity, שכר ועונש/*sachar veOnesh*-reward and punishment, מדת הדין/*middat haDin*-God's Justice, מדת הרחמים/*middat haRachamim*-God's love, צלם אלוהים-*tzelem Elohim*-human beings created in God's image, דרך ארץ/*derech erez*-many meanings including *Menschlichkeit*, עם ישראל/*Am Yisrael* and כלל ישראל/*Clal Yisrael*-identifying with and responding to the needs of the Jews, אורחיים/*hachnassat orchim*-hospitality, כלה/*hachnassat kallah*-making certain that weddings are joyous, בקור חולים/*bikur cholim*-visiting people who are sick, הלויית המת/*halvayyat haMet*-accompanying a person's body to the grave, נחום אבלים/*nichum avaylim*-comforting mourners, צער בעלי חיים/*tza'ar Ba'alay chaim*-the kind treatment of animals, ענוה/*anava*-humility, בל משחית/*bal tashchit*-senseless waste, צדק/*Tzedek*-creating a *Menschlich* society, משפט/*mishpat*-Justice, including the intricacies of civil and criminal law, אמת/*emet*-truth, התקוה-*hope*, שלום/*shalom*-peace.

2. Secular, General Values:

Personal independence, fairness, fulfillment, happiness, power, justice, freedom, holiness, humility, kindness, care for the vulnerable members of society.

3. Working with values

We are constantly faced with situations when we are called upon to make choices and to decide which value takes precedence over another in a specific situation. As with secular law, הלכה/*Halachah*-Jewish law is replete with examples of precedence*. An example that readily comes to mind is Judaism's stress on the extreme value human life. The examples such as individual vs. communal rights, property rights, abuse (both physical and verbal), divorce settlements, court procedures, because they cannot be ignored if society is to function, living in a non-Jewish society are examined in great detail because society cannot function without these topics, תלמוד תורה/*Talmud Torah*-the study of Torah in relation to גמילות חסדים/*Gemillut Chassadim*-caring, compassionate actions.

These are only a bare few of the topics Jewish tradition covers.

Our task is to have a command of these values so that we will act appropriately.**

As we refine our hierarchy of priorities and our grasp of precedence in the common course of everyday living, our actions become more enhanced and sensitive, and, I believe, we live a better life.

A technical note: When working with this subject of priority and precedence, I have personally found these graphic arrow symbols — → and ← — to be useful.

Bet — For What Kind Of Individuals I Created This Anthology

I. There are a great number of individuals whose very nature “gets” what these Torah texts mean to convey. The brief selections in this anthology are intimately connected to Jewish texts that have been preserved for us over more than three thousand years. They are intended to demonstrate Judaism’s insights into the nature and purpose of being Jewish and human. But these people seem to be because of “good” genes, because of an encouraging environment, or a combination of both have personally developed a superb sense of values. They already know the essence of what I have composed, and live their lives without any need for these texts.

II. For the others, it may be that your personal preference is to skip the lengthy introductions (including my biographical material and qualifications for working with texts) and go directly to Dvar Torah #4 “The Jewish Bookmark”. As I often teach — *whatever works for you.*

III. I have created this anthology for two types of students: Individuals who have had experience with Jewish text, and “newcomers”.

*If your Jewish education did not include text study in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, your first move is to read Arthur Kurzweil’s article/pamphlet **I Can’t Read Much Hebrew, I Can’t Read Much Aramaic, I Never Went to Yeshiva, But I Study Talmud Every Chance I Get. Brother, Can You Spare a Dime; The Treatment of Beggars According to Jewish Tradition: A Case in Point.** (You can find it on line by Google-ing “Arthur Kurzweil Beggars”.) He was the pioneer in Jewish genealogy. Following his own research he published a book as a practical guide for others, **From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History** which became very popular and encouraged great numbers of other people to do the same as he had done. Subsequently he became a superb lecturer on Jewish texts as a guest speaker in many Jewish communities.*

The background is this: For many months over two years, Arthur and I studied Torah texts together, once a week. I worked from the texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. BUT, he had no educational background in the languages. One particular day the topic was Judaism’s view on giving to beggars. We agreed that he should research and write up what he found. The result was the article.

“I Can’t read much Hebrew...” is the single most valuable resource anywhere for anyone who wants to study Jewish texts in English.

For those to whom this is a new area of study, I have translated all texts into non-scholarly English, and explained all technical terms. [See “Definitions” below.]

For the more experienced ones, skip down to Dvar Torah #4.

Only a very few of the Dvar Torah might be difficult to follow. Those are only intended for the more advanced students. Except for these few, this anthology should be readily accessible to everyone.

Gimel — Definitions and Terminology

דבר תורה/Dvar Torah (plural: **דברי תורה/Divray Torah**), literally means “A word of Torah”.

Length: **דבר/davar**-“word” in **דבר תורה** means a brief presentation, usually 5 minutes and no more than 10.

Content: **דבר תורה** in **דבר תורה** means that it is based on or makes reference to some classical Jewish text such as a verse in the Bible, a quote from the Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, or one or more of the many classical commentaries.

When: A **דבר תורה/Dvar Torah** is usually delivered at a meal, often the

late Shabbat afternoon **שלישית סעודה/seudah sheleesheet meal between mincha and ma'ariv**, after a banquet at a **שמחה/simcha**, as a substitute for an opening prayer at some celebration, or, even, if the Rabbi feels that services have dragged on too long and the congregants are getting edgy and are eager to get to *kiddush*, she or he may substitute it for a 20-minute sermon, or may call on a congregant to deliver it.

The purpose: To transmit a Jewish-value message such as honesty in business, doing the necessary research before distributing Tzedakah money, allowing the computer or phone a day of rest on Shabbat, or the ethics of e-mails and websites — all in a concise “rememberable” manner.

תורה: “The Torah” refers to The Five Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, whether in the traditional scroll or in book form. In this anthology, “Torah” refers to the accumulation of Jewish texts throughout the ages, beginning with The **חומש/Chumash-Genesis through Deuteronomy**, and — Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, and the traditional and contemporary commentaries, sermons, curricula, and in various other formats that deal with Lessons for Life as a Jew and human being

Text: A Jewish library has two kinds of books:

(1) “Book” books, i.e., of a general nature such as the life of the early pioneer settlers in Israel before 1948, the writings of Nobel Laureates Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Elie Wiesel, a cookbook *How To Prepare A Shabbat Meal In Three Minutes*, travel guides to Jewish communities around the world, and *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

(2) **Books of texts**, which refers to material preserved and handed down over the generations, including Bible, Talmud, Midrashic, Halachic works, and their massive accumulated commentaries. Somewhat similar are **תשובה/Teshuva** texts, i.e., Halachic answers to questions that needed decisive clarification, or new issues that have arisen — written by sages for centuries (including our day), based, of course, on the traditional texts. My Divray Torah also occasionally touch on a variety of these **תשובה/Teshuva** texts and how they relate to Jewish and human interactions.

תנ"ך/Tanach-The 24 books of the Bible

הלכה/Halachah: The legal material in a Talmudic, medieval, or modern texts.

מדרש/Midrash: The non-legal material in those texts.

Talmudic page numbers, e.g. Avodah Zara 18a/א:יח עבודה זרה יח:

“Avoda Zara” is a major section of the Talmud. “18” is the double-sided leaf of a page. “a” is the front side, and “b” is the back.

חברה/chevra: any group of friends or people with whom you associate.

כבוד/Kavod: dignity

ז"ל abbreviation of **לברכה ה/ה זכרונו/ה**—May his/her/their memory be a blessing for us

ה עדן/מנוחתו/menuchato, menuchata Eden—May his/her soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden

Dalet — A Special Note: Individuals who may find these divray Torah unnecessary

All of us have met people who personify *Menschlichkeit*. They are naturally kind, decent, generous individuals of impeccable integrity. It seems that being a *Mensch* is in their genes. The brief selections in this anthology are intimately connected to Jewish texts that have been preserved for us over more than two millennia. They are intended to show Judaism’s insights into the nature and purpose of being Jewish and human. But “natural” *Menschen* already know this and live their lives without any need for these texts. The word “Mitzvah” may not even be an essential word in their vocabulary.

As I considered this issue, I thought that, if those admirable people were interested, they might still benefit in two areas: (1) Reinforcing their Jewish identity, and (2) they may find some practical suggestions to refine and supplement their own Mitzvah work.

Hay — Major factors contributing to my involvement in this area of Torah teaching

(1) My interest in, involvement with, and *passion* for Jewish traditional texts and the relationship to living a *Menschlich* Jewish life stems from different sources, the beginnings originated in my undergraduate years. I was a student in the double-degree Joint Program (“The Joint”) of The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and Columbia University’s School of General Studies (GS).

(A) At JTS I studied a great amount of Biblical, Talmudic, and Halachic material and was given the tools to understand the texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic on my own.

(B) GS had the right setting and atmosphere for serious study in general. Most of the non-Joint students were adults past college age (“continuing education”) who *were in my classes because they wanted to be there*.

(2) My founding in 1981 of the non-profit **Ziv** (זיב—“radiance” referring to the Mitzvah-act itself and to Mitzvah heroes) Tzedakah Fund in the United States, and Ziv Tzedakah Foundation in Canada. **Ziv** America functioned for 27 years and distributed nearly \$14,000,000. The Canadian fund was active for 40 years, donating more than \$725,000. The contributions came from hundreds of donations in North America. Both Tzedakah funds focused on more than 100 low-overheard, effective, and efficient Mitzvah programs and projects. But the essence of and vast majority of our allocations were given for Mitzvah work founded by or directed by one of my **Mitzvah heroes**.

The sheer number and variety of Life-experiences from those years greatly deepened my desire to connect my Jewish text-values studies to Life.

(3) My involvement with United Synagogue Youth (USY) since I was 15 years old. Most memorable were 44 summers on the staff of USY Israel Pilgrimage. I served as the Tzedakah/Mitzvah Resource Person, established and supervised their enthusiastic hands-on Mitzvah work, introduced them to Mitzvah heroes, and taught them and learned from them.

The math goes like this: Estimates of total number of teen-agers — 10-15,000; staff members I worked with — a few hundred; beginning in 1976 means a good number of them are already in their 50’s and 60’s and have assumed positions of leadership in their communities, among them many rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, and lay leaders.

Vav— The specific origin and development of this anthology

In 2015, Arnie Draiman created a blog for me in Israel’s virtual newspaper *Times of Israel*. Arnie is a friend of 40 years, my main Tzedakah-, Mitzvah-, and Mitzvah-hero-discoverer-resource person in Israel for more than two decades, a partner in Torah, and a serious, meticulous, but sympathetic, critic of my writings. He felt that a blog would be a way of reaching more people with my Torah teaching.

From the moment I wrote my first Dvar Torah I didn’t care that I did not have a fraction of the students I would have taught before the pandemic hit. Neither was I concerned that my blog wouldn’t have as many regular followers as Celine Dion’s. Nor, when I began to write, I certainly did not have any intention making this a major project. I immediately found the blog format very comfortable — particularly the limited length, the freedom to choose *absolutely any topic* I wanted to write about, and the informal style of the writing.

In the early stages I began to write an occasional Dvar Torah as the spirit moved me, which Arnie would then post. The turning point occurred with the onset of COVID. Faced with no more travel and no more live audiences or students, the general isolation and semi-isolation, and the possibility of more free hours, I began to write them more frequently.

A pattern then evolved: First thing every morning, I either wrote a new Dvar Torah or revised one I had just written. I also began sending a Dvar Torah to friends attached to my e-mails, and several of them wrote back to me with their comments. Their insights were added to mine, which allowed me to refine and expand the content.

Zayin— Jewish Values. vs. Assimilation

Understandably, this anthology was an additional attempt to stem the tide of Jewish assimilation into some less-than-desirable American values.

Assimilation **in the extreme form** is the voluntary dissociation of a Jew (for a variety of possible reasons), and is tantamount to disappearance from the Jewish people.

The eminent 20th century Jewish philosopher, a very deep *thinker* about the **שואה/Shoah**, once wrote this single most stark statement about assimilation that I know:

The Eleventh Commandment is not to give Hitler posthumous victory.

Chet — A Helpful Hint While Navigating Through My Style: About The Workings Of My Mind

You will easily notice various prominent points about the process and content of these selections:

(A) I am not what would be commonly considered a “thinker”. I do not try to explain the totality of Life and Reality like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, or Einstein. That intellectual area is too high and too much for me. I don’t think anyone would read this anthology and think, “Siegel’s a theologian or a philosopher”. What I call The Big World Out There is just too big. Nor am I capable of dealing in absolutes, ultimates, or totalities such as “All Humanity”. My mind doesn’t work that way.

(B) Logic is foreign to me.

Once, when I had mentioned that I always got straight A’s in math, one expert in my audience told me after my talk “You got algebra, right? But you didn’t get geometry.”

(C) As I write in several of the Divray Torah, I am essentially a poet who thinks in free associations, non-sequentially, and often lyrically. As a result, all I can do is take a slice of reality and the interactions of human beings, integrate Jewish texts, work them around in my mind, turning it this way and that, and write about my conclusions.

(D) Details about my mind’s machinations: Things (names, words, phrases, quotes, images) spontaneously, unexpectedly, intensely, arbitrarily, and chaotically sometimes swirl around at uncontrollable speed in my head.

However, when it comes to rest on a single item, I can focus intensely.

On the other hand, when there is too much material to manage — even to the point of being painful — I get frustrated and “hit the wall”.

Sometimes I can see it coming; at other times it happens without warning. The message, though, is clear. I need to stop, drop it completely, or just work with what I have.

(E) Additionally, I try to be particularly careful with one aspect of grammar. I believe that “*the poor*,” “*the homeless*,” “*the disabled*,” “*the mentally ill*” are problematic phrases. They categorize the individual human beings, turning them into collectives and abstracts. While I would not say that it dehumanizes them, it certainly depersonalizes them. They are, most of all, persons. Even though more wordy and sometimes

cumbersome, I prefer to use “persons” or “individuals”: poor *persons*, homeless *individuals* (or as my social worker niece Debbie Wilcox says, “people who are experiencing homelessness”), *persons* with disabilities, *individuals* with mental illness.

Similarly, “a homeless shelter” and “a battered women’s shelter” ought to be, “a shelter for homeless persons” and “a shelter for individuals and families who have been victims of domestic violence.” And even with that lengthy phrase, I preferred “individuals and families who are *survivors* of domestic violence.”

Tet — Additional Items About The Text of This Anthology

(1) This anthology was prepared on the Macintosh application TextEdit. I had no choice, because in Microsoft Word and other applications, when the Hebrew and Aramaic material transferred from the JCL (Deluxe Edition) CD-ROM — the words would appear on the screen in reverse order. Also, proper page numbering was problematic, and the last line on some pages occasionally prints only the top half of the words, the other half appearing on the next page. Adjusting one of these — say on page 21 — would throw off every page afterwards, which was just too daunting a task to keep changing. Since the words are still legible, I left the lines as they were. Furthermore, I chose not to make a page separation between every Dvar Torah, because the result would have made this volume too thick, would have been too cumbersome for my purposes, and perhaps too daunting to a potential reader.

(2) Miscellaneous Things to Know

(⌘) Some texts, people, and ideas appear more than once in different Divray Torah. The repetitions happened either because they were needed in different contexts or they were included in Divray Torah written on different days.

(2) My positive, optimistic statements and conclusions are not mere Pollyanna-ish naïve thoughts, but rather, I believe, are very real.

(λ) Aside from the poems, more than 90% of the material is new. Very few prose items have been taken (though refined) from my other books.

(7) Other than three or four topics, no Dvar Torah is a continuation of the previous one, so it is not necessary to read the selections consecutively.

***American Values, Ideals, and Principles,
And How Some Of Them are Actualized
In American Society***

Aleph - The Declaration of Independence

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Bet - The Preamble to the Constitution

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Gimel - From Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

a. Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

b. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here, have, thus far, so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

***Dalet - Some Examples of the Actualization of
American Ideals, Values, and Principles***

Womens' Suffrage 1920*

Native Americans received the right to vote in 1924,

The Voting Rights Act of (1965),

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FSLA) (1938)

child labor

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990),

The Pure Food and Drug Act (1906),

Social Security (1935),

Medicare (1964),

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (1966),

The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act (1996) ,

which frees the donor of food from legal liability,

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) (1967),

The Freedom of Information Act (1966)

**In other countries: New Zealand — 1902, Australia — 1906, Finland — 1913, Norway, Denmark, Iceland — 1915, Canada — 1917, Russia — 1917, Great Britain — 1918, Switzerland — 1971, Kuwait — 2005, Saudi Arabia — 2011.*

Refining and Expanding Our Understanding of Jewish and Secular VIP's — Values, Ideals, and Pinciples

I understand that the following are essentially “short lists”. Because of your own background, personality, and life experiences, you might find it productive to add to ones that you find of interest.

(Aleph) Values briefly expressed in words

- a.* “It’s the right thing to do.”
- b.* “No one left behind.” (American soldiers)
- c.* “Just doing my job.” (First responders, police, EMT’s, firefighters, doctors, nurses, social workers who have made an enormous difference in others’ lives — including saving them from dying)
- d.* “All for one and one for all.” (The three Musketeers)
- e.* “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” (Attributed to UCLA Bruins football coach Henry Russell.) *A sharp rejoinder came from Woody Hayes, the legendary Ohio State football coach — “If winning’s not the only thing, they why do they keep score?”*
- f.* “Let them eat cake.” (Marie Antoinette)
- g.* “Semper fi.” “Always faithful.” (Motto of the Marine Corps)
- h.* “Sic Semper Tyrannis.” “Thus Always To Tyrants.” (on the state flag of Virginia)
- i.* “וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינָנוּ אֹכְלֵי” “And the bush was not consumed.” (*Exodus 3:2*) (Chiseled in the wall over the front gates of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.)

Introductory story to j:

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was intensely devoted to her poetry from her earliest years. She gave a great number of public readings. Her reading voice was magical, entralling the audiences — many of them enormous. The number of people who came to hear her was certainly unusual for a poetry reading. Her biographer, Nancy Milford, wrote that at one point she was the most famous woman in America. However, when World War II had already broken out in Europe, she wrote, “I used to think it very important to write good poetry...What does it matter now, when men are dying for their hopes and their ideals? If I live or die as a poet it won’t matter, but anyone who believes in democracy and freedom and love and culture and peace ought to be busy now.” She then wrote a book of propaganda in prose — not really her real talent. Despite the noble intent, its quality was universally panned by the critics.

***j.* W.H. Auden (1907-1973) — by many critics ranked noticeably higher than Robert Frost in the pantheon of 20th Century poets writing in English — once wrote, “My poetry never saved a child from Auschwitz.”**

(Bet) A random list of various kinds of people

and their possible understandably differing hierarchy of values:

A survivor of the Nazi death camps,
mystic, Quaker, hedonist,
מתמיד/matmid-a Torah student who devotes every possible hour to study,
athlete, entertainer, kindergarten teacher,
soldier on the beach at Normandy June 6, 1944,
prisoners in a maximum security correctional institution,
knight in the age of chivalry, serf in the Middle Ages,
doctor lawyer rabbi voeg instructor nun

doctor, lawyer, rabbi, yoga instructor, nun,
Abraham Lincoln, Justice of the Supreme Court,
person experiencing homelessness, victim of domestic abuse, recovering addict,
long-haul truck driver, computer geek, CEO of a drug company,
teen-age burger-flipper at McDonalds,
PhD candidate years into the state of being ABD — All But Dissertation.

(Gimel) Social conventions

A. Forms of address: Your honor, Mr./Madam President, (and a band playing “Hail to The Chief”, and sometimes laying down a red carpet) vice-president, secretary, senator, Supreme Court Justice, Professor, Doctor*, etc., (Spanish) use of formal *Usted* instead of *tu**, (German) formal *Sie* instead of *du**, in some Jewish schools, calling the teacher **מורה דבורה/Morah Devorah (Teacher Devorah)** instead of Ms. Green.

**When my father, a doctor, was a patient in the hospital, there was a sign over his bed, “He is to be addressed as “Dr. Siegel””. The fact that he was a patient lying in bed and needing serious medical treatment, did not change his status. (The only exception was one of his doctors, who was a friend. He was allowed to call him “Julius” — but no one else.)*

***Hebrew does not differentiate between formal and informal “you”, only “אתה”. That is the curious — intentional — meaning underlying the language of Jewish ברכות/brachot-blessings. The second word is “אתה”, which implies a closeness, intimacy, but each ends with the content of the blessing in third person, e.g., **המוציא לחם מן הארץ-Who causes bread to come from the earth.** The late Professor Max Kadushin, ז”ל — pioneer in the field of Talmudic values — appropriately called this combination of 2nd and 3rd person in relation to God “normal mysticism”.*

B. Standing: Court clerk announces “All rise” when a judge enters, President, distinguished guest, a bride walking down the aisle to the *chuppah*, your Rabbi* or Rebbi, the Torah, Mitzvah hero, army: at attention, some people for a mother and father, curtsy and bowing when meeting royalty, and in some Asian cultures bowing in greeting.

**There was an annual gathering of Torah study in Jerusalem on the Yahrzeit of the distinguished Yemenite Rabbi Yosef Kapach, whom I knew from my many visits to הרבנית/The Rabbanit. The program, featured many scholarly presentations and was held in a large auditorium with 400-500 people in attendance. One year — even while the speaker was in the middle of teaching his words of Torah, one of the two Chief Rabbis entered from a door near the stage. Immediately, the entire audience rose to its feet.*

(Dalet) What are the Jewish VIP’s — Values, Ideals, and Principles in these texts and practices?

Why is there is no bracha when giving Tzedakah?

What does it mean not to show disrespect to a thing?

אין זורקין הפת משום בזיון אוכלים

One does not throw bread because of disrespect for food.

(Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 171:1)

What Jewish value is being expressed in this Halachah of not throwing bread?

Why do some Jews keep Kosher?

Who do some Jews become vegetarians? Vegans?

Which of these may be thrown away (if any) -

kippah, damaged Tzitziot, a worn-out Tallit?

Not wearing leather items on Yom Kippur?

Covering the eyes when lighting Shabbat and holiday candles?

Covering the Challah while Kiddush is being recited?

What should you do if you cannot afford wine for Kiddish?

What should you do if you cannot afford white for tzitzit?

The mourner initiates conversation?

Head coverings for men?

Head covering for woman?

If you only have enough money for Chanukkah candles or Shabbat candles, which do you buy?

What Jewish value motivates a person

to have the veterinarian put a badly suffering pet to sleep?

What are good reasons why

a bar or bat Mitzvah “kid” should have a Mitzvah project?

In the Shulchan Aruch Law Code, why do the Laws of Tzedakah [beginning in Yoreh De’ah 247] come after the Laws of Torah Study [beginning in Yoreh De’ah 245] ?

Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial in Washington is an enormous Yahrzeit plaque, listing more than 58,000 individual names. Lin was telling the world that every single one of them was a human being who deserved to be remembered.

Beyond the names, of course, is the truly awesome value-message she transmitted by the artistic nature and form of the wall.

What values do people express when they give a bigger tip than usual to a waiter or waitress during COVID?

Why do some people leave a larger tip if the waiter or waitress is Hispanic?

(Hay) A Special Case — The Jewish treatment of books*

(1) If a Siddur, Machzor, or other book containing God’s name falls to the ground, the person picks it up and kisses it. (2) Some people kiss the page when they close a book. (3) Others do not leave a book open when they finish using it. (4) When they are no longer usable, a Sefer Torah and those books with God’s name are buried ceremoniously in a grave called a **גניזה/geniza****.

**[From Professor Sperber’s book]: One year, the great Rabbi Israel Salanter (founder of the ethical Musar movement) came late to Kol Nidray services. Some people had noticed him chasing a cat to shoo it into his house. He explained that he had some books inside the house that he had borrowed. The house was empty because everyone was in the synagogue. He was concerned that mice might damage the books.*

And another story about Rabbi Salanter: On the way to synagogue, he heard a baby crying. When he entered the house, he found an infant about two months old crying in the crib. Lying next to the infant was a bottle of milk, and nearby a young girl about six was sleeping. The mother had gone to synagogue and left the daughter to feed the baby, but it was late, and she all asleep.

Rabbi Salanter fed the baby, and gently woke the little girl. But she told him that she was afraid to be left alone — so he stayed until the mother came back. Rabbi Salanter then went to the synagogue, arriving near the very end of the service.

***In the Jewish day school in Boca, Raton, Florida, a teacher taught the students about the Jewish practice of **גניזה/geniza**. One Bar-Mitzvah-age student decided that this was going to be his Mitzvah project — he would organize his synagogue’s (Shaarei Kodesh) **גניזה/geniza** ceremony.*

On the subject of Bar/Bat Mitzvah projects (about which I have learned hundreds), I want to mention one more — quite awesome in scope and sensitivity. The young man photographed all of the headstones in the synagogue cemetery so that anyone unable to personally visit the grave of the beloved, could see the stone. This was long before COVID when so many people were hesitant to travel.

Perhaps not as powerful, taking pictures and posting the synagogue Yahrzeit plaques may offer some element of connection.

Making It Easier To Read My Divray Torah

1. One Additional Potentially Productive, Meaningful, And Permissible Method of Studying Torah

לזכר אחי מורי אברהם הלוי

Stanley Siegel

מעמיק בתורה

I. Early Early Morning: Sometimes before dawn, I used spend a couple of hours reading addictive page-turner detective novels or studying arbitrarily-selected “easy” Torah. The whodunit obsession lasted many months. Then the minor obsession with that genre ended like my undergraduate interest in Twentieth Century French drama.

II. A Recent Change: For no *rational* reason, I recently switched my early morning Torah study or secular reading time to leafing through the 1973 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica (EJ)*. I randomly chose one volume from the 16 on the shelf. At that time, I had no plans to “do” all 16, nor, at present is it something I am considering. When I began, I had no idea how long this “project” would hold my attention before I would turn, again purely by chance, to something else.

This has been the normal pattern in my education, the short attention span is no doubt attributable to my medically-certified attention deficit disorder. This also explains why, as a child, I liked picture books with short captions, and, now prefer coffee table books. Presently, for example, during my time with the EJ, I browse, surf, or scan, and read only whatever interests me and ignore the rest. I simply pass over entries that I *really* don’t want to absorb or learn more about. I’m long past “coulda, shoulda, woulda” education, like in college I “shoulda” taken a semester of Shakespeare instead of slogging through Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. I was quickly covering so much material *my way* in the EJ, I was absolutely certain that I would be exposed to many people, ideas, and facts that were completely new to me. Or I would finally fill in numerous details on topics that I didn’t know enough about but had always said to myself, “Some day I’ll get to it”.

III. Some Results From Just A Few Days Inside The EJ:

(A) Early on, I discovered a real gem on my very first day — a new Mitzvah hero: Dame Myra Hess (1890-1956) was a renowned British pianist. During the Blitz, with Nazi bombs and V1 and V2 rockets falling on London, she organized concerts at the National Gallery to help maintain the morale of the terrified citizens.

Her music had exactly the same effect young David’s did when he played his harp to ease King Saul’s troubled mind.

(B) A column count [two columns/EJ page]:

“Hebrew grammar” — 98;

“History” — 211;

“Poland” — 80;

“The **שואה/Shoah**” — 82;

“Israel” — 940,

“Jerusalem” — 213.

(C) How many Russian Jews that Baron de Hirsch sent to Argentina, the United States, and Canada to become farmers, safe and far away from the Czars’ murderous anti-Semitism.

The gauchos learned to speak Yiddish and there is a town named “Moisesville”.

(D) The world-renowned cellist Gregor Piatogosky was Jewish.

(E) I re-discovered **הגדול הכהן חלקיהו/Chilkiah The High Priest**, who found the scroll of the Book of Deuteronomy, gave it to **שפן הספר/Shaphan the Scribe**, who

gave to **יהויה המלך/ King Josiah**, who then launched his historic reform. (*II Kings* 22:8ff)

(F) After the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1498, the names and writings of several of the great number of major Sefardi rabbis who scattered to North Africa, Italy, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Greece, and other countries, islands like Djerba, and cities like Constantinople, Casablanca, and Salonika, which became great centers of Torah

(G) From the pre-World War II photographs, the beauty and grandeur of so many of the synagogues destroyed during Kristallnacht.

(H) How many Jews received the Nobel Prize for their work in chemistry and literature, in addition to the more well-known laureates in physics and medicine.

(I) Who were the pre-eminent experts in their field. For example, every article about Biblical, Talmudic, and modern and ancient Israeli flora and fauna were written by Yehuda Feliks, and Gershom Scholem wrote *almost everything* about Jewish mysticism.

IV. The EJ And The JE: Years ago I used the same method with *The Jewish Encyclopedia (JE)* of 1903.

(K) To some historians, the publication of the JE proved that Europe was no longer the exclusive center of Jewish scholarship.

(L) I particularly noted that, shortly after settling in cities like Cincinnati, Louisville, and Minneapolis, the immigrant settlers purchased land for a Jewish cemetery, established free-loan societies, and founded synagogues.

(M) Names like Heydrich, Sobibor, Mengele, Mauthausen, and Eichmann — all-too-frequently referenced and described in depth in the EJ — naturally were unknown to the editors in 1903.

V. My Way Is Definitely Not For Everyone: Nothing about my approach is relevant for many — possibly most — people. The way their minds work and their method of study are completely different than mine. They, like my late brother Stanley, **ל"י**, will not move on until they understand completely what they are studying. For me, and others like me, though, I am only offering another *possible* option for Torah-study.

Obviously, everyone encounters certain topics that necessarily require a close reading, slow, meticulous, detailed research, and serious thought such as the intricacies of COVID variants.

2. How Sherlock Holmes Helped Me Get All A's in Bible At The Jewish Theological Seminary

(Aleph) **A Partial Elementary Introduction To Biblical Hebrew** — I hope to provide you with two easy steps to give you entrée into studying the **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible** in the original Hebrew. I say “easy” because all Hebrew words, ancient or modern, are based on a three-letter root. The search for those three letters in their many grammatical configurations and range of meanings is very tantalizing. Don't be intimidated or consider this project too daunting. *You don't have to be a rocket scientist* or a scholar of ancient Semitic languages, history, or culture to do it.

(Bet) **My Own Approach** — Because of those tempting three letters, I personally learned to emphasize *words* in my **תנ"ך/Tanach** studies. This approach provides me with *immediate* and *frequent* pleasures ranging from mildly good feelings to palpable thrills to enlightening, illuminating, and occasionally even revelatory moments.

Lately, I've come to realize that I work like Sherlock Holmes solving a crime. Holmes might notice an unusual postage stamp in a victim's drawer, an out-of-place kitchen utensil, or a strange smudge on the carpet, and would connect those clues to lead him to the perpetrator. *A lá* Sherlock, nowadays police and other investigators — with all their modern databanks and sophisticated electronic tools — discover, uncover, analyze,

interpret, connect, and pursue the implications of the clues, and catch the “perp” — which is precisely the meaning of Deuteronomy 16:20:

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף

Tzedek Tzedek tirdof—“Justice Justice you must pursue!”

(Gimel) *The Two Best Techniques For Discovering And Interpreting The Word-*

Clues — To be successful, you have to be curious, and sensitive to words that do not match the standard “wooden” translations. You will come to “feel” that something is “off”, will then ask the right questions, and ultimately find your way to the solution. Here are some examples that might confront you: How/why does דָּבָר/*davar* mean both *word* and *thing*? How/why does the root כבד mean *heavy, honor, glory, dignity, success, or the liver*? How/why can the root צדק mean everything from *Justice*, to *justified, straight, vindication, right, righteous, innocent, צֶדֶק-using your money to benefit others, success, or victory*? One of my favorites is the word מִדְּבָר/*midbar* — *wilderness OR desert*. How you translate it in a particular passage makes a *biiiiig* difference if you are trying to picture the Children of Israel wandering around for 40 years. Of a more abstract nature is יִרְאָה/*yir’ah* which can mean either “fear” or “awe”, and many contexts it is often difficult to determine which is the correct translation

(Clue-Technique #1) Obviously, the *context* will determine the intended meaning.

The example that immediately comes to mind is the word הִנֵּה/*hinay*, which is frequently translated “Behold”. I think we would agree that when Jacob wakes up in the morning and discovers Leah in his bed instead of Rachel, הִנֵּה/*hinay* emphatically means, “Uh, oh!” or, “What’s going on here?!” “Behold” hardly captures Jacob’s reaction.

Another example of context is in Deuteronomy 25:1: After a court’s verdict is rendered, the legal term for the innocent party is called the צַדִּיק/*tzaddik*, whether or not that person is personally a *mensch* or a מִמְזֵר/*momzer-S.O.B.*; the רָשָׁע/*rasha* is the guilty party — fine human being though the person may actually be.

The prose sections provide most of the examples of *Clue-Technique #1*. But I (and, no doubt, Holmes,) particularly like *Clue-Technique #2*, which is found in the poetry (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve so-called “Minor” Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and scattered passages elsewhere throughout the תַּנַּ"ךְ/*Tanach*). The only electronic tool you will need is a computer with either a disk containing the digitized Hebrew תַּנַּ"ךְ/*Tanach* or internet access to סֵפֶרִיָה/*Sefaria*, because their search engines will instantaneously display every instance of any specific word. You will also need to have right next to you the Jewish Publication Society’s (JPS) 1985 English translation *Tanakh**, which is absolutely the best one for your purpose. It was the most important resource for my own progress.

To understand *Clue-Technique #2*, you will need to know one essential fact about Biblical poetry: A verse is built on parallelism. This standard stylistic pattern means that:

1. the meaning of the first half (A) of a verse, is repeated — exactly or approximately but in different words — in the second half (B). For example, אִישׁ=אָדָם-person, and חֵכְמָה=בִּינָה-wisdom,

2. or (B) states the opposite of (A), like רָע/טוֹב-bad/good and לַיְלִיּוֹם-night/day,

3. or (B) uses a word associated with another word in (A) — for example, אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם-earth/Heaven and כֶּסֶף/זָהָב-silver/gold.

Job 28:17 illustrates the synonymous (A=B) type,

לֹא יֵעָרְכָנָה זָהָב וְזָכוּכִית וְתַמּוּרְתָהּ כְּלִי פָז

If you don’t know the meaning of פָּז, since it is parallel to זָהָב, it must mean “gold”.**

This is the really fun part. As your examples multiply, you will become more attuned to catching nuances and more accurate translations will now increasingly make

more sense, even ones very remote from what you had originally thought possible.

Have at it!

(Dalet) Feeling Ambitious? — Start with **נֶפֶשׁ/nefesh**, which can mean *person, neck/throat, corpse, self, death, gravestone, or living being*. You may still be having difficulty freeing yourself of the rigid “old” translations, e.g., **נֶפֶשׁ/nefesh** — *neck/throat?* Absolutely!

Jonah 2:6:

Water surrounded my neck,
or Psalm 69:2 —

אֶפְפוּנֵי מַיִם עַד־נֶפֶשׁ

Deliver me, O God, save me,
for the water is up to my neck.

Or try **יָד/yad** — *hand, strength, side, portion, share, place, or monument*. From there, go to **לִבָּב, זֶמֶר, שֹׁפֵט, קֹדֶשׁ, סִפֵּר, עֶרְב, שָׁלֹם, and הִלָּל**.

If this subject doesn’t “grab you”, isn’t your “thing”, move on to another aspect of **תַּנְיָךְ/Tanach** that interests you personally such as archeology, women heroes, or ancient near eastern law. Only — whatever you choose — *pursue it with passion*.

However, if **תַּנְיָךְ/Tanach**-in-Hebrew *does* interest you —

Have at it and have fun!

**The previous edition was published early on while I was an undergraduate, and was a major factor in my progress toward intermediate תַּנְיָךְ/Tanach in the original.*

***The Book of Proverbs-משלי is an especially good place to start, since it has many examples of parallelisms that are relatively easy to decipher.*

3. Five Crucial Yiddish* Words To Keep In Mind When Studying Torah And Searching for Jewish VIPs- Values, Ideals, and Principles

(Aleph) I have found that keeping in mind the following five Yiddish words describing a person’s character and essence can serve as a useful guide during your Torah study: **(1)** With Jewish texts, it may help make you select material that will deal with the nature of yourself and other human beings, and may yield useful insights to the meaning of the text. **(2)** Away from the written word or Oral Torah we might be studying, i.e., in Life, these words can direct you to the Best of the Best human beings.

A mnemonic word is MASHEZ:

M: **מענטש/Mensch**-an authentic human being, i.e., decent, honest, virtuous, humble, kind, caring, compassionate, generous.

[pl: *Menschen, common English usage — Mensches; adj: Menschlich; abstract: Menschlichkeit*]

A: **איידל/aydel**-a *Mensch* but with an additional element of nobility-, delicacy-, gentility-of-soul. To say of someone that he or she has an **אייִדלע נשמה/edele neshama-soul** is extraordinarily high praise. This is what Rachel of the Akiva-Rachel Talmudic love story saw in the apparently crude shepherd when the Midrash says she saw that he was **מעלי-ma’alay** from the root **עלה** “**up, high**”, like in “**עלייה/aliyah**.” There was something high, beyond the norm about him.

The Yiddish contrasts sharply with the German “Edel” which means high-born, like a

duchess, marquis, earl, or princess.

SH: שיינער ייד /*shayn-beautiful*. To call someone a **א שיינער ייד** /*a shayner Yid* is a very high compliment.

E: ערלעך /*ehrlich-honest*, a person of the highest integrity

Z: זיס /*ziess-sweet*. **א זיסער ייד** /*a ziesser Yid*-a sweet Jew or a **א זיסער מאן** /*a ziesser mann*-a sweet person would be the kind of individual you would want to be part of your *chevra*.

You can add: פיי /*fein-fine*, just like in English.

(Bet) *If your ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492:* and scattered to Iraq, Syria, North Africa, Turkey, and other parts of the Diaspora, you spoke Ladino, based on Spanish. So how do you say the German-based מענטש /*Mensch* in Spanish-based Ladino? Though I recognized that in different countries there would develop variations in vocabulary, I had to choose one person with Sefardi ancestors to answer my question.

I asked my close friend Rabbi Abe Morhaim — a descendant of Turkish Jews.

He answered, **“hombre bueno”** or **“hombre precioso”***** .

(Gimel) That says it all

**Please allow for my faulty spelling in Yiddish.*

***I found a quote from a certain young woman named Nickole Evans that I think is appropriate in this context, “I’m not the smartest girl in the world, nor am I the most talented. What I have is a heart.”*

****Feminine = “mujer [pronounced ‘muzher’] buena/preciosa”.*

Some Texts about
Jewish VIP's – Values, Ideals, and Principles

(Aleph) Our Jewish Values
From Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Halachic texts
and their commentaries:
(My comments in Italics)

1. I have not found a single all-encompassing text expressing the very highest value the Jewish hierarchy of values. The only possibility I might consider – from the חומש/Chumash – might be this one:

כִּי יִדְעֵתִיו
לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו
וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה
לְעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט

For I have selected him [Abraham]
so that he may instruct his children and his posterity after him
to keep God's ways:
to do צדקה ומשפט/Tzedakah uMishpat-what is just and right.

(Genesis 18:19)

I take “to do what is just and right צדקה ומשפט-Tzedakah uMishpat” to mean “to live a Menschlich Life”.

2. Nevertheless, the following are some prioritizing texts that place them in a very important position in the order of values:

(א) He [Hillel] said to him [the person exploring becoming a Jew],
“What is hateful to you, do not do to other people.
That is the entire Torah.
The rest is commentary.
Now go study.” (Shabbat 31a)

אמר לו
דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד
זו היא כל התורה כולה
ואיך פירושה הוא
זיל גמור

This is fairly close to the negative formulation of Leviticus 19:18 **וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ** –
Love others as you love yourself, which in the following text is Rabbi Akiva's choice of a very great principle. I personally believe that the negative way is the easier and more manageable approach in day-to-day living.

In any event, in the text above, Hillel's was a special situation with a potential Jew-by-choice, and – though Hillel was indisputably one of The Greats of the Talmud – his was still an individual opinion.

(ב) Rabbi Akiva states that loving others as one loves oneself
is a very great Torah principle,
But Ben Azzai states “This is the story of human beings” (Genesis 5:1)
(i.e., that every person —being created in God's image —
is the very essence of being human) is even greater.

וְאֵתְּבִי לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ
 רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר
 זֶה כִּלְלֵי גְדוּלַת תּוֹרָה.
 בֶּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר
 זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם
 (כִּיּוֹם בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אָדָם בְּדַמּוֹת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ)
 זֶה כִּלְלֵי גְדוּלַת מִזְוָה

(Sifra, Kedoshim, on Leviticus 19:18) [See the Introduction]

Neither sage is saying **הַכִּלְלֵי הַגְּדוּלָה**, *the fundamental principle*, but, rather, that they are principles of major significance.

(ג)

חַיִּיבִין אֲנִי לְהִזְהֵר בְּמִצְוֹת צְדָקָה
 יוֹתֵר מִכָּל מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה

We must be especially careful to observe the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, more so than any other positive mitzvah*.

(Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to Poor People” 10:1)

*Which would include (to name a few, [there are 248 of them in his סֵפֶר הַמִּצְוֹת /Sefer Hamitzvot]): **פֶּאֶה/pe’ah-leaving the sheaves at the corner of the field for poor people**, /Hashavat Avaydah-returning lost objects to their owners, **בַּל תַּלִּין/bal talin** paying employees on time, eating Kosher food, fasting on Yom Kippur, prayer, hearing the shofar, studying Torah, and reading the Megillah on Purim.

(ד) **וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגְדָה**... After listing many important Mitzvahs, the Mishnah states... **וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגְדָה** is equal to them? Outweighs them all? **supersedes them?**
 (It is not easy to get the full sense of כְּנֶגְדָה.)

אֵלּוּ דְּבָרִים שְׂאִין לְהֵם שְׁעוֹר
 הַפֶּאֶה, וְהַבְּכוּרִים, וְהַרְאִיוֹן, וְגִמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים, וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה.
 אֵלּוּ דְּבָרִים שְׂאִדָם אוֹכְלֵי פְרוּתֵיהֶן בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהַקֶּרֶן קִיָּמָת לֹא לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.
 כְּבוֹד אֵב וְאֵם, וְגִמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים, וְהַבָּאת שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ
וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגְדָה כָּלָם
 (Mishnah Pe’ah 1:1)

(ה) **Circumcision is great because it is equal-in-weight to all the other Mitzvahs in the Torah.** (Nedarim 32a)

גְּדוּלַת מִילָה שֶׁשְׁקוּלָהּ כְּנֶגְדָה כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁבַתּוֹרָה

(ו) **Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi stated:**

(Referring to a verse in the Torah:)

This shows that Shabbat

is equal-in-weight to all the Mitzvahs in the Torah. (Brachot 9a)

רַבִּי אוֹמֵר
 זֶה מִצְוֹת שַׁבַּת
 שֶׁהִיא שְׁקוּלָה כְּנֶגְדָה
 כָּל מִצְוֹתֵיהֶן שֶׁל תּוֹרָה

Both this one and the previous one use **כְּנֶגְדָה** but add **שְׁקוּלָה** (root **שָׁקַל**=to weigh) to make their meaning more explicit. Some commentators state that this is an exaggeration and not to be taken literally. They believe it is only a reaction to the neglect of these two Mitzvahs in their day.

3. Examining the types of Jews the sages considered worthy of, i.e., guaranteed a place in, the **עוֹלָם הַבָּא/Olam HaBa-The Next World** will give us a sense of their **very high Jewish value-priorities**. The first two, are relatively “light”.

(אא)

**Rabbi Yirmiah bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan,
Whoever walks four cubits in the Land of Israel
is assured of a place in the World to Come. (Ketubot 111a)**

א"ר ירמיה בר אבא א"ר יוחנן
כל המהלך ארבע אמות בארץ ישראל
מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא

(בב)

**Rabbi Elazar said in the named of Rabbi Avina:
Whoever recites תהלה לדוד/Tehilla LeDavid [אשרי/Ashray] three times a day
is assured of a place in the World to Come. (Berachot 4b)**

אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי אבינא
כל האומר (תהלים קמ"ה) תהלה לדוד
בכל יום שלש פעמים
מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא

*The following are four examples of individuals the sages assured a place in the
עולם הבא/Olam HaBa-The Next World:*

(גג)

**רבי יהודה בן בבא-For sacrificing his life holding off attacking Roman soldiers.
(Avoda Zara 8b)**

(דד)

אלעזר בן דורדיא-For repenting for a serious sin. (Avoda Zara 17a)

(הה)

**רבי חנינא בן תרדיון-For suffering martyrdom at the hands of the Romans
for teaching Torah in public in defiance of the government's decree.
(Avoda Zara 18a)**

(וו)

**Two אינשי בדוחי/jokers who used their talents to relieve others
of their sadness and suffering. (Ta'anit 22a)**

*4. The Midrash (Derech Eretz Zuta 1) states that nine people were allowed into
Gan Eden (Paradise) alive, i.e., without having the common human experience of dying.
Among those nine are the following two:*

(זז)

Pharaoh's daughter בתיה/Bityah, for having baby Moses.

(חח)

**Serach-שרח bat Asher-אשר בת daughter of Asher (the son of Jacob), the old,
old woman who showed Moses where Joseph's bones were buried, thus fulfilling the
promise to Joseph to have his body taken to the Promised Land for burial. This was the
crucial prerequisite to the Exodus.**

(Bet) In the Halachah

(טט) Life and Death

ת"ר

מעבירין את המת מלפני כלה

(If a funeral procession and a wedding entourage meet at a crossroads,)

A funeral procession makes way for a wedding entourage. (Ketubot 17a)

I think we would be hard pressed to find a more graphic depiction of the well-known phrase from Deuteronomy (30:19), וּבַחַיִּים בְּחַיִּים, uVacharta baChayim-Choose life!

(י) Not to curse yourself

ההמקלל עצמו

כמו שקלל אחרים

שנאמר השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד

One who curses oneself...

is the same as if the person cursed someone else

[which is, of course, prohibited],

as the verse states (Deuteronomy 4:9),

“But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously...”

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Sanhedrin 26:3)

(כ) Asleep in the synagogue:

אם התחיל אחד מהעשרה להתפלל לבדו ואינו יכול לענות עמהם או שהוא ישן אפילו הכי מצטרף עמהם

If one person of the ten [in a Minyan] began to pray by himself/herself, and is unable to answer “Amen”

or is asleep —

even in situations like those,

that person is counted. (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55:6 [Laws of Kaddish])

There are at least eight legitimate reasons why the person would be asleep, none of which show a supposed lack of כבוד/respect for the prayers. However, waking the person up does show a lack of respect.

(ל) Education:

היה הוא צריך ללמוד ויש לו בן ללמוד

ואין ידו משגת להספיק לשניהם אם שניהם שוים הוא קודם לבנו

[In a family] where there is a parent who must study Torah,

and a child who is of Torah-study age,

and the parent doesn't have enough money for both,

if both are equal*,

the parent takes precedence. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 245:2)**

**(1) Some would say that children naturally learn more quickly than adults. (2) On the other hand, Torah material is meant to be related to Life-experience which will yield deeper understanding of the text. Because of this, the parent would have priority.*

***I list this Halachah because when I have asked my audiences who takes precedence, many “vote” for the child. Once the group has discussed this Halachah, the people usually come up with at least five or six good reasons to “vote” for the parent*

**(ממ) Do not say to a individuals
who have changed their behavior for the good,
“Remember what you used to do.” (Bava Metzi’a 58b)**

היה בעל תשובה
אל יאמר לו
זכור מעשיך הראשונים

This is one of a few examples in that section of מציע/Bava Metzi’a that deal with verbal abuse and deceptive speech practices.

**(ננ) Rabbi Ila’I said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar:
Just as it is a Mitzvah to say things that should be heard,
so, too is it a Mitzvah not to say something that would not be heard.**

(Yevamot 65b)

ואמר רבי אילעא משום ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון
כשם שמצוה על אדם לומר דבר הנשמע
כך מצוה על אדם שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע

Two possible interpretations:

(1) If you might say something that would be harmful to another person, it is better to remain silent;

(2) in a conversation or argument when you know the other person is not going to listen to your opinion — it is better not to start or continue the exchange at all.

(Gimel) Tzedakah:

(סס) Four cups of wine

אפילו עני שבישראל לא יאכל עד שיסב
ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין
ואפילו מן התמחוי

**(At the Passover Seder), even the poorest Jew should not eat without reclining,
and that person must be provided with no less than four cups of wine —
even if it has to be taken from the תמחוי/tamchu’i-community soup kitchen.**

(Pesachim 99b)

Though I could not recall the source, I remember that somewhere Maimonides commented that he never heard of a community that did not have a תמחוי/tamchu’i-community soup kitchen or a קופה/kuppah-community cash Tzedakah fund.

(עע) Poor people have to donate

אמר מר זוטרא
אפי' עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה
יעשה צדקה

Mar Zutra said:

**Even a poor person who is supported by Tzedakah
has to give Tzedakah. (Gittin7b)**

By not allowing poor people to donate, you are excluding them from the chevra. This is an insult to their dignity, essentially telling them they are not worthy to be givers.

(פפ) *Tzedakah money never belongs to us*

קונם כהנים ולויים נהנים לי. יטלו על כרחו

(If a farmer says,)

“I vow that the Kohanim and Levi'im should have no benefit of anything that is mine”,

they [the Kohanim and Levi'im] take [their Terumah and Ma'aser] anyway... even against the farmer's will,

[(because these portions of the crop do not belong to — never belonged to* — the farmer.]

They always belonged to the Kohen and the Levi.)] (*Mishnah Nedarim 11:3*)

**From the moment that Paul Newman, had committed himself to donate all after-tax profits to Tzedakah from his “Newman's Own” products — to date some \$740,000,000 — he never considered a single dollar his own. Similarly, Steven Spielberg created the Righteous Persons Foundation, dedicating all the profits from “Schindler's List” to Tzedakah.*

(צצ) *How much to give?*

שיעור נתינתה אם ידו משגת יתן כפי צורך העניים ואם אין ידו משגת כל כך יתן עד חומש נכסיו מצוה מן המובחר ואחד מעשרה מדה בינונית פחות מכאן עין רעה... הגה ואל יבזז אדם יותר מחומש שלא יצטרך לבריות

The amount one should give to Tzedakah:

If one can afford it,

enough to provide for all of the needs of the poor people.

But if one cannot afford that much, then

one should give up to a fifth of one's possessions—

which is doing the Mitzvah in an exceptional fashion —

one tenth is an average percentage,

and less is considered רעה/miserly f...

Comment by Rabbi Moshe Isserles:

And one should not give away more than 20%,

lest he or she ultimately become dependent on others*.

(*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 249:1*)

**There are a few exceptions to exceeding the 20% limit. Examples include redeeming captives, if the person is wealthy enough that he or she will not be impoverished and become a public charge, and in a last will and testament.*

(קק)

רבי אלעזר יהיב פרוטה לעני והדר מצלי

אמר

דכתיב: אני בצדק אחזה פניך

Rabbi Elazar would first give a coin to a poor person,

and only afterwards would he begin to pray,

saying,

“As is written in the verse (*Psalm 17:15*),

‘I, בצדק-beTzedek-by means of this act of Tzedakah

פניך/e'che'zeh fanecha-will see Your face.’” (*Bava Batra 10a*)

This is the reason a Tzedakah box is passed around during week-day services. The money collected by the end of a month or year is quite significant.

(רז) *Giving it all away is not Jewish*

ואין זו חסידות...
אלא שטות
שהרי הוא מאבד כל ממונו
ויצטרך לבריות
ובזה וכיוצא בו אמרו חכמים
חסיד שוטה מכלל מבלי עולם

...this (giving away all on's possessions)

is not חסידות/*chassidut*-exceptional righteousness,
but rather שטות/*shtut*-foolishness.

Giving away all one's money

causes that person to be in need of others....

this is one of the situations the sages referred to when they taught,

“A foolish righteous person is among those who ‘wear the world out.’”

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Arachin Va'Charamin* 8:13)

(שז) *Money saved on food because a person is fasting*

אמר מר זוטרא: אגרא דתעניתא — צדקתא.

Mar Zutra said:

[For a person who is fasting], the money not spent on food

is to be given to Tzedakah. (*Brachot 6b*)

(תת) *Maimonides defines true happiness*

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח.
מנות לרעיו. שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב
עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים. שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו
דומה לשכינה שנאמר ישעיהו נ"ז להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות
לב נדכאים.

It is better for people to spend more on gifts for poor people for Purim

Than to spend on their own Purim meal

Or for sending packets of goodies (משלוח מנות/Mishloach Manot),

For there is no greater or more glorious joy

Than to bring happiness

To the hearts of poor people, orphans, widows, and strangers.

One who brings joy to the hearts of these people in need

resembles השכינה/the Divine Shechinah,

As the verse states (Isaiah 57:15)

“[For thus says the One Who Lives Forever

in the Most Sublime Heights, and Whose Name is Holy:

I live on high, in holiness;

Yet I am with those who are distressed and feel a sense of despair —]

Reviving the spirits of those who feel low-in-spirit,

Reviving the hearts of those in desperate need.”

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:16-17)

(ת.ת.א)

רבי יהודה אומר:
...והזהרו בזקן ששכח תלמודו
מחמת אונסו,
דאמרינן:
לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחות בארון

Rabbi Yehudah said:...

Take great care with a sage who has forgotten the knowledge of Torah
because of reasons beyond the sage's control,
because, as we say,
“Not only were the (2nd) Tablets (of the 10 Commandments)
placed in the Ark,
but also the broken pieces of the (1st) Tablets.” (*Brachot 8b*)

(*Dalet*)— *Some Misunderstood and Misplaced Jewish values:*

(א.א.א)

וכל מי שצריך ליטול ואינו יכול לחיות אלא אם כן נוטל
כגון זקן או חולה או בעל יסורין ומגיס דעתו ואינו נוטל
הרי זה שופך דמים ומתחייב בנפשו ואין לו בצערו אלא חטאות ואשמות
...and whoever needs to take Tzedakah,
beg unable to live without it —
such as an elderly person or one who is sick or is suffering greatly —
and who is too proud to take it —
that person sheds blood
and is to be held accountable,
and there is no benefit from the suffering —
only sin and guilt.

(*Maimonides, Hilchot Matnot Ani'im [Laws of Gifts to Poor People] 10:19*)

(ב.ב.ב)

אמר רבא: כמה טפשאי שאר אינשי דקיימי מקמי ספר תורה
ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה

Rava said:

See how foolish people are — they stand before a Sefer Torah
but do not stand before a great person. (*Makkot 22b*)

(ג.ג.ג)

חפצי שמים מותר לדבר בהם
כגון חשבונות של מצוה
ולפסוק צדקה
ולפקח על עסקי רבים
ולשדך התינוק ליארס

About Heavenly matters one is allowed to speak [on Shabbat],
such as accounts related to Mitzvahs, e.g.,
to calculate the distribution of Tzedakah money,
and to plan things related to community welfare,
and to arrange engagements for infants*

(*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 306:6*)

*I included this selection because many people believe you are not allowed to talk about money at all on Shabbat.

Rabbi Yechiel Michel HaLevi Epstein, (1829-1908), compiled a law code called the ערוך השולחן/Aruch HaShulchan. In the section Orach Chaim 306:14 writes that it is permissible to speak with people to engage them to teach Torah to children. He also adds that it is permissible to make arrangements with a tradesperson to teach children a trade.*

(דדד)

רב אידי אסברא לי
אמרו צדיק כי טוב

...
וכי יש צדיק טוב
ויש צדיק שאינו טוב
אלא, טוב לשמים ולבריות
זהו צדיק טוב,
טוב לשמים ורע לבריות
זהו צדיק שאינו טוב

Rav Iddi explained the verse (*Isaiah 3:10*)

“Speak of the Tzaddik who is good”:

Is there such a thing as a Tzaddik who is good and a Tzaddik who is not good?

A person who is good towards Heaven
and good towards human beings
is a good Tzaddik.

A person who is good to Heaven
and bad to human beings is a Tzaddik who is not good. (*Kiddushin 40a*)

(ההה)

היכי דמי חסיד שוטה
כגון דקא טבעה איתתא בנהרא
ואמר
לאו אורח ארעא לאיסתכולי בה
ואצולה

What is an example of a חסיד שוטה/*chassid shoteh*-foolish pious person?

Someone who sees a woman drowning in the river and says

“It’s not appropriate for me to look at her —
so I can’t save her.” (*Sotah 29b*)

(ווו)

אי זהו חסיד שוטה
ראה תינוק מבעבע בנהר
אמר לכשאחלוץ תפילי אצילנו
עם כשהוא חולץ תפיליו
הוציא זה את נפשו

What is an example of a חסיד שוטה/*chassid shoteh*-foolish pious person?

Someone who sees a young child drowning and says,

“When I take off my Tfillin,
I will save him”,
and by the time he removes his Tfillin,
the child has drowned.

(*Yerushalmi Sotah 3:4, [Venice Edition 19a]*)

The Talmud also has a term — **יוהרא/yohorah-haughtiness, arrogance** — for a person who publicly demonstrates (“shows off”) a religious practice beyond the norm. In addition, some later Halachic literature uses the term **נבל ברשות התורה/naval bire’shut haTorah-a scoundrel within the laws of the Torah** referring to someone who technically is following the Law, but twists it for unethical, unfair, or unsavory purposes.

For a curious — and much more extreme — variation on this topic, you may want to read Robert Rockaway’s “But He Was Good to His Mother”. It is the story of how Jewish gangsters such as Bugsy Siegel, Arnold Rothstein, Dutch Schultz, and Meyer Lansky they treated their mothers with respect. Apparently, if any of them studied in their synagogue religious schools they may have learned the verse (Psalm 34:14) **סור מרע ועשה טוב**. Apparently they paid attention to **va’asay Tov-do good**, and knew how to treat their mothers. But they did not focus on the previous two words **סור מרע/sur mayRa-stay away from evil**.

I sense that this was not an exclusively a Jewish phenomenon.

(זזז) A warning to stay away from “gray areas” and “iffy” ethical situations

הרחק מן הכיעור
ומן הדומה לו

Stay away from things and situations that are morally ugly and that even resemble the morally questionable ones. (Chullin 44b)

Among the most egregious historical examples of misplaced religious values happened in 1096: As the First Crusade passed through Europe to liberate Jerusalem from the Moslems, the crusaders massacred Jews in the Rhineland.

Some **סיידורים/siddurim** still have a memorial prayer for the martyrs.

(Hay) Our Jewish Values - Biblical texts:

The latter Biblical prophets, while not denying the importance of ritual, emphatically stressed ethical Menschlich living over formal ritual, railing publicly (and often at great risk to their personal safety) against the injustice and abuses they saw in society, and the erroneous emphasis on ritual over ethical living. These are just three of many possible examples:

A.

טו רחצו הזכו
הסירו רע מעלליכם מנגד עיני
חדלו הרע
למדו היטב
דרשו משפט
אשרו חמוץ
שפטו יתום
ריבו אלמנה

**Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
away from my sight.
Cease to do evil; Learn to do good.
Aid the wronged.*
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow. (Isaiah1:16-17**)**

*The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.

**The entire first chapter of Isaiah is a powerful indictment of the people’s behavior that should be read in its entirety, terrifying as it is.

B.

הִכְזָה יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבָחָרָהּ
יוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם נֶפְשׁוֹ
הִלְכֵף כְּאֶגְמוֹן רֹאשׁוֹ
וְשָׁק וְאֶפֶר יַצִּיעַ
הִלְזָה תִקְרָא צוֹם
וְיוֹם רְצוֹן לַיהוָה
הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבָחָרָהּ
פִתַח חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע
הֲתִר אֲגִדּוֹת מוֹטָה
וְשָׁלַח רְצוּצִים חֲפְשִׁים
וְכָל־מוֹטָה תִנְתְּקוּ
הֲלוֹא פָרַס לְרַעֲב לַחֲמֵךְ
וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בֵּית
כִּי־תִרְאֶה עָרִם וְכִסִּיתוּ
וּמִבְשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם

Is this such a fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
a day when God is favorable?
No, this is the fast I desire:
to unlock the fetters of wickedness
and untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
to break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with hungry individuals,
and to take wretched poor people into your home;
When you see the a naked person, clothe that person,
And do not ignore your own kin. (Isaiah 58:5-7)

These verses are part of the Haftarah on Yom Kippur morning.

C.

כִּי חֶסֶד חִפְצָתִי וְלֹא־זָבַח

For I desire goodness, not sacrifice. (Hosea 6:6)

D. From the שׁוֹמֵשׁ/Chumash — Brief, emphatic and powerful:

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף

Justice Justice* you must pursue. (Deuteronomy 16:20)

**The repetition of the word צֶדֶק is a standard Biblical syntactical formulation meaning “emphasis”, as with עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי Isaiah 51:9 and 52:1.*

בֵּית צֶדֶק/Bet Tzedek in Los Angeles, founded in 1974, is the Jewish pioneer in pro bono legal work for the Jewish and Non-Jewish communities and has become a paradigm for similar Mitzvah projects in LA. It has relieved the legal problems of thousands of residents of the city. Several years later, a friend of mind, Joy Rothenberg, founded a בֵּית צֶדֶק/Bet Tzedek in Boston.

Hugh Kaufman, one of my Hebrew Highschool classmates at the Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Center, was a government whistleblower. Whistleblowers, whether Jewish or not, and whether motivated by Jewish or general values, are committed to צֶדֶק/tzedek—creating a Menschlich society and מִשְׁפָּט/Mishpat-Justice. My friends and I remember him as a troublemaker and a loudmouth personality traits that later obviously paid great dividends for the citizens who had suffered because of the bureaucratic abuses he uncovered and had eliminated from the system.

Torah and Mitzvahs — Comparison and Contrast

(Aleph) מַעַם לִוְעֵז/May'am Lo'ez - The origin

Rabbi Yaakov Culi, (1689-1732) a distinguished Sefardi scholar and sage living in Constantinople, descendant of exiles from Spain, composed this commentary to the Torah in Ladino.

(Bet) Various facts to know about the מַעַם לִוְעֵז

1. The מַעַם לִוְעֵז has been exceptionally popular since it first appeared.
2. I have been told that there are Sefardi study groups of the weekly Torah reading that use the מַעַם לִוְעֵז, similar to Ashkenazim reviewing the weekly section with Rashi's commentary.
3. Although Rabbi Culi completed only material through Genesis and two-thirds of Exodus, several rabbis continued his work, using his notes and supplementing with their own comments in his style and content. My Hebrew translation now numbers 27 volumes, covering the שׁוּמַשׁ/*Chumash* and several others books of the תַּנ"ך/*Tanach-Bible* I bought it at least 15 years ago, so more volumes no doubt have been completed since.
4. In addition to my Hebrew version, it has been translated into English, Spanish, Portuguese, and, also, I imagine other languages.
5. The language is very accessible, calling to mind Maimonides' Hebrew in the Mishneh Torah.
6. Rabbi Culi's מַעַם לִוְעֵז is much more than a running commentary on the verses. It is filled with material from the Midrash, real-Life stories, local Jewish customs and practices, and Halachah.

A. It is the Halachah material which probably contributed greatly to its popularity, widespread distribution, and repeated reprinting.

B. In many places, Rabbi Culi takes a relevant verse about a Mitzvah and then summarizes extensively (sometimes for a few pages) the details of the Halachah as it was understood in Constantinople in his time. He covers not only the expected specifics of topics like Shabbat, the holidays, and *kashrut*, but gives equal treatment of ethical Halachot.

(Gimel) Why I wrote this Dvar Torah

For the sake of variety, I take to synagogue different commentaries to the Shabbat and holiday Torah reading. On any of those days it might be a traditional one, a modern one that is based on scholarly study of the text, one from the Israeli schools of Bible study, or some — such as the מַעַם לִוְעֵז — written by someone from a very different country and culture that I grew up with.

Because of my inability to concentrate for long periods of time — a characteristic of my attention deficit disorder — with these commentaries, as with *any* book, my custom is to first leaf through and scan for anything that interests me.

And so it happened recently on a Shabbat, since we are presently reading וַיִּקְרָא/*vaYikra-Leviticus*, I came across Rabbi Culi's comments on a verse (19:32) I had known for many years:

מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוִים
וְהִדַּרְתָּ פָּנֵי זָקֵן

**Stand up before an old person,
and show deference to an Elder.**

His comments begin with the well-known Talmudic equivalent of זָקֵן meaning “חכם-/*chacham-sage*”.

The Halachic section then proceeds under the title חֻבּוֹת קִימָה וְהִדּוּר/*The halachic requirements of standing and showing deference*. Rabbi Culi then rules on several situations that arise, for example:

At what distance when a person sees the **חכם**,
what if the **חכם*** is young,
does the rule apply to every **חכם** or only to the person's primary teacher
who taught him **רוב חכמתו/rov chochmato**
most of the person's Torah knowledge.

As for the other meaning of **זקן/zaken-old person** (defined as age 70 and higher,) if there old person is totally ignorant of Torah, or do the laws also apply to a non-Jewish Elder.
(DALET) And then came the line that stunned and exhilarated me

**והחכם
אפילו הוא מופלג ביותר
צריך לעמוד
בפני
בעל מעשים טובים ובעל צדקה**

**Any חכם-/chacham-sage
even if he* is most exceptionally learned
must stand
before a person
who is a Mitzvah (i.e., good-actions-benefiting-others)-Action-Person
or a Tzedakah-person.**

(Hay) Many thoughts

(I) With this Halachic statement, Rabbi Kuli raises the issue discussed in the Talmud (*Kiddushin 40b*) about which takes precedence **תורה/Torah study** or **מעשים/ma'asim-deeds of caring lovingkindness**. I want to examine the latter concept in the world of the Talmud.

(II) For example, individuals who are mentioned by name for their being a **בעל מעשים טובים ובעל צדקה** without reference to their Torah-Knowledge**:

(a) **מונבז המלך/King Munbaz** who sold the royal treasures to provide for his subjects in times of drought. (*Bava Batra 11a*)

(b) **בנימין הצדיק/Binyamin HaTzaddik** — supervisor of the Communal Tzedakah Fund — when approached by a woman who said that she and her children were starving and near death, realizing that the fund was empty

עמד ופרנסה משלו

fed them from his own money. (*Bava Batra 11a*).

(c) **רב יחזקאל/Rav Yechezkel** who was known as a **בעל מעשים**, and before whom even a great sage such as Mar Shmuel would stand. (*Kiddushin 33b*)

(d) **רבי חנינא בן דוסא/Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa**, tales of his **מעשים** are found on Ta'anit 25a.

(e) **רבי חנא בר חנילאי/Rabbi Chana Bar Chanila'i** whose actions Rav Chisda described in this fashion: In his house 60 bakers baked in the daytime and another 60 at night to bake for anyone who needed the bread; he never took his hand out of his pocket in case a formerly-rich person, now poor, approached, and delaying giving that person would have caused embarrassment. Furthermore, the doors of his house were opened in all four directions, and anyone who entered hungry, left satisfied. He also left wheat and barley outside during food shortages so that anyone who would be embarrassed to come in the daytime, could come at night. (*Berachot 58b*)

(III)

I believe the following text (*Shabbat 31b*) most approaches Rabbi Culi's striking story:

רבי סימון ורבי אלעזר הוו יתבי
חליף ואזיל רבי יעקב בר אחא
אמר ליה חד לחבריה
ניקו מקמיה
דגבר דחיל חטאין הוא
אמר לו אידך
ניקו מקמיה
דגבר בר אוריין הוא
אמר ליה
אמינא לך אנא
דגבר דחיל חטאין הוא
ואמרת לי את
בר אוריין הוא

Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Elazar were once sitting,
when Rabbi Ya'akov Bar Acha walked by.

One of them said to the other,

“Let us rise,

for he is fears wrongdoing (a synonymous phrase for ‘a Menschlich person’).”

The other one said,

“Let us rise, for he a person who knows much Torah.”

He replied,

“I just told you that

he is a Menschlich person,

and you tell me that

he is [only] one who knows a great deal of Torah?”

Rabbi Culi has a reference to Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher's 14th Century **ארבעה** **טורים**/*Arba'ah Turim* law code. in *Yoreh De'ah* section 244, which uses the terms **חסידי** **מעשים** **ובעל מעשים** to describe someone whose Jewish self is expressed in devotion to acts which are extremely caring and compassionate. Both Rabbi Culi's and Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher's terms are essentially equal in meaning.

It is interesting to note that Rabbi Joseph Caro in his 16th Century **שולחן ערוך**/*Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh De'ah 244:16*) code uses the word **רשאי**/*rasha'i-is permitted* (to stand), rather than **צריך**/*Tzarich-is required to* in the **מעם ליעזו** and in the **ארבעה טורים**/*Arba'ah Turim*. Why the change I leave to the scholars.

One other thing that perhaps initially drew my attention — Rabbi Culi's phrase that the sage may be **הוא מופלג ביותר** **is most exceptionally learned**. The rule applies not only to 2nd or 3rd level sages, but even to the greatest.

(Vav) Again, why I wrote this Dvar Torah

Any student of Talmud cannot avoid the high praise and status of the **חכמים**/*chachamim-sages*, and their unquestioned value of Torah study. I pursued Rabbi Culi's ruling because I think it would be erroneous to think that how a Jew and human being acts is of little consequence to the Talmudic sages.

This is hardly an exhaustive study of the subject, and, no doubt, others have devoted volumes of research to it.

Still, in all, and in my own way, I wanted to clarify the issue to whatever extent I was able.

*The term **חכם**/*chacham among Sefardim is often a synonym רב/Rav-Rabbi*.

**In our day, this should be understood with a gender-neutral term.

Halachah and Jewish Values

4. The Jewish Bookmark

(Aleph) The Old Talmud — More than 40 years ago, I was invited to speak one evening to the Jewish students at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The topic was, “The awesome Mitzvah-power of college students to change the world — and practical suggestions how to use that power”. That afternoon, I asked some students to show me the library. Scanning the shelves, we were surprised to find a complete full-sized 20-volume set of the Talmud that was printed more than a century before.

I suggested that we leaf through the entire 2,711 double-sided pages page-by-page. As we slowly worked our way through, we found many notes on scraps of paper and in the margins by the original, owner and by the generations of students who had studied from this particular Talmud until it eventually found its home at the Dickinson library. Because our enthusiastic efforts took a long time, and, as we continued turning the pages, we came to feel that we were engaged in something that moved us very deeply as Jews.

(Bet) What I Discovered — We were well into slowly and deliberately turning the pages, when I found a bookmark. It was a **ציצית/tzitzit** that was once attached to a *Tallit*.

(Gimel) Decades Later, July 27, 2021 — As I was randomly leafing through a small volume of the Shulchan Aruch, I ran across this (*Orach Chaim 21:1*):

חוטי ציצית שנפסקו
יכול לזרקן לאשפה
מפני שהיא מצוה
שאין בגופה קדושה

**A person may throw detached strings of tzitzit
in the trash,
because it is a Mitzvah**

that has no intrinsic קדושה/kedushah-holiness.

When I read this text, a few things came to mind:

(1) We bury no-longer-usable *siddurim*, *machzorim*, other holy books, and ספרי תורה/Sifray Torah-Torah scrolls in a grave (גניזה/geniza), in a formal, solemn ceremony.*

(2) These have intrinsic holiness because they contain God’s name.

(3) And yet, some commentators felt uncomfortable about just throwing away even the “non-intrinsically-holy” **ציצית/tzitzit**.

(4) For example, the “Maharil”, Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Moellin, (1360? – 1427), — and quoted by later Halachic authorities — wrote:

Let a person put the tzitzit in a book as a bookmark or do some other Mitzvah with the ציצית/tzitzit.

He concluded his comment with a well-known and profoundly Jewish concept,

דהואיל ואיתעביד בהו מצוה חדא
יתעביד בהו אחריתא

**Since one Mitzvah has been done with it,
let another one also be done with it.**

Two important principles and practices can be derived from these texts in the Shulchan Aruch and commentaries:

*(Dalet) Principle #1 – Recycling*** — In our time, recycling is everywhere, including: edible food, paper, glass; rubber (even as groundcover for playgrounds); plastic (including plastic straws and bags rescued from streams, lakes, and the ocean to prevent

fish from choking on them or ingesting the toxic materials); discarded wrecked cars and auto parts; still-salvageable pieces of unfixable electronics, and — during World War II — for the war effort — paper, rubber, metal (including empty toothpaste tubes), and even women's stockings to make powder bags for the Navy's warships' big guns. And every other imaginable kind of items that can be re-purposed and re-used.***

In **Volume ב** of Rabbi Daniel Sperber's scholarly study of Jewish customs, **מנהגי ישראל/Minhagei Yisrael**, he records other examples of recycling similar to the **ציצית/tzitzit**-bookmark, among them using the **לולב's ערבות/aravot-willow branches** for burning the last remaining **חמץ/chametz** before Passover, and making hospitable, generous individuals' coffins from the table on which they fed poor people.

(Hay) Principle #2: כבוד/Kavod-Respect — Rabbi Moellin's comment above demonstrated a way to show respect for even the non-intrinsically holy items such as a detached **ציצית/tzitzit**. The Talmud (*Menachot 99a*), provides another example illustrating this type of sensitivity. Rav Yosef derived a lesson from a Midrash that states that the *broken pieces* of the First Tablets were placed in the Ark alongside the intact Second Tablets. His conclusion:

**תלמיד חכם
ששכח תלמודו מחמת אונסו
שאין נוהגין בו מנהג בזיון**

**A person must not treat sages with disrespect
if they have forgotten their Torah-knowledge
because of reasons beyond their control.**

We would certainly apply his statement about **כבוד/Kavod-respect** to *anyone* who is “less than 100%” whole, such as:

(A) those persons whose minds are fading or are irretrievably lost because of physical trauma, various degrees of dementia, or Alzheimer's disease;

(B) someone in hospice or is otherwise permanently bedridden;

(C) a chronically, inextricably poor individual;

(D) an unemployable person because of extreme physical or mental limitations or is otherwise dysfunctional or incapacitated,

(E) or other “non-productive” [*I hate the term and the criterion is represents*] persons in our society.

Related to this idea, I once heard an excellent Torah-insight based on the question of how early one is allowed to begin reciting the morning *shema* (*Brachot 9b*): One answer mentioned is

**משיראה את חברו
רחוק ארבע אמות ויכירנו**

(usually translated)

**“From the time a person recognizes חברו/chavayro-a friend/another person
from four cubits (six feet) away”.**

Young Trevor Ferrell (see below) taught me this different interpretation:

“If you can't recognize the other person

six feet away

as your friend” —

then you are not ready

to reaffirm your relationship to God

by reciting the Shema.

כבוד/Kavod-respect, dignity derives from the awareness of our commonality with others because human beings are created **בצלם אלהים/in the Diving Image**. Therefore, people *always* have inherent **קדושה/kedushah-holiness**.

(Vav) Trevor Ferrell: The “Kid” From Philadelphia Who Personified This כבוד/

Kavod-Respect-Dignity Message — At age 11, Trevor Ferrell saw a TV segment about a local homeless man. He convinced his parents to take him down to Center City to give The (or so Trevor thought) Homeless Man a blanket and pillow he had brought with him. The Ferrells easily found a homeless man, and on the way back home saw several others living on the streets. For the next 10 years, never missing a night, Trevor — joined by volunteers that over the decade totaled in the hundreds — took care of the homeless people of Philadelphia, providing food for great numbers of individuals, and shelter, job opportunities, and transition to permanent housing for many of them. Always, he *always* called them his friends.

Trevor is my “**כבוד/Kavod-Respect-Dignity Rebbi**”.

(Zayin) Conclusion — Some people might say that my ending this Dvar Torah with nothing more than an (admittedly) inspirational tale is a cop-out. “Your nice story won’t really change anything or anybody.”

I invite you to disagree.

**(Occasionally, when requested, they are buried in the same grave with a person’s body.)*

****לשון העברית/haAkademia laLashon halvrit-Israel’s Academy of the Hebrew Language even had to create a new word for recycling — מיחזור/michzur — from the root חזר-to return.**

*****Similarly, not so long ago, in the early days of COVID when masks were in short supply and not yet readily available, there was a creative Jewish innovation: Transforming yarmulkas into masks. I know several people who were thinking that Jewish people had enough old ones in a drawer to protect every man, woman, and child in America.**

5. The Jewish Value of כבוד/Kavod-Dignity #1 A Few Simple Halachic Adjustments

(Aleph) Shabbat Lunch: It is a familiar scene — several guests are gathered around the table. Everyone has washed her or his hands, recited the blessing, and now they wait silently for the hostess to recite **המוציא/the Motzi**. According to the Talmud (*Brachot 42a*):

תכף לנטילת ידיים ברכה

***taychef li’netilat yadayim, bracha-*(המוציא/the Motzi) blessing
must be recited**

immediately after washing the hands.*

This is to prevent **היסח הדעת/haysech hada’at-distracted or delay** in staying focused on the purpose of washing the hands, namely to recite the blessing for the food God has provided. In our scenario, she recites, cuts or tears the *challah*, distributes pieces to the guests, and, depending on her background, announces “**בתאבון/betayavon-Bon appetit**”, “**עס געזונטערהייט, חברה/Chevra, ess gezunterhayt-Friends, eat in good health**”, or — in homey Yiddish — “**מיטן אייגענען ציינער-מיטן אייגענען ציינער-May you continue to eat with your own teeth!**”

More on this Shabbat meal later.

(Bet) Some items in the Talmud that are no longer applicable in our day, or are passé, might include:

(A) In Talmudic times, “regular people” ate two meals a day, the first one specifically at the fourth hour, and for sages at the sixth. (*Pesachim 12b*)

Talmudic “hours” were 1/12 of the time between sunrise and sunset and sunset and sunrise.

Their active life was determined by the hours of daylight.

Marriage at an early age was the accepted practice.

(B) All subsequent Great Sages agree that Talmudic medical remedies are no longer valid.

(C) Elimination of therapeutically “bleeding” a person. The medical profession long ago universally abandoned the practice as ineffective.

(D) Fasting – even on Shabbat – to counteract the effects of an upsetting or ominous dream, like when you stand frozen in the middle of the street while a FedEx truck bears down on you at full speed. (*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Fasts, 1:19*).

(E) It is prohibited to enter a house at night unless there is a cat (to kill snakes) (*Pesachim 112b*).

(*Maybe there’s no danger of snakes in your neighborhood, but if you are a “cat person”, this Halachah — to have a cat — would still apply.*)

(Gimel) Well-known exceptions to the Halachah:

(1) A *brit milah* is delayed after the 8th day if the infant is not healthy.

(2) People with certain physical conditions including diabetes (under medical advisement and/or the individual’s personal feeling) eat on Yom Kippur.

(3) Medical professionals and first responders are **פטור/patur-exempt** from the laws of holidays, Shabbat, and even Yom Kippur when dealing with a situation that is even **ספק נפשות/safek nefashot-possibly life-threatening** (*Yoma 83a*).

(4) A recently-married couple is **פטור/patur-exempt** from reciting the *Shema* on the first night together alone.

(5) Various allowances are made for an **איסטניס/istenis-a person who has a weak or delicate physical constitution**, e.g., we

(*Several other exemptions also apply to an איסטניס/istenis*).

(6) A person asleep in synagogue still counts for a Minyan (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55:6*).

(7) **Giving away all of one’s possessions is not חסידות/chassidut-righteousness — but rather שטות/shitut-foolishness.** (*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Arachin Va’Charamin 8:13*).

(Dalet) Progress:

(AA) For recovering alcoholics, optional grape juice is available at *Kiddush* in synagogue and for guests at Shabbat, holiday, and *Seder* meals. In addition, sugar-free cookies are offered for people with diabetes, and gluten-free *nosh* for people whose bodies cannot tolerate gluten.

(BB) Ramps into the synagogue building and up to the *bima* and Torah-reading stand for people who use wheelchairs, walkers, and canes, or who are otherwise unable to climb steps.

(CC) Large-print volumes of the **סידור/siddur** and **חומש/chumash** or magnifying glasses, or both;

(DD) Sound-enhancing systems and earphones in the synagogue for hearing-impaired people.

(EE) Sign language interpreters.

(FF) Balloons for deaf congregants so that they can feel the vibrations of the sounds of the Shofar.**

(GG) Abolition of laws that assumed that deaf-mute people are not competent in legal matters.

(HH) Women’s advanced text-Torah study

(II) Though not universally accepted, Halachically-configured electric scooters for people unable to walk to synagogue on Shabbat and holidays.

The design was created by a Halachically-oriented institute in Israel.

(JJ) Reduced synagogue dues for people unable to pay the full amount. This is similar to the adjusted lower cost — depending on a person’s economic status — of animal sacrifices prescribed for individuals who have been cured of their skin disease. (*Leviticus 14*).

(Hay) Back to the meal:

(I) At a Shabbat meal — the person reciting the **המוציא/The Motzi** puts both hands on the **חלות/challot** and lifts them up (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 183:4*). But what if the person only has one hand or arm? What if the person has neurological damage and can't grip the *challot* or the knife, should he or she leave them on the table and have a guest cut or tear the *challah* instead? I do not think that would be embarrassing; *if* the person is used to this kind of assistance and would not be embarrassed

It is perhaps similar to — in ancient times, when people were called to the Torah. Originally, the people honored with the **עליה/aliya** read the portion. Subsequently for centuries afterwards, when recipients of an **עליה/aliya** were no longer competent to read from the scroll, the one honored makes the blessing, and another person — who is trained in reading from the Torah scroll — does the actual reading.

(II) What if the person can't recite **המוציא/the Motzi** except in sign language?

(III) Before *Birkat HaMazon*, in order to demonstrate the importance of this blessing of thankfulness to God, those who have eaten should put on their “outer garment” (**באר היטב/Ba'er Hetev Eighteenth Century commentary to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 183:19**). Nowadays, this would probably translate to a jacket, shawl, or scarf. But what if the host or guest is poor and unable to afford one?

(Vav) A few additional necessary Halachic updates:

(א) People are not allowed to read the Megillah out of order (*Mishnah Megillah 2:1*). **Halachah:** Individuals with dyslexia and other learning disabilities — **פטור/patur-exempt**.

(ב) Halachah: People who have dyscalculia and are unable to comprehend numbers, time, and sequences, and therefore cannot count the Omer consecutively (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 589*) — **פטור/patur-exempt**. Similarly, if they miss any regularly-scheduled prayers — **פטור/patur-exempt**.

(ג) Halachah: Despite the many Halachot about reciting the **אמן/amen-of-affirmation** after another person has completed reciting a *bracha*, deaf-mute individuals should wave their hands side-to-side in their accustomed fashion.

(ד) Halachah: A person reciting *Havdalah* who has lost the sense of taste and smell because of COVID is **פטור/patur-exempt** from drinking the wine and smelling the spices.

I believe that these are not inappropriate departures from the traditional flow of Halachah. To the contrary, they are like an osteopathic physician who manipulates a patient's bones — a wrist, ankle, back, finger, neck, or shoulder — restoring them to their proper place, and thereby relieving any pain and eliminating related medical complications.

(Zayin) My imagined personal scenario: I have ADD, and as the host, I will lead **המוציא/The Motzi**. Between washing my hands and walking the 12 steps from the kitchen back to the dining room table I am “off” somewhere — you can see distraction in my face.**

I may be thinking about the halftime show at the Super Bowl 10 years ago, then picturing Bruce, my German shepherd pet who bit me when I was 3 or 4 years old. (*I bit him back*.) Then I may recall meeting an old, dear friend unexpectedly on Jerusalem's **עמק רפאים/Emek Refa'im** while daydreaming over a cappuccino. After that, I may be savoring the aroma and taste of *schwarma* at my favorite place in Jerusalem, and, finally, remembering the paper I still owe my professor, the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, **לז"ל-may his holy soul be a blessing for us**, from a class 58 years ago.

My time “away” should not be considered **היסח הדעת/haysech hada'at-distraction and delay**. (*It's OK. It's just me. Just leave me be.*) It's like the respect shown by not waking someone who is asleep in synagogue.

(ה) Halachah for the guests: Don't interrupt me. It would not be respectful. Give me time: I will eventually notice the guests, see the *challah*, and come back “down” to

recite **המוציא/The Motzi**. In the meantime, discuss some Torah among yourselves or sing your favorite Shabbat melodies. Not to worry — the **תשבי/Tishbi 2017 Chardonnay** will still be pleasing to the tongue and palate, the *matza* balls will most assuredly still float, the *cholent* will still be warm and decidedly heavy and *gastronomically felt long after Havdalah*, the broccoli-quinoa-and-dill salad will still taste fresh, and the unbelievably gooey chocolate cake will no doubt remind you of the **מנה/Manna** our ancestors ate as they wandered through the wilderness.

**The Tosafot commentary (Brachot 42a) and Maimonides (Laws of Brachot 20:6) rule that ברכה ברכה לנטילת ידים תכף/taychef li'netilat yadayim, bracha-refers to מים אחרונים/mayim acharonim-the washing of the hands after a meal and at the end of the meal, right before ברכת המזון/birkat hamazon. I leave this issue of which for Talmudic scholars to unravel.*

***I was first told of this practice by my friend Jack Gruenberg, Educational Director at Beth El of New Rochelle. Understandably, there was an enthusiastic response from hearing-impaired members of the congregation.*

***Watching me, you might think of the announcers at the racetrack shouting into the microphone, “And they’re off!” “Danny’s off again somewhere.”*

6. The Jewish Value of כבוד/Kavod-Dignity #2 **Two Simple Suggestions for the Synagogue:** **Dr. Raynaud; ברכת המזון/Birkat HaMazon for Yom Kippur**

The French physician Dr. Maurice Raynaud (1834-1881) is listed in *Stedman's* well-known medical dictionary for having described something relatively mild, but still very real — and, in comparison, certainly not terrible like lymphoma or metastasized breast cancer. While I do not understand the physiological ins and outs of Raynaud's Syndrome (or Phenomenon), its most obvious manifestation to those who have it (like myself), is the abnormal inability to tolerate lesser degrees of cold than the norm in the hands and feet. Mine is mild Raynaud's. But I have a friend who can't take an ice tray out of the freezer, and I have heard stories of amputations of toes.

SUGGESTION #1: The Jewish community has come a long way with accommodating people and making them feel welcome in our synagogues, ramps to the Bima, sound systems people who have hearing impairments, sign language interpreters, large print prayer books and magnifying glasses for persons with visual limitations, and posters in both the men's and women's bathrooms with the emergency phone number for victims of domestic abuse. Along this road to welcoming people in, I was impressed when congregations would offer grape juice instead of wine for people who are fighting alcohol addiction. Let us announce from the Bima and put a sign over the hand washing table that when you finish washing and pass the cup to the next person, make sure the water is tepid. A simple solution.

SUGGESTION #2: Because of a variety of medical conditions, some people *must* eat on Yom Kippur. So states the well-known Halachah. In fact, I have seen at least one Siddur with a special **ברכת המזון/birkat hamazon** for Yom Kippur with the appropriate inserts for that day. Congregation Har Shalom in Potomac, Maryland, my late brother's synagogue where I often go for Yom Kippur, has two other accommodations: (1) A separate room with some snacks and comfortable chairs where the person can eat in private, and (2) one more element that really impressed me: As the person who has eaten exits to return to the service, they see on the back of the door a large, nicely printed poster with a special prayer. This allows the person to have a moment or two of individual words with The Holy One for accommodating to her or his needs. While not applicable to the people in the Big Service, the prayer is unique to the person who has just eaten on this holiest day. I find that, very moving, and I think we would do well if it could be adopted in other synagogues.

7. Before Breakfast

The Jewish Value of בעלי חיים / צער / tza'ar ba'alay chaim - The Caring Treatment of Animals

(Aleph) Numbers Chapter 22: A certain man (בלעם-Bil'am) was beating the donkey he was riding. Startled by something that Bil'am hadn't seen, the animal had stopped dead in its hooves. Its reaction to the whipping was (*spoken in excellent Biblical Hebrew, I might add*):

מָה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ
כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רַגְלִים

...
הֲלוֹא אָנֹכִי אֲתִנְךָ אֲשֶׁר־רָכַבְתָּ עָלַי
מֵעוֹדךָ עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה

**What have I done to you
that you have beaten me these three times?...
Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding
all along until this day!**

(Bet) Before your western omelette and exquisite Guatemalan coffee: I found my “hook” for this Dvar Torah in a passage in the Talmud (*Brachot 40a*): Building on the fact that in Deuteronomy 11:17 we read the verse:

וּנְתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בַּשָּׂדֶךְ לַבְהֵמָתְךָ

I (God) will provide grass in the field for your cattle
appears immediately before

וְאָכַלְתָּ וּשְׂבַעְתָּ

**you shall eat your fill,
Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav:**

אִסוּר לְאָדָם שִׂיאֲכַל
קוּדָם שִׂיתָן מֵאֲכַל לַבְהֵמָתוֹ

**It is prohibited for people to eat
before feeding their animals.**

In his Third-Century world, Rav Yehudah in Rav's name was referring to oxen, cows, donkeys, horses, sheep, goats, and chickens. For us — the cat, dog, iguana, angelfish, gerbil, conyer — whatever pets the family has.

(Gimel) Some thoughts on the importance of the sage's statement:

(1) The most obvious: The animals cannot feed themselves.

(2) Gratitude, because they work for us: Back then: Horses, oxen, and mules plowed the fields, donkeys transported people (Bil'am's donkey) and carried loads of merchandise. They provided milk, meat, eggs, and wool and hides for clothing. *In our day:* A very short list — dogs: from sniffing out bombs and drugs to herding sheep. Therapy horses facilitate recovery from PTSD. And we must not forget cats that, in addition to eliminating rodents, are also skilled snake killers. In fact, the Talmud (*Pesachim 112b*) warns:

בֵּיתָא דְלִית בֵּיהּ שׁוֹנְרָא
לֹא נִיעוּל בֵּיהּ אִינִישׁ בַּהֲכֵרָא

**A person should not enter a house at night
unless there is a cat.**

(3) What animals do for us in our day that might not be defined as “work”: Again, a short list: Dogs, cats, birds, and fish in aquariums in nursing homes, assisted

living, and Alzheimer's facilities.*

Dogs and cats are a homeless person's best friends. In homes, especially for people who live alone: They provide companionship, affection, often help relieve stress and soothe frayed nerves, offer love that expects nothing in return, and occasional welcome laughter at their antics.

I don't have the statistics, but I sense that, since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of adoptions from animal shelters has risen significantly. In addition to those benefits, research has shown that owning a pet contributes to lowering a person's blood pressure.

Even the so-called "small Mitzvah" of sprinkling fish food in the tank and watching these little, yet awesome, creations is a gentle hint about the greater framework of Life itself.**

(4) It is a Jewish reminder — Like people who tie a string around their finger to remember something, or, in Jewish practice, kissing a *mezuzah*, kissing a *siddur* that has fallen to the ground, and reciting the **מְוֹדָה אֲנִי /modeh ani** one-line prayer when waking up to thank God for returning our souls to us — are all built-in reminders of God's presence. But feeding an animal is different. Petting a cat or dog, and feeling the in-and-out of a breathing body is a much more profound experience. A *mezuzah* and a *siddur* are just things, but the animal has the same life-breath as we do, and both human beings and animals are **בְּרִיּוֹת /beri'ot-God's creations**.

However, I would like to clarify that I am not equating the value of animals with that of human beings. I am only describing the commonality of both humans and animals as creations of God.

(Dalet) Various implications of the Jewish practice of feeding animals first:

(A) As stated above, the most obvious reason for feeding them before we ourselves eat is because the animals cannot feed themselves.

(B) In the Talmudic passage quoted above, Rav Yehuda in Rav's name uses the term **אִסוּר /prohibited**, which is usually applied to "official" negative Mitzvahs, i.e., Halachically prohibited acts or things. However, Maimonides (*Hilchot Avadim 9:12 [Kapach edition]*) seems to "downgrade" the practice, describing it only as a historical fact to be imitated:

חכמים הראשונים היו

...

ומקדימין מזון הבהמות

The early sages would feed...

the animals

before themselves.

I do not have the expertise to know why Maimonides changed the language, and, in general, how a statement in the Talmud does or does not eventually attain "official" Halachic status. I leave understanding that process to scholars who specialize in this area of Jewish knowledge.

(C) Attaining some personal measure of The Divine: The concept of being God-like, though human, in some fashion seems unrealistic considering the natural distance between Creator and creations.

The Jewish desire to do so is based on God's instructions to the people Leviticus 19:2:

קְדָשִׁים תְּהִיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Be holy, because, I, Your God am Holy.

Still, that is too indefinite, with no instructions on how to “be holy”. A more helpful verse would be Leviticus 20:7:

וְהִתְקַדְּשֶׁתֶם וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדָשִׁים

Make yourselves holy, and then you will be holy.

So it appears that Leviticus is offering an opening. The Talmud builds on this possibility offering two ways:

#1 — Shabbat 133b

הוּי דומה לו
מה הוא חנון ורחום
אף אתה היה חנון ורחום

**Be like God,
As God is caring, and compassionate,
So, too, should you be caring and compassionate.**

#2 — Sotah 14a

להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה

to walk in God's ways,
meaning to *act as God acts*.

The Talmud gives examples (among others) of the latter wording: Provided clothing (God for Adam and Eve), God visited a sick person (Abraham after his *bris*) and buried a dead person (Moses). A more striking example, is in a separate passage (*Shabbat 95a*):

שקילעה הקדוש ברוך הוא לחוה

The Holy One prepared Eve's coiffure (for the first wedding in human history).

By doing these, we are taught that, in some manner, we will have integrated an element of God into ourselves, a profound Jewish value. Maimonides, quoting Isaiah, (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah and Chanukkah, 2:16-17*) adds yet another one — Tzedakah — to the list:

**One who brings joy to the hearts
of these people in need** (poor people, orphans, widows, and strangers)
resembles השכינה / the Shechinah,
as the verse states (*Isaiah 57:15*):

כִּי כֹה אָמַר רִם וְנִשָּׂא שְׁכוֹן עַד וְקָדוֹשׁ שְׁמוֹ
מְרוֹם וְקָדוֹשׁ אֶשְׁכֹּן
וְאֶת־דָּכָא וְשִׁפְלֵ-רוּחַ
לְהַחְיֹת רוּחַ שְׁפָלִים
וּלְהַחְיֹת לֵב נְדָכָאִים

**“For thus says the One
Who Lives Forever in the Most Sublime Heights, Whose Name is Holy:
I live On High, in holiness;
Yet I am with those who are in distress and are despairing —
reviving the spirits of people who are low in spirit,
and reviving the hearts of people in desperate need.”**

From his statement, Rav Yehudah quoting Rav, has added one more: Just as God provides food for animals before providing for human beings, so, too, in some way, by feeding animals before ourselves, we resemble The Divine.***

**Some people have told their friends that they just have to live to get out of bed in the morning so that they can feed their parakeet or love bird. “I just love the colors of the feathers!”*

***It is now common for dentists to have aquariums in their office.*

****It is possible to add planting trees to the list. As God planted trees in the Garden of Eden, so, too, should we plant trees.*

8. Selling A ספר תורה/Sefer Torah A Devaluation of Our Most Sacred Text?

(Aleph) Introduction I:

This is an extremely sensitive topic. It deals with the unquestionably most sacred tangible *object* of the Jews — a ספר תורה/Sefer Torah-Torah scroll. Because of this, my discussion will be handled delicately. I would hope that no one who reads this Dvar Torah would think that I am relating to the subject casually and without the proper respect.

(Bet) Introduction II:

I am not a פוסק-*posek* (awkwardly translated as “decisor”), i.e. a Torah-learned person who is qualified and *certified* to render authoritative Halachic decisions. Rather, I am a student of Torah whose mind works most comfortably by free association instead of sequentially and logically. As a result, I may sometimes reach certain conclusions not considered by the accumulated centuries of material found in our traditional Jewish texts.

(Gimel) Introduction III:

The crucial text I want to examine is an admittedly surprising statement in the Talmud (*Makkot 22b*) by the great sage Rava, who lived during one of the most prolific periods of Torah — fourth century Babylonia:

אמר רבא
כמה טפשי שאר אינשי
דקיימי מקמי ספר תורה
ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה

Rava said:

**See how foolish people are —
they stand before a Sefer Torah
but do not stand before a great person.**

I will return to Rava’s words below after examining some other texts.

First, though, there is another text comparing people to “things”, even holy things (*Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 5:4, 24a*):

ר' חמא בר חנינא ור' הושעיא
הוון מטיילו באילין כנישתא דלוד
א"ר חמא בר חנינא לר' הושעיא
כמה ממון שיקעו אבותי כאן
א"ל
כמה נפשות שקעו אבותיך כאן
לא הוון בני נשא דילעון באורייתא

**Rabbi Chama bar Chanina and Rabbi Hoshaya were taking a tour
of the synagogues of Lod.**

**Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said to Rabbi Hoshaya:
See how much money my ancestors invested* here
[by building these synagogues]!**

He replied:

**How many souls they drowned* here!
Were there no people here who wanted to study Torah
[and who were unable to
because there wasn't enough scholarship money available]?**

**Rabbi Chama bar Chanina is reacting to Rabbi Hoshaya, using the same Hebrew root שקע which means both to invest, like “to sink money into something” and to “literally sink, to*

cause to sink [a person or thing]”.

Now, to our specific text about selling a Sefer Torah. The crucial issue I want to study is: **For what reasons and under what conditions and may a community sell a Sefer Torah?** The classic text concerning this issue is codified in the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 153:6*), based on a passage in the Talmud (*Megillah 27a*):

מוכרים בהכ"נ וכן שאר דברים שבקדושה ואפי" ס"ת להספקת תלמידים או להשיא יתומים בדמיו

**We may sell a synagogue,
and, similarly, all holy objects —
even a Sefer Torah —
in order to provide for students of Torah
or to allow orphans to get married
with the proceeds of the sale.”**

(Dalet) A few comments:

1. For whatever the needs of the proceeds of the sale may be, it is clear that those people responsible must first thoroughly review their own budget and balance sheet to be *absolutely* certain that there are no other sources of available funds.

SELLING A SEFER TORAH SHOULD BE SEEN AS A LAST RESORT.

2. If the total needs will cost less than the gain from the sale of a Sefer Torah — in any event — let the community begin by selling the Torah’s silver ornaments.*

3. The *Tosafot* interpreter of Medieval Provence and Germany commented (Bava Batra 8b) that **perhaps redeeming captives should be added to Torah-scholarships and the marriage of orphans, and the fact that it was not specifically listed because היא דפשיטא היא**—*perhaps it was so obvious*. In fact, Rabbi Shmuel Levi Kelin (Vienna, 1720-1806) in his *מחצית השקל/Machatzit HaShekel* commentary, on the *מגן אברהם/Magen Avraham’s* commentary to the Shulchan Aruch, **removes the “perhaps” and writes that redeeming captives is an absolutely proper use of the funds**. It is a potential case of *פיקוח נפש/pikuach nefesh*-saving lives. In modern times, we can recall the astronomical re-settlement costs involved in 1948-1950 bringing the masses of immigrants from Arab countries to Israel, and more recently, the rescue of Jews from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopian Jews.

There is no need to feel distressed that the synagogue in some way will be *devalued* or diminished for having sold a Torah. To the contrary, there should be a sense of *שמחה מצוה/simcha shel Mitzvah—the joy of doing a Mitzvah* because of all the benefits the recipients will receive from the proceeds from the sale. This is somewhat similar in the Talmud (*Shabbat 119a*) to Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Yossi’s comment about Tzedakah to Rabbi Yehuda (HaNassi), based on Deuteronomy 14:22, (with a play on the Hebrew root עשר):

Give away a tenth so that you will become wealthy

(spiritually, if not with a fatter portfolio.)

Or as Churchill said it, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” The synagogue’s reputation has not declined. To the contrary, it has significantly increased its moral stature .

Furthermore, and despite the great pride a synagogue may feel for having several or many *ספרי תורה/Sifray Torah*, the maximum ever needed on very few Shabbatot and holidays (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 684:3*) is three Sifray Torah. In addition, the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 144:3*) explains:

**We do not roll the Sefer Torah while the congregation is present,
but if there is only one Sefer Torah and they need to read in two,
then they roll it,
and the dignity of the congregation is set aside.****

(Hay) To conclude:

A. We need to compare the text in the Talmud and in the Shulchan Aruch. They are essentially the same, except the final words: The Talmud text has **ולישא אשה – to get married from the proceeds of the sale**; the Shulchan Aruch text mentioned above reads “**יתומים בדמיון להשיא יתומים**”/yetomim-orphans with the proceeds of the sale.” Both texts naturally emphasize Judaism’s focus on marriage, but the “orphan” text provides, I believe, an opening to a wider understanding of why, if need be, synagogues should sell a Sefer Torah if there are no other available funds.

B. All we need to do is talk to Jewish community chaplains and social workers at Jewish Family Service to better understand the term “orphans” in our communities. They know and work with the Jewish orphans, among them are:

Elders on limited incomes sometimes still living in (now run down and/or dangerous) neighborhoods, Jewish prisoners and institutionalized mentally ill Jews, in their own homes, poor Jews simply unable to earn a living, individuals and family members obviously just too poor and aging before their time just because they cannot afford even the most inexpensive medications, homeless Jews, some individuals with serious chronic illnesses or certain incapacitating disabilities, victims of domestic violence, and addicts, including gamblers and oxycontin abusers.

Historically, the Jewish community (in comparison to the needs of the general community) had been slower to recognize and respond to the problems and to respond to many of these groups of Jews. That is now mostly a thing of the past in the American Jewish community. In recent years, there has been a swift and commendable, often astonishing, response and is now comparable to that of the general community.

Perhaps now we should add to our agenda:

- (א) Providing relief from the prohibitive cost of day school tuition;
- (ב) relief for families that cannot afford the cost for afternoon religious school;
- (ג) the same for the ever-higher cost of sending a child to a Jewish camp or on a summer program in Israel, and of no lesser significance
- (ד) subsidizing the financial needs of *adults* — laypeople, teachers, and a full range of professionals — to attend significant conferences and take advantage of opportunities for study in North America and Israel.

Rabbi Joseph Caro stated it best (*Bet Yosef to Tur 153*), quoting Rabbeynu Asher):

Since we may sell a synagogue to purchase a Torah and other texts, we may certainly sell it (a Torah) for the purpose of Torah study, since what good is it buying texts and a Torah if we are not able to study from them?

[In this case, by comparison,] the student is more important than the Torah.

Finally, we return to Rava’s words above, clarifying a crucial Jewish value:

See how foolish people are — they stand before a Sefer Torah but do not stand before a great person.

Something must have *really* distressed Rava about what he witnessed in his community to have the *chutzpah* to describe the Jews as foolish. My sense is that it was this: For all the undeniable holiness of a Sefer Torah, it is still a *thing*. In comparison,

people, breathing, living, human beings —

וְתַחֲסֶרְהוּ מֵעַט מֵאַלֹהִים

You have made human beings only a little lower than the angels (*Psalm 8:6*). Living people are of greater importance in the Grand Scheme of God's World. It is not the incredibly meticulously copied words in a scroll that take precedence, but the realization and personification of those words in *people* that is the essence of what Judaism is teaching.

(Vav) Postscript:

Should some people think that this law about selling **ספרי תורה/Sifray Torah** — to give aid and hope and a second chance at life to so many Jews in need, to allow them a married life (if desired) and to facilitate Jewish children and adults to becoming committed Jews by any and all agencies and techniques, to allow them to study Torah, and to give all of them the freedom and opportunity to live a full, *menschlich* life — is only a hypothetical statute written merely as a didactic tool to stress a certain point.

It is not.

I know some congregations that have understood this to be a *practical* Halachah and have sold some of their many **ספרי תורה/Sifray Torah** for the purposes stated above.

**In a similar vein, and [להבדיל/Lehavdil-to make a comparison from a different world], in 1968, a popular movie, The Shoes of the Fisherman, was a big hit. Anthony Quinn played the character of a pope who was a man of the people. On his wanderings, he was profoundly struck by the poverty and other needs beyond the Vatican walls. He responded by selling the treasures of the church.*

***In general, it is considered disrespectful to the congregants' dignity just to have them sit there doing nothing while the Torah is being rolled — except in this situation of having only one Torah.*

9. Ancient, Big Changes

(Aleph) As occasionally happens, by chance: I recently began to get tired of leafing through the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* in my couple of very early morning free hours — before the reality of the routine of e-mails, Zooms, phone calls, paying bills, and washing dishes comes crashing in. So I arbitrarily took a volume of *The Steinsaltz Talmud* off the shelf. The late Torah giant, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, ז"ל, published a new edition of the Talmud (*Steinsaltz Edition=SE*) with his own penetrating continuous modern Hebrew commentary. A complete full-sized *standard* Babylonian Talmud is most often printed in 20 volumes. Because of the different formatting and length of several of the traditional divisions (*tractates*), Rabbi Steinsaltz divided several of the individual large sections (*tractates*) into two volumes, and at least one into three volumes, and combined at least a couple of short standard *tractates* into a single *SE* volume. The result: *SE* comprises 44 large books, of which I own about 35. *So much Jewish values material!*

I specifically wanted to pick one of the *SE* volumes because I enjoy solving relatively small textual problems, and Rabbi Steinsaltz's edition succinctly clarifies Greek and Persian words, and also what is known as *realia*, e.g., what did the houses look like back in Talmudic times, what were the Babylonian and Roman court procedures, what time of day did they eat their two meals, what perfumes and cosmetics were available and popular, and why did they recommend eating garlic on Friday night? The *SE* explanations help bridge the centuries-long time-gap I often feel because of the distance between our texts and now and the Judean, Galilean, and Babylonian cultures and my own in Twentieth Century Maryland.

(Bet) Again, by chance: Though the odds were 35 to 1, I chose *SE*'s second volume of **בבא קמא/Bava Kamma**. In the standard edition, **בבא קמא/Bava Kamma** has a total of

119 double-sided pages; therefore the *SE* split it into two volumes. I began spending some time with the indices of foreign words and *realia*, jumping back and forth to the correct pages. But after a while, I needed a break, and started leafing through and skipping around the Talmudic text itself in no order. *By chance* I found myself looking at a familiar passage on page 82a — the statement that

עשרה תקנות תיקן עזרא

(the Biblical) **Ezra introduced 10 innovations into Jewish life.**

Of Ezra's 10 new practices, some I understood and liked immediately, a few did not particularly interest me, others I did not personally like, and still others pleasantly surprised me. Here are a few of Ezra's 10 innovations:

(A) Reading a portion of the following week's Torah selection on Monday and Thursday mornings so that people would not go three days without Torah and

(B) on Shabbat afternoon for the benefit of business people who were unable to come to hear it on Monday and Thursday mornings.

(C) Laundry done on Thursday so everything will be clean and fresh for Shabbat.

(D) That couples should eat garlic on Friday night, the traditionally-designated time for engaging in sex. Among the reasons given is that **שום/garlic** warms the body and brightens the face, kills parasites in the stomach, increases the sperm count, and

מכניס אהבה ומוציא את הקנאה

increases love and removes הקנאה-hakin'ah.

In this context, **הקנאה-hakin'ah** means any inappropriate motive for engaging in sexual relations.

(E) That cosmetic and jewelry peddlers should be allowed freedom of movement in the community. (The easy accessibility conjures up the Twenty-First Century picture of the proliferation of UPS, FedEx, Amazon Prime, and other companies' vans and trucks constantly appearing in front of my building — a phenomenon that enormously increased because of COVID. They are obviously delivering packages for people who order online and, for many, who completely avoid going to stores in person.) The cosmetic-and-jewelry innovation, however, was spoiled for me because of the sexist reason given (82b):

כדי שלא יתגנו על בעליהם

So that women should not be unattractive to their spouses.*

(F) That the woman of the house should get up early to bake the bread. The sexist element can be easily eliminated by substituting, "whoever does the baking" for "the woman of the house".

(Gimel) Two final comments:

(פ) Farther down on the page, several of Ezra's innovations are explained. However, my initial discomfort and anger about the bread baking (despite my textual tweak) was completely reversed when the Talmud explained that the reason for baking early was

כדי שתהא פת מצויה לעניים

so that there would be enough bread available in case a poor, hungry person would come to the door.

Now *that's* my kind of Halachic innovation!

(ת) I did the math: There are at least 4,165 pages in my *SE* 35 volumes. This means 4,165 to 1 odds that I would see this specific selection of Talmud today. If I could beat odds like those at the roulette wheel with even a moderate-sized bet in Las Vegas, I would be able finally to own a very nice apartment in Jerusalem a block from the restaurant that serves my favorite Kosher French onion soup with quality gruyere cheese and an unlimited supply of Israeli-style mini-cROUTONS.

**This sounds too much like when some people introduce a couple, all too often they say, "Ploni and his lovely wife Esther".*

10. Four Jewish Topics I've Been Thinking About

I. Ages 12 and 13: Legal majority for certain laws* is set in the Talmud at 12 years + 1 day for females, and 13 years + 1 day for males. This is the background why in some Orthodox and non-Ashkenazi communities, celebrations for girls** take place at age 12, while Bar Mitzvah universally happens at 13. Naturally, the Talmudic sages knew nothing of hormones, nor did they chaperone sixth-grade school dances where the girls towered over the boys . But they *did* see their own and others' children growing up, so it was obvious to them that there was a marked difference.

I discovered a curious comment by Rashi that offered an additional explanation for the "Mitzvah-maturation-age" difference. Based on the well-known and widely-accepted principle (*Sanhedrin 26b*) that

שהיא מתשת כחו של אדם

it (Torah study) weakens a person's physical strength,

On another passage (*Ketubot 50a*) — and reflecting the Jewish societal reality of Eleventh Century France, Rashi states —

שהיא ממהרת להביא כח

שאינה מתשת כח

בלימוד תורה

**Girls mature more quickly
since they do not study Torah,
which weakens the body.**

The physical maturation of boys is thus arrested, while the girls develop naturally without external Torah-delay to interfere in their physical development.

I leave for another time a separate Dvar Torah about the journey from womens' lack of opportunities and subsequent ignorance of Torah in Rashi's time to our own era when thousands of women regularly engage in high-level Talmud and Halachah studies. But, in the meantime, I want to mention two historical events that stand out in my mind: Sarah Schnerir's revolutionary founding of the first Bais Ya'akov school for orthodox girls in 1917 in Cracow, and Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik's (*The Rav*) radical founding of the Maimonides school in Boston *in 1937* [!] where male and female students study Talmud together in the same classroom. In some sectors of the Jewish community this has become our present-day reality. It is a the topic that has been covered thoroughly by historians, Jewish educators, learned feminists, and Halachists.

II. Something in the Rambam that caught my attention: The phrase (*Shabbat 33b*)

נשים דעתן קלה עליהן

nashim da'atan kala alayhen-women's minds are קלות.

The two root-letters קל [full root, קלל] means "light" or "easy" as opposed to "heavy", "difficult", or "serious". Over the centuries, קלה (singular of קלות) in our text has been interpreted in a variety of ways, including: "frivolous", "weak", "limited", "incapable of", "having a short attention span", or "lascivious". The context determined the translation. In different periods of Jewish history and in various communities, it was applied to why women were restricted in their study of Torah to only *Halachot* pertaining to women, or תנ"ך/*Tanach*, or sometimes משנה/*Mishnah*, but not the more intellectually-challenging גמרא/*Gemara*.

נשים דעתן קלה עליהן remained widely accepted. The near-universal acknowledgement of this idea is why I found a passage in Maimonides' Laws of Torah

Study (I:13) particularly interesting. In his Halachic summary of whether or not a women should study Torah, he states:

שׂוֹרֵב הַנְּשִׂיִם אֵין דַּעְתָּם מְכוֹונֶת לְהַתְּלַמֵּד אֶלָּא הֵן מוֹצִיאוֹת דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה לְדַבְּרֵי הַבְּאִי לְפִי עֲנִיּוֹת דַּעְתָּן

Most women's minds are not attuned to be taught, and as a result they make words of Torah into worthless things because their minds are limited.

Most, but not all. For this pre-eminent Halachist, apparently **דַּעְתָּן קְלָה** was not an *absolute* characteristic of women's minds. I believe had the Rambam's text been more prominently referred to, his wording quite possibly could have served as an opening for women's serious Torah study nine centuries ago.

III. Women's intuition: The sages of the Talmud (*Niddah 45b*), created a principle from a play on the root **וַיִּבֶן-vayiven-build (root=בנה)** in the story of Adam and Eve (*Genesis 2:22*):

וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה
"God built/וַיִּבֶן-vayiven — from the rib taken from the man — a woman".

By changing one vowel, the Rabbis read a completely different word instead — **וַיִּבֶן-vayaven (root=בון-understand, intuit).**

The result of their interpretation was:

שֵׁנֶתֶן הַקֵּב"ה בִּינָה יִתִּירָה בְּאִשָּׁה יוֹתֵר מִבְּאִישׁ
God gave more בִּינָה (same root=בון)/bina-the power or intuition and insight to women than to men.

More precisely — in the verse

וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם
God endowed the Woman/Eve/females with the natural powers of insight and intuition and **מִן** in **מִן הָאָדָם** means "**more than**" in Adam/males.

I am uncomfortable with this Rabbinic statement for three reasons:

(1) This method of deriving meaning from loose linguistic associations — though common in the Talmud and Midrash — ultimately remains tenuous, particularly with concepts as important as this one;

(2) For example, salting the *challah* — originally to make the tasteless bread more palatable*** was applied long before the symbolic interpretation of table=altar, sacrifices=salted, etc.

(3) Despite other universally-recognized differences between men and women, I doubt that neuro-researchers, psychiatrists, psychologists, *and reality* would support the Rabbis' claim****, and

(4) In the male-dominated Talmudic world, where so much is taught and legislated that defines women as second-class members of society, ascribing intuitive superiority to women feels paternalistic.***

IV. My approach, my tone: I am *not* mounting a wild or loose campaign to re-align the thinking about specific issues in the Talmud and Halachic literature. However, I believe it would be useful — and practical — to openly and vigorously re-examine and evaluate some aspects of what our Torah teaches us (such as in III above "a woman's intuition"). A few examples:

(A) We lose nothing (indeed, gain) by teaching that Friday night candlelighting — alongside the spiritual aspect — was *originally* simply meant so that people would not sit in the dark during their Shabbat meal;

(B) Stating unequivocally that there is something fundamentally wrong with Abraham's accepting the command to sacrifice Isaac — despite all exegetical, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, or mystical acrobatics by various commentators over the centuries who attempted to justify it;

(C) To not allow ourselves to react *passively* to the multitude of Biblical and

Talmudic passages that legally prescribe floggings and the death penalty, sometimes even for minor Halachic infractions, which so strongly violate our basic human sensibilities;

(D) Strongly expressing our vocal opposition to the idea that the accumulated quantity of Torah knowledge is *always* a higher Jewish value than *Menschlichkeit*.

At this point, I think it is important to add what can be learned from medieval folk superstitions and customs such as: Red ribbons, garlic, blue windows and doors, circles (at weddings), knots, amulets, and incantations, or that salt was considered an effective way to keep demons from invading and ruining a meal.

By analogy in our own day, this became clear to me when my relatives recently had a Zoom get-together, and I asked my *ziesse* (and potentially endangered) great-nephew, a student at the University of Maryland, “Are sororities and fraternities still partying?” He answered, “Yes”, adding that Greek life goes on as if there were no Corona virus, and, furthermore, the bars are still open. I ask, “Would we all not have benefited had we educated the younger generation that unmasked drinking in crowded bars (besides college students, obviously also older, insensitive people), and clustering, unmasked people at parties should not be happening anywhere?” Would this not result in lower numbers of people testing positive? Would the numbers not be growing as much and spiking so frequently — endangering the health, wellbeing, and, the very lives, of others?”

Not getting vaccinated and not using masks and social distancing are today’s equal to the medieval superstitions that salt will ward off the harm of the Demon-COVID — that there is some magical force of protection Out There that will keep a person safe without any *real* defensive measures. And this most certainly applies to the unfortunate massive, tightly-packed, unprotected, disaster-inviting rallies that have taken place in America.

**For example, the legal age for purchasing and selling real estate is either 18 or 20.*

***Occasionally, but not always, referred to as “Bat Mitzvah”.*

****Several other dips (including vinegar) were also the ancient practice.*

*****I want to make clear that I am not commenting on the sages’ general method and their conclusions. I am commenting only on this instance — and others I have studied — but not all of them.*

11. Precedence: An Unexpected Talmudic Opinion

There is a centuries-old Jewish practice that, before the **ברכת המזון/birkat hamazon blessings after a meal**, a cup of wine is handed to the person who will lead the blessings.*

That designated person recites the **בורא פרי הגפן/boray peri hagafen-blessing over the wine**, and then leads the assembled people in the **ברכת המזון/birkat hamazon**.

Customarily, the honor is given to the most respected person at the meal.

Somehow I re-discovered (but had forgotten) has an interesting comment in the Talmud (*Sotah 38b* about this custom:

ואמר ריב"ל
אין נותנין כוס של ברכה לברך
אלא לטוב עין

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said:

We only give the cup of wine for leading the ברכת המזון/birkat hamazon blessing

to a person who is טוב עין.

The literal translation of **טוב עין/tov ayin** is “goodness of eye” or “has a good eye”. But the *real* meaning in the Talmud is “generous”.

When I recently came across this passage again, I pictured a multiple-choice

question on a Jewish dayschool exam looking like this: To whom is the cup of wine cup given for **בִּרְכַּת הַמְּזוֹן/birkat hamazon?**

- (A) The person with the most Torah-knowledge,
- (B) The **כֹּהֵן/kohen**-descendant of priests, or
- (C) — Neither (A) nor (B).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement caught my attention, surprised me, and excited me because of the unexpected precedence the host or hostess gives to a generous person over (A) or (B). This sage's answer is (C), and his Torah-lesson presents a clear message, namely, that Tzedakah holds a decidedly higher position over others in the Jewish hierarchy of values such as (A) and (B), at least in this instance.

My enthusiasm for Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's opinion is not meant to imply that I personally lack respect for Torah-study, or that I have a biased opinion concerning the passé status of the priestly class long after the Second Temple was destroyed more than 1950 years ago. But, at least at mealtime, caring deeds and Tzedakah toward others which may possibly lead to Menschlichkeit for both the giver and the recipient — is more important than Talmudically-expected intellectual achievement, prowess, or hereditary status.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi derives his ruling from a verse in Proverbs (22:9):

**טוב עין
הוא יבורך**

tov ayin hu yevorach
a generous person
will be blessed.

But he reads **יְבוֹרֵךְ/yevorach** as it appears in Proverbs itself — without the ו/vav — i.e., **יִבְרַךְ**, and, with a slight change of vowels has turned it grammatically into the active verb **יְבַרְךָ/ye-va-raych-shall bless**, meaning that the generous person should be the one to lead the blessings of **בִּרְכַּת הַמְּזוֹן/birkat hamazon**. This “tweaked” reading makes sense because, *theologically* speaking, the passive form “will be blessed”, is obvious, namely that, in the Talmudic way of thinking, generous people will *naturally* be blessed by God. So, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi sensed that there had to be some additional meaning to the verse, something beyond God's beneficence to Good People. I believe he is teaching us that, by acts of generosity, caring people are, in fact, a blessing for others beyond themselves. They are designated the leaders *because*, by their acts of Tzedakah, they demonstrate to the others that they are doing their part in creating a more sensitive, humane, *menschlich* life for everyone.

I read two commentaries that expanded on Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's bold statement. First, Rashi seems to have a more literal understanding of **טוב עין**, commenting that **טובי עין-tovay-ayin-people** have *good eyesight* to perform not only caring deeds on behalf of others, but also distance themselves from **בִּצְע/betza-dishonest profit and greed**. In a separate commentary, the Maharsha (*Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels, 1555-1631*) includes the second half of the verse in Proverbs:

כי נתן מלחמו לדל

ki natan milachmo ladal
because *ayin tov*-people give of their bread to a poor person.

Edels translates and interprets **מִלְחָמוֹ/milachmo** as “*one's own bread*” meaning that people who are imbued with a generous soul, would not eat fine-quality bread and give only coarse bread to a person in need. ***Tov-ayin-people*** recognize that Tzedakah — justice, fairness — requires acknowledging the fundamental equality of the giver and the recipient. The reality of this kind of encounter is that one person has, and the other one doesn't. Yet, they are still equals, i.e., human beings because they are both created **בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים/beTzelem Elohim-in God's image**.

I did not see any notation on the Talmudic page that indicates Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's centuries'-previous statement became the source for the final Halachah. Since Halachic references are printed in small letters on a page of Talmud, I looked again at *Sotah 38b*. I just wanted to be certain that I hadn't missed it. Finding no notation, I subsequently looked in the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 183:7*) and found that, indeed, his opinion became the final rule, at least in Rabbi Joseph Caro's law code.

Other legal codes rule differently. Personally, I have only been present at meals where the host asks if there is a kohen present.

As soon as I told my good friend Rabbi Jonathan Porath the Hebrew טוב עין/**ayin** he gave me one more interpretation. He very wisely explained it to mean **a person who sees only the good in others**. That sort of individual is certainly worthy of the honor of leading Birkat HaMazon.

Reviewing the comments above, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's insightful statement makes perfect sense to me.

**Just this morning, long after this Dvar Torah was written, I discovered in Rabbi Yehiel Michel HaLevi Epstein's (1829-1908) Halachic magnum opus, the ערוך השולחן/Aruch HaShulchan an interesting comment: Despite the fact that the cup of wine before birkat hamazon, was a firmly-entrenched ancient Jewish practice — it was not done in his Eastern European community. Wine was simply too expensive. Following the practice would have been too much of a burden financially, so it was simply ignored.*

12. שהחינו/Shehecheyanu

Aleph — What I heard: Not too long ago, a friend told me that she had learned that teen-agers were no longer rushing to get their driver's license as soon as they have reached the legal age. Several others whom I subsequently asked confirmed what my friend had told me. I was surprised, because in my day, we all ran to get our license as soon as the law allowed. It gave us the freedom to see our friends scattered all over northern Virginia. My friends agreed that the present trend was largely attributed to the teenagers' texting and using all the other tools of social media to be in touch with their *chevra*, so they didn't feel a need to *actually* see their friends.

Bet — The texts: Not long ago, at the invitation of my good friend Rabbi David Shneyer, I had the opportunity to teach some Shavuot ZoomTorah. The material was mostly unusual, ignored, or off-the-beaten-track texts about Jewish values. Approximately 45 people "attended": friends of mine, members of David's congregation and impressive outreach efforts קהילה חדשה/**Kehilla Chadasha-A New Congregation/Community** and עם כולל/**Am Kolel-An inclusive people**), and a few others who must have heard from someone that they might want to participate.

The morning after, two things struck me:

(#1) I pictured slot machines with five spinning wheels, where you win with any straight line or diagonal connection. I obviously knew a good number of the people, but I could see Steve at the top right of the screen reconnecting (after nearly 6 decades), with Warren, one row down and three to the left, and David saw Bill, maybe only three over to the right. AND

(#2) — the vertical, horizontal, and diagonal visual connections on the screen — added an entirely new, enriching dimension to my understanding of the wonders of ZoomTorah that I had not recognized previously.

There were two texts that I didn't use that night, one from the Shulchan Aruch and the other from The Book of Genesis. *The first text:*

הרואה את חברו לאחר שלשים יום
אומר שהחינו
ואחר י"ב חדש מברך מחיה המתים
והוא שחביב עליו הרבה ושמח בראייתו
מי שלא ראה את חברו מעולם
ושלח לו כתבים
אע"פ שהוא נהנה בראייתו
אינו מברך על ראייתו

**One who sees a friend after (a gap of) 30 days
recites (the) Shehecheyanu (blessing).**

**If it has been 12 months,
one recites מחיה המתים/Mechayay haMaytim**

Who brings dead people back to life.

**(A) [In either situation], that applies
only if the person was really dear to him,
and he is overjoyed to see him.**

**(B) If the person had never seen the friend
but knew about him,**

and had contact through letters –

even if he is happy to see him, he does not make the blessing(s).*

(Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:1-2:)

The Second Text: The classic Biblical example of such an encounter is in Genesis

46:30:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יֹסֵף
אָמוּתָהּ הַפֶּעַם
אֲחֵרֵי רְאוּתִי אֶת-פָּנֶיךָ
כִּי עוֹדֶךָ חַי

Then Israel [i.e., Jacob] said to Joseph,

“Now I can die,

having personally seen your face

that you are still alive.”

It is not difficult to imagine Jacob’s intense emotions after seeing his son Joseph after all those many years when he thought his beloved son was dead.

We know of שואה/Shoah Survivors who were and, still are, being reunited with family members decades afterwards, unaware that the brother or sister or child had also survived. While hopefully we are spared situations in our own lives like those of the Survivors or Jacob, so many of us do experience the distress of separation and longing because of our modern great geographical distances. I believe that these blessings in the Shulchan Aruch text allow us to verbalize what emotions may lie in our subconscious thoughts.

Gimel – Two comparable examples:

(A) Zoom-Chevra: Because a book of mine** was published in April, 2020, my editor, Rabbi Neal Gold, thought it would be a good idea to have him interview me. With the Corona virus raging, this “naturally” became a *virtual* event. About 75-80 people appeared on the screen, most of whom I knew from different periods in my life. As I told many people afterwards, it was the single greatest number of my friends “gathered” in one place *ever*.

(B) Jerusalem: For the past 44 summers, I made it almost a daily habit to sit in the shade outside of one of the restaurants on Jerusalem’s עמק רפאים/Emek Refaim. I would stretch my time by nursing a Diet Coke or הפוך/hafuch-cappuccino, in anticipation that — more often than not — one of my friends would walk by. We would then have a

truly blessed hour to *schmooze* or talk Torah-and-Mitzvahs. Some of them — both **צברים/sabras-native-born Israelis** and **עולים/olim-immigrants** — I saw frequently; others were tourists whom I hadn't known were in Israel on a tour, or came on their own, and still others, who “made my day, week, month, summer”, I had not seen for years or decades. *Nothing*, I insist, *nothing* can ever replace those experiences, the handshakes, and the hugs — feeling muscles, body mass, and contours — and double-cheeked kisses.

Now, no one denies that Zoom and similar electronic miracles have their glitches: you might lose the sound, there might be static, you are distracted and accidentally switch to Gallery View to scan for friends and stop paying attention to the teacher or speaker, or you click on this or that icon, and it doesn't respond, or you can't find the right icon to click on. The same is also certainly true in face-to-face conversations: An unintended but spontaneous yawn happens, your eyes wander away from the person speaking, the other person might have been saying something and meaning something else, or the other person says, “You weren't listening”.

At one point recently, I wrote the following brief “Prayer for the Future” to include in e-mails to friends, who like all of us, have been living far too long under COVID-conditions:

***The toll from our separation from relatives, friends, acquaintances, and /stam-
other just live, breathing human beings, has been overwhelming. And for all the many
and varied blessings of Zoom and social media, they will never compare to a REAL LIVE
hug and kiss.***

***May the “new normal” bring us to a heightened, amazed and amazing awareness
of the crucial value of the awesomeness of human contact with friends, relatives,
acquaintances — anyone at all. And may all our desires and renewed efforts to stand
face to face with them be fulfilled.***

Amen

Dalet — My analysis:

Call me old fashioned. True, I most certainly do not miss carbon paper and the stink of mimeograph correction fluid. True, I was not born with a mouse in my hand, but I have written thousands of e-mails, and competently manage to use Word, TextEdit, Excel, Firefox, Safari, Google Chrome, Youtube, FaceTime, and occasionally slowly (and with many typos) send text messages. Nevertheless, I take the word “**הרואה—one who sees**” in the Shulchan Aruch text literally.

My question is: When the coronavirus joins the history of the 1918-1919 flu, polio, SARS, and AIDS epidemics, and because of the length of our isolation, *and* the extreme ease, immediacy, and reach of Zoom and similar applications — is there a danger that some people may settle for second-best, accepting this one-step-removed situation as the preferred pattern of living? I believe that we have to ask ourselves if this “not quite, almost” reality is really the way we want to, and are supposed to, relate to others? I am concerned that, for a few people (like the teens mentioned above), this thought that pops up now and again from the back of the mind will become their normal practice. It may not even be noticed at first. Will we have given ZoomLife (in my mind – undeserved) priority over *real* real Life and *real* real people.

Or will we no longer believe that we are “going out of our way” to visit/see/*shlep* to Cousin X, friend Y, or even *lifelong* friend Z? I personally most definitely prefer any human glitches to the ones that appear as thousands of multi-colored pixels on a screen. I would hope to give preference, always, to a living, breathing human being over the most advanced sophisticated complex of minuscule electrical charges and silicon-generated 0's and 1's on my Mac.

Many people have heard the clever statement, “On a person's deathbed, nobody ever said, “I wish I had spent more time at the office”. In monumental contrast, long ago someone told me a line that has stayed with me since I first heard it maybe 20 years ago: “I

don't want to be 80 years old and have to say, "I wish we would have spent more time together".

**I have tried to avoid linguistic gender-bias in my translations. However, in some instances, I have had to use only the masculine gender to keep the sentences from being too awkward or cumbersome. This Halachah in the Shulchan Aruch obviously applies to everyone.*

***Radiance, Creative Mitzvah Living, The Selected Prose and Poetry of Danny Siegel, The Jewish Publication Society, 2020.*

13. **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu and Beyond**

(Aleph) שהחינו/Shehecheyanu: At one time or another most Jews have recited the **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** blessing. It is recited or sung on holidays, joyous and milestone occasions in one's life, or when buying something new. Another occasion for reciting **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** is before a person eats something he or she has not enjoyed for more than a year, or which the person had never eaten previously such as durian, horned melon, or ugly fruit.

This short blessing simply and powerfully expresses our gratitude that God has allowed us to live and enjoy these human experiences, occasions, and physical items.

The following are excerpts from the Laws of **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 223:3*) which will provide some important details:

**בנה בית חדש
או קנה כלים חדשים
אפילו היה לו כיוצא באלו תחלה
או קנה וחזר וקנה
מברך על כל פעם שהחינו**

**If someone built a new house
or bought new כלים/kaylim utensils
[appliances, tools, devices, clothing, "things"]
or similar items for the first time
or bought them and then bought others that are the same —
the person should recite the שהחינו/Shehecheyanu blessing every time.**
Noteworthy is the continuation:

**ולאו דוקא חדשים
דהוא הדין לישנים
אם הם חדשים לו
שלא היו אלו שלו מעולם**

**that the item need not necessarily be new in and of itself;
it may be second-hand,
as long as the buyer never had one before.**

Another detail is supplied in the next section (223:4) which states:

**בשעת הקנין יש לו לברך
אע"פ שעדיין לא נשתמש בהם
שאין הברכה אלא ע"י שמחת הלב
שהוא שמח בקנייתו**

**A person should make the blessing at the time of purchase,
even before the item has been used,
because the real joy
is in the act of buying.**

(I) A separate bracha known as, "מלביש ערומים/Malbish Arumim-(God) Who provides clothing", is recited when the person wears a new piece of clothing for first time.

(2) Buying anything, of course, “supports the economy” — a remote concept. Closer, and more in detail would be to picture the entire chain of people who are involved until the item reaches the cashier’s counter. Working backward, say, from a wool sweater), the series would include: from cashiers to company owners to factory workers, to knitters, button sewers, and dyers, all the way back to the New Zealand sheep shearers, to the person who buys the food for the hard-working sheepdogs that run in circles around the sheep for hours to keep the herd together — with still some other steps in between. We become aware of and express our gratitude for all those people who did so much just to keep us warm.

(Bet) Beyond **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu**: The next section (223:5) records a lesser-known and much-less-frequently-recited blessing called **והמטיב הטוב/haTov veHaMayteev**-(God) Who is good and Who makes good things happen:

קנה כלים
שמשמשין בהם
הוא ובני ביתו
מברך הטוב והמטיב
אם נתנו לו במתנה
מברך הטוב והמטיב
שהיא טובה לו ולנותן

If a person purchases new utensils (e.g., tools, appliances, devices) that the other members of the household will use, the person recites the **והמטיב הטוב/haTov veHaMayteev blessing. If the person was given the item as a present, the recipient recites **והמטיב הטוב/haTov veHaMayteev** since this is beneficial to the giver as well as to the recipient.**

Two distinct occasions are described:

(A) When the person *and the members of person’s household* use the items: I believe this applies to items any other people — even those beyond the immediate household — who will derive benefit. What interested me is the theological connection, namely “Who makes good things happen” means *it happens through the agency of human beings*. This is another Jewish example of the frequently-sermonized partnership between God and human beings.

(B) The second occasion for reciting **והמטיב הטוב/haTov veHaMayteev** is when the new item is a gift. As with the situation described in the previous paragraph, the “makes things happen” is God working through a human being. It is the human recipient of the items who will use them to connect with others. In addition — and I believe of no less importance — is that the text states that giving gifts

שהיא טובה לו ולנותן

***tova lo velanotayn*-benefits not only the recipient but also the giver.**

The human connection and interaction is sufficient to warrant reciting the *bracha*. Much has been analyzed and written about the joy and privilege one feels when giving a gift. There are many people who have articulated this most eloquently, including therapists, members of the clergy, and probably best of all, the giver.

Additionally, since the word **כלים** in the *Shulchan Aruch* also means clothing, section 223 includes whether purchasing insignificant items such as undershirts and slippers, requires the **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** blessing. Both Halachic sides whether or not to recite the *bracha* are discussed in the text because of the need, for example, to take into account poor people who would not consider such items — underwear, slippers — insignificant.

At the other extreme, one commentator even mentions that, for wealthy people,

purchasing some high-priced objects such as the latest model top-of-the-line Bentley may be no more than mere *tchatchkas* in their opinion.

Clearly, cost is not a determining factor.

It is the purchaser's feelings about the item that are decisive.

(Gimel) Summary — The Underlying Issues: Common to all aspects of section 223 is the human, personal reaction to something new in his or her life. *The object only means something in relation to the person.* The person's happy reaction to this new "thing" — and equally, if not more, important — the happiness at being alive to enjoy it — is the essential stimulus for reciting the *bracha*. The opposing opinions that maintain that it is *not* proper to recite the blessing on doubtful occasions are referring to the separate concept of **לבטלה לברכה/bracha leVatala-using God's name unnecessarily.** In Talmudic thinking, this would be tantamount to transgressing one of the Ten Commandments, specifically, not to take God's name in vain.

(Dalet): My personal (and no doubt non-traditional) Halachic practice: I am certainly aware of my extremely limited knowledge of the enormous mass of post-Talmudic Halachic material that has accumulated over many centuries, including the hundreds of contemporary **תשובות/teshuvot-responsa**. I'm not even a rabbi, but still, if I *were* one of those Torah giants that appear once or twice in a generation or in a hundred years, who had everything in their pre-computer memory coupled with instant and infallible recall, I would rule that in all cases they *should* recite the **שהחינו/Shehecheyanu** or **הטוב והמטיב/haTov veHaMayteev** blessing. It is *that person's* life, happiness, and *his or her* relationship to God that is the relevant determining factor. Who am I to deny them the opportunity to thank God for their good fortune, whether or not *I* think they should or should not?

This topic has been on my mind for a long time. I was having great difficulty relating the connects and disconnects among the three elements: God, human beings, and blessings. Now, having reviewed these aspects of the Halachah, and having given my unquestionably non-authoritative Halachic ruling in the previous paragraph, I feel a great sense of relief.

14. Preparing and Parting Jewishly

(Aleph) Preparing to greet The Divine: The fifth chapter the first volume of the Talmud **ברכות/Brachot** opens with the words:

אין עומדין להתפלל
אלא מתוך כבוד ראש

**People should not begin to pray
unless they are in a serious frame of mind.**

Over the centuries, several commentaries and law codes expanded on and refined this statement with various details about people's thoughts, moods, and emotions when preparing to "greet" God in prayer, including: The Babylonian Talmud (*Brachot 31a*), Talmud Yerushalmi (*Brachot 5:1, 36b*), Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 4:18*), and the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 93:3*). For example (*Brachot 31a*):

אין עומדין להתפלל
לא מתוך עצבות ולא מתוך עצלות
ולא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך שיחה
ולא מתוך קלות ראש
ולא מתוך דברים בטלים
אלא מתוך שמחה של מצוה

**People should not begin to pray
if they are sad,
lackadaisically,
jokingly,
after superficial or idle chitchat,
in an unserious mood,
or preoccupied with inconsequential things,
but rather מצוה של שמחה מתוך/simcha shel Mitzvah-with the joy of doing a
Mitzvah.**

Additional negatives mentioned are:

Not to pray

לא מתוך מריבה
ולא מתוך כעס

**after just having had an argument
or angrily/in a foul mood.**

On the positive side is a variation of something mentioned above:

People *should* begin to pray

מתוך דבר של תורה

after engaging in words of Torah. (Brachot 31b)

This statement is examined critically in later sources because “words of Torah” can prove to be counterproductive when people prepare to pray. If they choose “engaging in Halachah” for their “words of Torah”, they may become distracted if the Halachah involves complex argumentation. Instead, the pre-prayer Halachah has to be in the form of

הלכות פסוקות

halachot pesukot, i.e., clearly-defined laws.

Furthermore, the Yerushalmi (*Brachot 5:1, 37*) makes a rather surprising and bold statement:

העוסק בצורכי ציבור
כעוסק בדברי תורה

**People involved in providing for the needs of the community
are similarly ranked with those who are involved in Torah study.**

Communal Mitzvah-work is certainly an appropriate transition to prayer. What better way is there to approach God than with a “track record” of helping to actualize a just society and caring for God’s creations?

(Bet) Partings: Immediately following the Talmud’s first discussion about preparing to pray is a section (*Brachot 31a*) about how to say good-bye.

(1) To be honest, *that* was my primary interest in writing this Dvar Torah, but I needed the background prayer-material to better understand the proper frame of mind Jewish tradition recommends for people saying good-bye.

(2) Again, to be honest, *previously* my focus had always been on the parting *words*, mostly to help people say something meaningful and to avoid reciting inadequate phrases like, “Catch you later”, “See ya”, a hurried, offhanded “Bye bye”, or, pretentiously, “Ciao”. *Now*, my interest has shifted to examining *who* the people are that are parting from each other. To mention just a few examples:

A spouse sending the other spouse off on a long business trip;
anxious husbands or wives who are sending their police-officer spouses
to engage in yet another day of potentially dangerous work;
a spouse as the other spouse goes off to war;
casual acquaintances;
people mercifully taking a hopelessly ill beloved pet
for the painful final trip to the veterinarian’s office;
after a visit with an elderly relative.

after a visit with an elderly relative,
sending a child off to kindergarten or college;
handing the keys to the family car for a son's or daughter's first solo drive;
lifelong friends;
relatives or friends in hospice when *only* the visitors know
that they will never see the other person again, or
relatives or friends, when the visitors *and* the dying person know
that this is the last time they will ever see each other.

A special case relates to living with COVID. Before the vaccines, many people experienced a frightening feeling that they might *never* see some family members and friends again. This sense was compounded by “Life with Zoom” — for all its many blessings — the one-step-removed-from-reality that has become routine. Thankfully, during good periods, as immunization numbers grew and restrictions began to lift, such apprehensions noticeably subsided.

(Gimel) Possible wording for three specific occasions of parting: I found three situations where the Talmudic material particularly satisfied me:

(A) Directly addressing the deceased person at a funeral (*Brachot 64a*) —

”לך בשלום

laych beShalom

Go in peace”,

referring to Genesis 15:15 —

ואתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום

“May you go peacefully to your ancestors.”

(B) For no specific situation, Mari the grandson of Rav Huna the son of Rabbi Yirmiah bar Abba stated that (*Brachot 31a*)

אל יפטר אדם מחבירו
אלא מתוך דבר הלכה
שמתוך כך זוכרהו

people should good-bye with a Halachah,

because then both the Halachah and the person who taught the Halachah will be remembered because they will always be connected.*

(C) After studying Torah in Pumbedita, when the Rabbis parted, they would say to each other,

מחיה חיים
יתן לך
חיים ארוכים
וטובים
ומתוקנין

May God,
Who gives life to the living,
give you
a good,
long,
and stable life. (*Yoma 71a*)

I believe that this is a wonderful good-bye blessing after *any* session of Torah study.

(Dalet) A personal, unexpected conclusion: As I was writing this Dvar Torah, once again I became aware that there is no set or “magic” formula in our literature to guide us in *every* aspect of our lives. Almost always when encountering human situations, my customary method is to search our Jewish texts — in retrospect, sometimes naïvely and unreasonably — for practical advice or profound insight. *BUT*, as I continued writing, I understood even more clearly what I had probably suspected all along: Yes, sometimes we may find connections, insights, answers, or relief — such as the three texts I just cited —

and we *should* continue to search. But at the same time, we should be prepared to realize that

if what we are looking for isn't there, it just isn't there.

(Hay) Silence: And, of course, there are times when no-words-at-all are the deepest and most appropriate way for people to say goodbye.

**There are certain specific situations when this may work. I, myself, have done this on a few appropriate occasions.*

15. Greeting Other People

(Aleph) A Jewish suggestion #1:

שְׂמַי אֹמֵר

...
וְהָיִי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם
בְּסִכּוֹר פְּנִים יְפוֹת

Shammai says...

“When you meet anyone,

always do it with a pleasant expression on your face.” (*Pirkay Avot 1:15*)

(Bet) A Jewish suggestion #2:

... רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל אֹמֵר ...
וְהָיִי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם
בְּשִׂמְחָה

Rabbi Yishma'el says...

“Greet every person

with שמחה/joy.” (*Pirkay Avot 3:12*)

(Gimel) Various comments:

(1) Innumerable students of Torah have compared these two statements.

(2) Rabbi Yishma'el clearly goes beyond Shammai's approach; he asks much more of each of us.

(3) In many Talmudic texts, **כול/kol-all, every** — is not to be taken literally.* In real life, applying these sages' words universally does not take into account the encounters we unfortunately might have or might have had (**חס ושלום/chass veShalom-God forbid**) with others who threaten us or are otherwise dangerous to us.

(4) Shammai's words “with a pleasant facial expression” should not be restricted to (adulterated by?) picturing a yellow smiley-faced emoji, bumper sticker, or cute print on a t-shirt. Shammai's “with a pleasant expression on your face” is not meant to be reduced to a cartoon image.

The great Torah genius and creative text-interpreter, Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941) understands Shammai's **בְּסִכּוֹר פְּנִים יְפוֹת/besayver panim yafot-with a pleasant facial expression** to mean **“to make eye-contact”**, not to turn our face away from the person in need. We should look (not stare) directly at the person, taking care not to make her or him uncomfortable or feel embarrassed. Instead, we have to have direct caring eye contact. In that way, we make the connection as two human beings who are intimately joined by showing our personal interaction with that other person. Indeed, in modern Hebrew, a common way to say “face to face” is **“בארבע עיניים/beArba aynayim-with four eyes”**.

You can't get more up-close-and-personal than that.

(5) Rabbi Yishma'el's words, **שמחה/simcha** is not just “happiness”, although that is certainly a part of it. Rather, **שמחה/simcha-joy** is intimately connected to the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's teachings about the awareness of The Sublime in Life, a recognition of the radically amazing wonder of being alive as a human being a glorious

recognition of the humanity, including the fact of being alive as a human being, a precious creation of God.

Think **שמחת תורה**/*simchat Torah* and **שמחה של מצוה**/*simchah shel Mitzvah*.

(Dalet) A grammatical point: Both sages use **הָאָדָם כָּל**/*kol HaAdam* instead of what we might have expected — **אָדָם כָּל**/*kol Adam*. The additional הָ may simply be the difference between Mishnaic and modern Hebrew. However, I think that the הָ possibly translates as “the entire person”. This would mean, that when your *entire* self and the *entire* person you meet is *completely* present “in the moment” — *that* is when Rabbi Yishma’el’s “with **שמחה**/*simcha-joy*” most meaningfully applies. *That* kind of encounter constitutes a profoundly human interaction and absolutely a cause for *simcha*-celebration.

**There are numerous examples in the Talmud where כל does not mean everything or everybody.*

16. שכחה/Sheechecha

(Aleph) Pronouncing the word שכחה/sheechecha:

Accent on the first syllable — SHEE-che-cha. The problem is two throaty harsh-sounding letters — the **כ**/*chaf* and the **ח**/*chet* — are right next to each other. While originally they sounded different (and even today you can tell when Yemenites pronounce a distinct **ח**/*chet*), in common usage today, they sound the same. The *ch* is not the *ch* in *chihuahua* or *Chichi*, the colloquial Guatemalan name for *Chichicastenango**.

Rather, both the **ח** and **כ** are pronounced like in **ברוך**/*baruch*, **כריין**/*chrain-horseradish***

חריר/*charif*-beyond wasabi-spicy, **כראפּען**/*chroppen*-the onomatopoetic Yiddish word meaning **to clear the throat, snore**. Even though your first attempts might be difficult, stay with it until you pronounce the word as fluently as the Jewish names “Hillel”, “Herzl”, and “Trader Joe’s”. Somehow we manage to say “acetaminophen”, “dioxynucleic acid”, “sriracha” and “homoioteleuton” quite comfortably. **שכחה**/*sheechecha* is certainly no less important for Jews to pronounce without stammering.

(Bet) שכחה/sheechecha means “forgetting”:

שכחה/*sheechecha* is the name of an agricultural Mitzvah explicitly mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:19. It is often listed as part of a triad with **לקט**/*leket*-**grain that has fallen by the wayside during the harvest, to be left behind for poor people**, and **פאה**/*pe’ah*-**the corners of the field left standing to be gathered by economically vulnerable individuals and food-insecure members of society**. All three Mitzvahs relate to portions of a crop which according to the Torah belong to the people in need.

(Gimel) What שכחה/sheechecha is not:

(1) This forgetting is *not* the same as misplacing and searching for the car keys, nor like forgetting one ingredient in a recipe, causing your guests to make an effort not to gag.

(2) It is *not* like the *very* bad book I wrote and now needed to search for a copy so I would remember the title — so deeply it had been buried in my memory;

(3) And it is *not* like the deleted computer files that any 10-year-old geek invariably knows how to retrieve.***

(Dalet) What שכחה/sheechecha is in Deuteronomy 24:19:

כִּי תִקְצֹר קְצִירְךָ בַשָּׂדֶה
וְשָׁכַחְתָּ עֹמֵר בַּשָּׂדֶה
לֹא תָשׁוּב לְקַחְתּוֹ
לְגֵר לְיִתוֹם וְלֵאלֵמָנָה יִהְיֶה

**When you reap the harvest in your field
and overlook a sheaf in the field,
do not turn back to get it;
it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.**

I was attracted to this particular Mitzvah because something about the name and nature of שכחה/sheechecha seemed so out of the ordinary. It more than merely piqued my curiosity. It jarred my mind as strongly as when during every Passover Seder, I have to rethink the translation concerning the nature of the fourth child, whether שאינו יודע לשאול /she'ayno yoday'a lish'ol means "Doesn't know how to ask" or "Doesn't even know to ask".

I discovered much more about שכחה/sheechecha when I went to the תוספתא כפשוטה /Tosefta Kifeshuta, (Pe'ah, p. 169), the magnum opus of the late Professor Saul Lieberman, ז"ל, who was considered by many scholars to be the greatest genius of Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature of the Twentieth Century. Among his comments were:

- (A) The Mitzvah is *not* the forgetting itself.
- (B) The Mitzvah is leaving the forgotten part of the crop for people in need.
- (C) Farmers may not *intentionally* forget.
- (D) They may not explicitly state that they want to leave a large section of the crop for poor people by "forgetting". That is considered a form of צדקה /Tzedakah, but is not the Mitzvah of שכחה/sheechecha.
- (E) Farmers may not stipulate that, if they have forgotten anything, they will go back to reap it. That is a stipulation contrary to

מה שכתוב בתורה

mah shekatuv baTorah

what is explicitly stated in the Torah.

- (F) Most striking is that the very moment that the farmer forgets, that produce already *belongs to* the poor people who gather it. Therefore, the meaning of the word יִהְיֶה /yiheyeh in

לְגֵר לְיִתוֹם וְלֵאלֵמָנָה יִהְיֶה

to the widow, fatherless and stranger

does not mean "is", but "rightfully belongs to".

- (G) Most insightful of all in Professor Lieberman's explanation is the fact that poor people take possession of the produce *even if the farmers are unaware that they had forgotten to reap that portion of the crop.*

(Hay): *Shechecha today:* I have not yet reached the point where I can analogize שכחה/sheechecha beyond ancient wheat and barley fields to "out in the Big World" in the Twenty-First Century. However, I suspect that I shall return many times in the future to this unique way of doing good for other people .

(Vav): *Help from a friend and teacher:* My Torah-teacher and friend, Rabbi Michael Klayman, brought to my attention an important issue relating to "out in the big world" in the Twenty-First Century. Taking into account how much knowledge we have nowadays about how the brain functions, we — and the Halachah — need to adjust and supplement the Halachot of שכחה/sheechecha.

The root cause of some farmers' forgetting may stem from a neurological or physiological condition outside the definition of "the norm." and the reason for forgetting

would be beyond their control. Therefore, if a large portion of the crop was forgotten, shouldn't allowance be made for a miscalculation due to this disability and a certain percentage of what is "forgotten" would still belong to the farmers and not to the poor people?

I believe this is an important question that should be dealt with by contemporary Halachists.

**Chichi is the Guatemalan city with its enormous open-air market, a shopper's paradise for tourists and locals alike.*

***which, as the song has it. "like rain, in Spain falls mainly in the plain".*

****While I can't quite figure out where it fits or doesn't fit into this Dvar Torah, the song from the Sixties, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" keeps playing in my head.*

17. An American Jewish Breakthrough Of The First Order: The Adult Bat Mitzvah

This happened so many years ago, it was before I had a computer to record my decades of calendars in one file.

I was in Tucson to "do" a week-end of lectures at Beth El Congregation. As it happened – most fortuitously – it was the same Shabbat when 14 women were celebrating their adult Bat Mitzvah. The age span was very striking – women in their 30's to their 70's and beyond. Each was given two minutes to tell why they decided to commit themselves to this program, knowing from the start it would take two years of preparation, and participation in regular classes which might interfere with their other responsibilities.

When they began their preparations, some of them couldn't tell an **א-Aleph** from a **ב-Bet**, much less decipher unwelleted and unmusical-noted Torah text.

Many reasons were given, among them: **(1)** they wanted to keep up with what their children were learning in religious school; **(2)** [from the oldest woman] – girls weren't given a Jewish education back then, *and* she grew up in a very small Jewish community (I think in West Virginia) where it was just not part of their view of Things Jewish; **(3)** they wanted to assure themselves and their families that their days of life-changing and re-definition didn't end when they were in college; **(4)** that their families could be proud of them for something so different than "the usual" (like success in their jobs), and I think most striking of all, **(5)** they felt something was missing in their deepest Jewish and existential selves about what it was to be a Jew and human being.**

It was all very moving, every one of the stories. I had wanted to get up from my seat right then and there and walk to the Bima and hug each one of them and wish them a Big Time **יישר כוחך/Yasher Koach**. But I restrained myself and waited until the *very* festive Kiddush to try to get to as many of them as possible. It wasn't easy, since each one was surrounded by many friends and family members, including some who had flown great distances to share in this Great Simcha Moment in their lives.

I have witnessed several events like the one in Tucson, though not with so many women in one ceremony. More frequently, I have spoken with women in my audiences everywhere who have had an Adult Bat Mitzvah and asked them what it meant to them. *Every one of them* spoke of the experience as one of the most wonderful thing they had ever done. One woman told me it was second only to having given birth.

Add to that one other element: For so many of them, they have created a **חברה-chevra**, a group of friends from their co-celebrants, built on a deeply meaningful Jewish basis. For them, that day in Phoenix, and wherever else I have spoken to women about their experience, was just the beginning of a richer Jewish life.

Perhaps now it is time not to restrict “commencement” to college graduations. *This* commencement is of a different order, one to be recognized and encouraged throughout our communities everywhere.

**Nowadays there is no longer a need to put the term in quotation marks.*

***Jokingly, some said that they wanted to do it for all the nice presents.*

Jewish Values
From The Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Halachah

18. The Six Questions

*For Rabbi Matthew Simon,
My Rabbi,
who first mentioned
this amazing, unforgettable text
in a Shabbat morning sermon years ago*

A preliminary note: In the world of the Talmudic sages, some of Rava's questions (see #5 and #6) no doubt referred to using one's intellectual talents in Halachic discussions. My focus will be of a more general nature.

This Dvar Torah is based on a quote by the Talmudic sage Rava (*Shabbat 31a*).

The text:

אמר רבא
בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין
אומרים לו
נשאת ונתת באמונה
קבעת עתים לתורה
עסקת בפריה ורביה
צפית לישועה
פלפלת בחכמה
הבנת דבר מתוך דבר

**Rava said, When a person is brought into the [Heavenly] Courtroom
for judgment,**

they* say to that person...:

Since there are six questions, I will translate and comment on individually:

1. נשאת ונתת באמונה, "Did you conduct your business affairs honestly?"

While some Torah students might have expected the courtroom questioning to begin with ritual observance, e.g., hearing the Megillah reading or fasting on Yom Kippur, Rava teaches that, while a Jewish life is full of significant ritual, nevertheless, important as ritual is, no less important is acting fairly, justly, and compassionately toward others, i.e., being a *Mensch*.

2. קבעת עתים לתורה, "Did you set a fixed time for Torah study?" I often wondered about this one because it makes no mention of the *quantity* of required Torah study. I believe that Rava's question is a more realistic and inclusive one, since some people do not have the intellectual capacity or *zitzfleish* to absorb great quantities of Torah. Therefore, the prosecution will not ask "how much", but only insists that it should be a *regular* part of a Jew's daily life.

Though mentioned in a different context (*Brachot 17a*), in light of Rava's wording, I think the following text is also relevant:

אחד המרבה
ואחד הממעט
ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים

**whether more or less,
as long as the person's heart is directed toward Heaven.**

The question also takes into account that different people have different time-rhythms, some being "morning people", others definitely not. The sage's lesson: Whatever

works for each individual is an acceptable defense.

3. עסקת בפריה ורביה, “Did you occupy yourself with having children?”

This is a problematic question since there are many couples who, for a variety of reasons, cannot have or choose not to have children. The usual wooden translation of the root עסק is “to occupy oneself with”. But עסק has a range of meanings that includes “to deal with”. I found a solution to the standard translation in one of my favorite commentators in the back of the Talmud.** The Maharsha (acronym for Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels [1555-1631]) explains:

“The text doesn’t say, ‘Did you perform the Mitzvah of having children?’ provide for people to marry such as orphans and couples who otherwise would not have been able to do so.”

4. צפית לישועה, “Did you wait for/expect salvation?” The first word — צפית-*tzipita*, as with the Spanish word “esperar”, means both to “wait for” and “to hope”. I believe the second word — ישועה/*yeshu’ah* — “salvation” does not refer to personal salvation, but rather, for a time when this world — so overflowing with discord, suffering, and woe — will achieve a state of harmonious balance and peace. For that kind of ישועה/*yeshu’ah-salvation*, each person is expected to wait for (not immediately, we’ve experienced too many false messiahs) and always to hope for the day when that will, indeed, come. Our personal lives and Life should not be lived under a cloud of *ultimate* uncertainty or despair.

Hope is the message of Question #4.

5. פלפלת בחכמה, is not easy to translate. פלפלת (the same root as פלפל – “pepper”) would mean something like, “If you have great verbal talent in conversation, discussion, or argument, did you use that skill for wise and constructive purposes?”

This divine gift of verbal skill — in the negative extreme, twisting the meaning of words by every sort of tyrant, demagogue, and pseudo-guru — *can be, but should not be*, used to embarrass, dominate, assault, or manipulate others. Also prohibited would be the self-centered need to “play” a game of argumentative one-“uppersonship” or running circles around another person “just for the fun of it”. These types of language-games toy with and harm other people and damage their dignity. Still, we need to consider two special situations arising from question #5:

א. What rules of argument apply — or are suspended — for defense or prosecuting attorneys in the quest to achieve True Justice? How do Rava’s words apply to real courtrooms in contrast to the portrayal of lawyers in popular TV shows and best-seller detective novels?

ב. At a certain period of time a few centuries ago, a method of text analysis called פלפול/*pilpul* developed in some Eastern European yeshivas and among certain Talmudic scholars. פלפול/*pilpul* involved complex and (overly)-clever comparisons of disparate ideas and texts. Opposition arose when this approach to Torah study went too far. It had essentially become an intellectual exercise of cleverness, disingenuous thinking, and hair-splitting analysis. The critics felt that פלפול/*pilpul* advocates and practitioners had ignored the purpose of Torah study, namely, uncovering more of what they understood the Oral Torah to be — meaning, in some way, God’s Word.

6. הבנת דבר מתוך דבר, “Did you derive one thing from another?” I would translate something like “Did you connect the dots?” Or “Did you see the ‘4’ when you had ‘2 + 2’ right in front of you?” The person who first came to mind was Rachel Carson. In her book *Silent Spring* she publicized the stark fact that (*a*) bald eagles and other bird species were dying off from ingesting DDT and other pesticides that America was

overusing. (b) Laws and regulations had to be changed to protect them.

Many historians consider her the founder of the entire environmental movement.

a. Although Rachel Carson was the first one that occurred to me, there are, of course, many others in various fields of endeavor, among them, in science, the arts, law, cyber inventions, the theory of economics, business, child-rearing, good government.

b. Think of artists who could look at a blank canvas and (mysteriously? mystically?) envision the finished painting. Canvas-2 + palette-2 = 4, the masterpiece. Similarly, the sculptor (Michelangelo? Da Vinci? Someone more recent?) who could look at a block of marble and chip away until what had been envisioned in his or her mind's eye and was just waiting for the sculptor's hands and chisel have it emerge.

c. Biblically, I think of Isaiah 58:7:

פָּרַס לְרֵעִב לַחֲמֶךָ

...Share your bread with hungry people.

and the Mitzvah-hero food rescuers Syd Mandelbaum, Joseph Gitler, and David Levitt who "got it" — the 2 + 2 = 4, i.e., 2-hungry people + 2-wasted food = 4-design and actualize the logistics for delivering the donatable food to food-insecure, hungry, or starving people.

d. Finally, Rava's words summarizing the general religious perspective:

אי יראת ה' היא אוצרו

אין

אי לא לא

**If the person has the fear of God/is in awe of God
as the very essence of his or her being,
then these answers are valid,
and if not, not.**

"Fear of God" in many classical texts means expecting punishment for wrongdoing.

"In awe of God" means, being aware of the multitude of awesome, radically amazing, and inexplicable miraculous aspects of life — the Creation, the very fact of being alive, the incredible variety in the world — and concluding that Some One, Being, or Thing is behind these mysteries. Human beings may sense a Presence or Force outside and beyond themselves***, and consequently feel a higher call to ethics, a feeling that justice and righteousness are the authentic and desired way the world should and can be configured, and that they must play their part.

In our Twenty-First Century, we should note that in ancient Jewish literature linguistically "fear of God" is often synonymous with *Menschlichkeit*. It would seem to me that being a Mensch is the validating all-encompassing defense in the courtroom.

*"They say" ("אומרים") does not imply more than one speaker. It is simply Hebrew grammar, meaning, "...is asked." This grammatical form exists in Spanish and other languages.

**Yes, Virginia, there is Jewish wisdom and life beyond Rashi and Tosafot.

***It really makes no difference to me if the students of Rava's final phrase believe in the traditional God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

19. AlephBet

(Sung According To the Children's Tune)

A B C D E F G (pause) H I J K L M N O P (pause)

Q R S T U V W X Y Z

For English speakers, learning the alphabet was a fairly straightforward and easy-to-memorize affair. The tune helped considerably. Who, even many years later, doesn't remember it?

(A personal aside: If only a Talmudic argument were so simple to play back to the students!)

I have often taught that Chaim Nachman Bialik had said that if you want to write poetry you have to love words. Since I am a poet, I have taken his advice seriously and have been known to read dictionaries. Actually, I don't start with **a** or **א** or the Greek **α**, and then read every word, but rather leaf through again and again until my eye strikes something of interest.*

Years ago I discovered a passage in the Talmud (*Shabbat 104a*) that goes through the entire Hebrew alphabet and adds brief comments applying moral or religious lessons that point to some advice on living the good Jewish life. It has even been made into a gorgeous calligraphed poster-sized print which some friends prominently display on their living room wall.

It is a very striking pedagogical passage, lengthy, covering a good portion of the page.

Here is a brief review: **ב-א** are the first letters of the words which stand for

אלף בינה

***elaf bina*-learn understanding and insight which will lead to wisdom.**

ד-ג

stands for

גמול דלים

***gemol dalim*-do good for the benefit for others.**

I understand the two phrases to be intimately connected: They serve as a source of understanding, insight, and Torah-wisdom that can stimulate our acts of Tzedakah and Gemillut Chassadim.

My interpretation that the two pairs of letters are connected is confirmed as the text continues by examining the shape of the letters: Why is the leg of the **ד/Dalet=the דל-the person in need** on the side closer to the **ג/Gimel=the גומל-Mitzvah-person** It is so that the recipient should make himself or herself available and not difficult to reach. And why is the face of the **ד/Dalet=לד-the person in need**, turned away from the **ג/Gimel=the גומל-Mitzvah-person?** It is so that the recipient should not be embarrassed by the encounter if facing the Mitzvah person would be too difficult emotionally.. Most significant, I believe: Why is the leg of the **ג/Gimel=the גומל-Mitzvah-person** extended towards the **ד/Dalet=the לד-the person in need?** To show that the Mitzvah people should always be ready to respond as soon as they recognize the someone else's needs.

Those are only the first four letters of the **ב-א**.

Trust me, it's worth turning to Shabbat 104a and going all the way to **ת**.**

I have been known to joke and tell a bit of a lie and say that I do read through, and that if they are "doing" the Greek dictionary, not to miss **λ-lambda because it is loaded with good stuff.**

***Thinking about this topic as I write about it this morning, I wonder why our teachers and professors never passed on to us this selection from the Talmud. But that is for another Dvar Torah I hope to write about some time in the future.*

20. Three Brief Words of Torah

First, some Yiddish: It could happen at Kiddush, or in Costco or The Nebraska Furniture Mart. Someone approaches another person and says,

“זאג מיר א שטיקל תורה”

“Zog mir a shtikl Torah”

“Say a piece of Torah for me.”

He or she isn't asking for a well-developed Halachic argument, a full-blown sermon, or an intricate comparison of two Talmudic or Biblical texts in order to derive something earth-shaking, universal, or cosmic, like **The הבא עולם/Olam haBa-The Next World**, with its related topics of **תחיית המתים/immortality** and **ביאת המשיח/the Time of the Coming of the Messiah**. The person wants only something nice, plain, and simple. Some mildly interesting insight, down-to-earth, and to the point will do just fine. It doesn't have to be particularly clever, demonstrating the other's vast knowledge of Jewish texts. Sometimes this request is referred to as a "**ווארט/vort-a word (of Torah)**". It might even be a "**ווערטעל/vertel-a little word (of Torah)**." Here are three "**ווערטעלאך/vertelach-little words**" I particularly like:

A. From the Talmud (Ketubot 17a):

ת"ר: מעבירין את המת מלפני כלה

(If a funeral procession and a wedding entourage meet at a crossroads,)

the funeral procession makes way for the wedding entourage.

We would be hard pressed to find a clearer visual depiction of the well-known phrase from Deuteronomy 30:19, **וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים uVacharta baChayim-Choose life!**

B. Jeremiah 15:19:

לֵכֶן כִּהְאָמַר יְהוָה...וְאִם־תּוֹצִיא יָקָר מְזוּלָל כַּפֵּי תְהִיָּה

Assuredly, thus says God...

If you produce what is noble out of what is worthless,

You shall be My spokesperson.

I would translate "*ostensibly worthless*". Now, the three-letter root of **מזולל** is **ללל** the same root as the modern Hebrew word **זול/zol** for "cheap". But for this **ווארט/vort**, I believe the word is referring to the Big World Out There where the abandoned and forgotten people are thought by some people to be worthless, and treated accordingly:

the people on the fringe,

street people — whether they have mental illness or not,

among them veterans with what appears to be severe PTSD

and who have such a arduous road back to normalcy,

the people who have become dysfunctional because they are dying of loneliness,

the lost people, and

the other throwaways of society.

The Jewish value is that no one is worthless, and that the purpose of the Mitzvahs of *Tzedakah* and *Gemillut Chassadim* to reach out and find and work with the **יקר/yakar-the priceless preciousness** that is within each of them and to restore them to their true selves.

C. The Three Levels of Awareness and Gratitude:

Level #1 — When you ask someone how he is she is doing, you may get the answer, "**ברוך השם/Baruch HaShem Blessed be HaShem**" (using the euphemism **השם/HaShem-The Name** as a substitute for God's Biblical name to prevent possible secular overuse or abuse. This is the most common practice of those who use the phrase.

Level #2 — The person responds "**ברוך השם יום יום/Baruch HaShem yom yom-Blessed be HaShem every day**" (again, using the euphemism **השם-The Name** as in the first instance above.

Level #3 —

Introduction: Rabbi Elazar, quoting his teacher Rabbi Chanina, taught that people should always state the source of what they are teaching (*Megillah 15a*),

כל האומר דבר בשם אומר
מביא גאולה לעולם

**Whoever repeats something in the name of the original person who said it
brings salvation to the world,**

I relate that this 3rd level was taught to me by my *Chazzan*, Cantor Josh Perlman: :
Cantor Perlman's suggestion:

The person responds “ברוך אדוני יום יום/*Baruch Adonai yom yom*-Blessed be
Adonai every day” (using the Bible’s word for God’s name, with no substitute term).

I happen to agree with Cantor Perlman.

If we feel the fullness of our life as a gift from God, what more appropriate time is
there than to give this response?

21. Something New, Something Old

(Aleph) חוצפה/*Chutzpah*

On the surface, doesn’t it seem *chutzpadik* to think that I, you, or some Plonit Almonit (*Jane Doe*) who owns three franchises of Dunkin’ Donuts, will add a **חידוש/*chiddush*** (from the root **חדש/*chadash***-new) — **some new interpretation** to the incredibly huge storehouse of Jewish Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Halachic literature? Consider this: The full-size Babylonian alone is printed in 20 huge, heavy volumes. I am not a scholar, rabbi, PhD in this field, or occupy an endowed chair of Rabbinic literature in some university. Still, my personal library of this vast literature numbers perhaps a couple of hundred books, of which the Talmud is only one part. To be *really* competent and speak authoritatively, a person must realize that there exist two millennia and more of accumulated Torah insights. Therefore, a person would need need multiples of 100 books. *Now* we have a better perspective on what someone who would offer a **חידוש/*chiddush*** is up against.

And yet, we constantly hear and see **חידושים/*chiddushim***-**new interpretations** of what the text teaches. Can there possibly anything new to be discovered?

Allow me to contrast the question above with a poem by the former American Poet Laureate Billy Collins. He writes about his experiences teaching poetry and the students’ obstinate desire and need to know *the* meaning of a poem. He says it’s like tying the poem to a chair and torturing a confession out of it — even beating it with a garden hose to get *the* answer. The students are young; they don’t “get” yet that poetry creates meaning in a different way than what they have learned in their physics or chemistry classes. In contrast with the study of Talmud, Rambam, and Pirkay Avot the relationship of student to the words is not hostile, but loving. Students of Jewish texts are committed to these words which are extremely important to them as Jews, and for a great percentage of them, sacred. In addition, there is an intuitive sense that Torah texts are *so* rich, they can sustain examination and near-infinite re-examination and still yield more meaning.

I believe this is similar to the Talmud’s statement (*Chagiga 9b*):

ואינו דומה שונה פרקו
מאה פעמים
לשונה
פרקו מאה ואחד

**Someone who reviews a text
100 times
is not the same
as one who goes over it
101 times.**

Something that might not have been understood before, *now* just might, or is bound

Something that might not have been understood before, now just might, or is bound to, make sense. In some way, at least the way my detective best-sellers describe it, it is like the cop, FBI agents, and other authorities who make the witnesses recite what they saw over and over again, and the witnesses or the “perps” are forced to repeat their story as many times as the law enforcement agents demand. There might just be some crucial detail that was missed, or in the suspect’s recitation the eighth time some body language, voice inflection, or change in the rhythm of speech that might reveal a critical detail that would prove the suspect’s innocence or guilt.

(Bet) Who will be the ones most likely to make a *שידוש/chiddush*?

There are, in fact, many kinds of people who see or hear a text who are likely candidates for finding something new — everything from a relatively small “tweak”-like insight to a truly revelatory breakthrough. Among those people are:

Young, even the youngest children because of their innocence;

people who have never studied Jewish texts,

some of whom don’t know Hebrew or Aramaic;

any student studying alone, with a partner, or in a class;

Elders because of their accumulated life experiences;

storytellers,

מגידים/maggidim and מגידות/maggidot-Jewish text-preachers,

jingle writers,

architects,

professors of Chaucer, Jean Genet, Faulkner, Beowulf, and Joyce,

professional language translators,

anyone whose brain works differently than the norm

(e.g., slow learners, people with ADD, bi-polar disorder,

dyslexia, LD’s, savants, geniuses –

anyone with electrical mis-firings in the brain’s circuitry,

or has a genetic anomaly),

inventors and tinkerers,

caregivers, health care workers, and first responders

landscape architects,

pioneers in whatever their field of endeavor

members of the armed forces,

law enforcement personnel,

local, state, federal employees

(because of the regimen, the acronyms, and slang in their jobs),

physicians,

accountants

computer techies and class-A geeks,

recent immigrants who are not-yet-totally-familiar

with the local language and culture,

street musicians

prisoners and ex-convicts, and lastly,

Rabbis, text-scholars, and educators in Jewish schools

if they are not totally locked into

their own previous understanding of the text.

Any one of these brings to the text his or her own unique conscious and subconscious mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual presence, as well as their hopes and dreams and sometimes even their disappointments and failures. These individuals are prime candidates to interact with the words and produce a *שידוש/chiddush*.

(Gimel) My Personal experience

I am most fortunate that I have some friends, some closest of friends, and many students who over the years have made *שידושים/chiddushim* that have astonished — no

awed — me. My friend Jan often tells me, “It’s obvious”, even if I have worked with and taught a specific text for years and eventually got stuck and felt that there was no way I could go any further or deeper.

This is a great blessing for a Torah teacher.

(Dalet) A few possible scenarios that might come into play

Picture the following persons who may contribute a **חידוש/chiddush**:

1. Imagine an attorney in her in her 40’s is sunning herself in a lounge chair by the pool at a 12-star resort (*because of a half-price coupon deal*) on Maui, with a smaller, lighter, more manageable volume of Talmud dealing with ancient jurisprudence balanced on her stomach, *or*

2. another Torah student in Fairbanks on December 8th at 9:00 a.m (*when it is still dark that far north*) tromping through the snow to the congregation’s regular Torah-study session, *or*

3. a 43-year-old caught in a dreadfully stifling job who still dreams of working on an old car in the garage or inventing a civilization-changing device of some kind, also heading to the congregation’s study group, *or*

4. a risk-taker who enjoys scaling sheer cliffs but is now laid up with a broken hip, knee, or ankle and is confined to the house most of the time (but in the wheelchair he balances a volume of the Rambam on his lap), *or*

5. an entirely lucid and alert woman in her late 80’s who marched in Alabama with Martin Luther King, *or*

6. not the least might be a world traveler who has visited many remote and isolated Jewish communities — some of whom had had no contact Jewishly for generations. Simply being there and participating in their form of Jewish life, even for a brief while, the obvious contrasts would stimulate **חידושים/chiddushim** to this traveler who lives a mainstream Jewish life back home.

All of these varied descriptions of random people show how factors of geography, personal background, mood, personality, age, and even temperature may be contributing factors to producing **חידושים/chiddushim**.

(Hay) The Jewish 180 degree psychological reversal

For most mathematicians, it make little if any difference in their work whether Leibniz or Newton invented calculus. The same is true for the cardiac surgeon who has just saved a life with the Hufnagel valve who knows nothing about the life of Dr. Charles Hufnagel. That Dr. Hufnagel taught, performed surgery, and did research at Georgetown University Hospital Center does not in any way affect how this present surgeon repairs her patient’s heart in the OR with the Hufnagel valve. There is no necessary connection.

This is not the same as in the world of **חידושים/chiddushim**.

Let us imagine that our blissfully poolside-lounging woman comes up with an astounding **חידוש/chiddush** while studying a difficult passage concerning the interrogation of witnesses in the Talmudic volume **סנהדרין/Sanhedrin**. Her soul must be feeling an authentic Jewish high. Later, when she returns home to the mainland, she is excited to tell her friends in the Talmud study group about her **חידוש/chiddush**. Following her explanation, one of the *chevra* respectfully points out that The **רי”ף-Rif** (Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, 1013-1103) said exactly the same thing. Our Hawaii vacationer, rather than feeling ego-deflated, is delighted that she has become related to an Algerian Jew who lived half-way around the world 1,000 years before the Hyatt on Ka’anapali Beach was built.

They are forever connected.

Soul-siblings.

She then recites the wonderful line that expresses this turnaround and the new-found Jewish-bond that has been created. When the woman hears about Alfasi’s **חידוש/chiddush**, she proudly says to the others:

”ברוך שכיוונתי לדעת הגדולים

Baruch sheKivanti leDa’at haGedolim

What a blessing it is for me to have thought of the same Torah-insight as one of The Greats!”

22. Just Exactly What Happened On Mount Sinai?

I recently re-discovered a Midrash that struck me very deeply. It describes the scene on Mt. Sinai where Moses is being taught the Torah by God for 40 days and 40 nights. For years I, and I would assume many others, thought Moses needed that much time because there was *so much Torah* to absorb.

I. Personal Background Leading To A Chutzpadik Comparison

All my conscious life, I have had difficulty staying focused. I have stared into space, daydreamed, “been somewhere else”, and my mind has been “all over the place”. Websites drive me crazy with all their colors, flashing lights, background music, shapes, and click here!/click there! Books of any length are a challenge and often not even worth the effort; even long newspaper articles or digital pieces friends send me from the Internet can tire me.

My solution is to skip around till something catches my eye or piques my interest. It is not uncommon for me to start at the end and work my way backwards.*

This explains how I “re-ran into” the Midrash discussed below, which is on page **נדריים/Nedarim 38a** in the Talmud. I would have never “re-run into” it if I had tried to start looking on the page 2**, instead of reviewing my scattered underlinings throughout **נדריים/Nedarim**.

Finally, when I was in my late 50’s, my old friend, Dr. Michael Stulberg, a psychiatrist tested me. His diagnosis was that I was such a classic case of a person with ADD-attention deficit disorder, my picture should be in the medical, psychological, and educational journals. This medical term was not in use when I was a child, and, as you will see below, certainly not in the time of **משה רבינו/Moshe Rabbeynu**.

Read on, and you will see why I interpreted the story of Moses and God on Mt. Sinai the way I did.

II. The Midrash-Text on Nedarim 38a Itself

וא"ר יוחנן
בתחלה היה משה למד תורה
ומשכחה
עד שניתנה לו במתנה
שנאמ': (שמות לא) ויתן אל משה
ככלתו לדבר אתו

Rabbi Yochanan said:

At first, Moshe would learn the Torah [that God was teaching him]
and then forget it.

Finally, it was given to him as a gift [by God],
as the verse states (Exodus 31:18)

God gave it to Moshe

when He had finished speaking with him.

Aha! So that is what was going up there. Even in that unique and awesome “classroom”, namely on Mr. Sinai, the greatest Torah student in the world, and the Ineffably Divine Torah Teacher, something wasn’t working. At that point — one must add **לכביכול/kiveyachol-as it were** — God did not have the proper understanding of the way Moses could most beneficially study Torah according to his personal ability.

But we know from another Midrash recorded in the Talmud (*Niddah 30b*) that,

before we are born, we are taught the entire Torah, but at the moment of birth, an angel slaps us on the mouth causing a profoundly traumatic forgetting. So:

(1) It's all there inside of us, as it was with Moses.

(2) The essence of any kind of learning is really remembering, and

(3) It is really the teacher's essential task to uncover and follow the unique mental GPS route to that student's way back to Torah.

And I think that's exactly what happened on Mount Sinai. **כביכול/kiveyachol-As it were**, when the Holy One realized that the "standard method" of teaching didn't work, God found another approach. And I imagine it happened in a flash, at the end of the 40 days. The whole body of Torah that he had struggled to absorb, entered Moshe Rabbeynu's mind in one glorious, awesome, instantaneous flash. That was the gift. And – one might add, **כביכול/kiveyachol-as it were**, that flash is why Moses' face radiated such light when he came down from the mountain.

Most likely, we "normal" Jews can't feel or imagine that scene on Mount Sinai because it is so far beyond our human understanding. But it happened.

Otherwise, why would the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan teach such an outrageously bold and gorgeous story?

**Biographies are in a special category, I always read them chronologically backward, sometimes starting with the funeral. I once read a biography of Eisenhower beginning with D-Day all the way back to childhood. For President Johnson, the starting point was immediately after President Kennedy was assassinated, then back to his growing up in the hill country of Texas.*

***All major sections of the Talmud begin on page 2. I can't even imagine how many sermons have been given about that fact.*

23. On Being a Teacher

"In a lifetime, you must meet a good teacher who will change your life."

From the Chinese-language movie "Little Big Master"

There are an enormous number of impediments to a student's ability to absorb what a teacher is attempting to communicate. The following list, assembled with a friend and presented here in no particular order of importance, barely covers the topic. Some, and sometimes many of the reasons, apply to kindergarten and primary school children through highschool age, adults, and also to childhood issues that continue into adulthood. The setting could be a classroom, a public lecture, large groups including huge college lecture halls, and even one-on-one teaching. Among the possible barriers might be:

A student consistently displaying an angry, anxious, or depressed mood;

hungry — with or without free lunches or breakfasts;

eating disorders;

uncontrolled hormones;

sleep-deprivation (which why some schools systems

moved the start of the school day to later);

trouble at home;

living with a sibling with disabilities who gets most parental attention;

having to be a caregiver for a parent or parents;

a kinetic learner;

super-geeks who only learn in front of a screen;

children who are physically short for their age, seriously overweight,

clumsy, awkward, or have a physical disability

which makes them easy targets for bullying;

ADHD, ADD, ADHD, LD, BI-POLAR, and OCD (with or without medications);

too bright and advanced for the subject matter. and the all-too-commonly —

parent-, peer-, or self-imposed pressure for perfectionism.
So how is a teacher supposed to fulfill the meaning of a verse in Proverbs 22:6? —

חֲנֹךְ לְנֶעֱר
עַל־פִּי דְרָכֹו
גַם כִּי־יִזְקִין
לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמֶּנָּה

**Educate a child in the best way
that fits the student's personality and abilities,
so that even in old age
the student will continue to follow that guidance**
(because it will have served the student well)

when there are so many and varied difficulties to finding the best “way” to reach the students?

To better attempt to reach a Jewish solution to the problem, we need to understand that the root of first Hebrew word — חֲנֹךְ — has a range of meaning beside “educate” that includes “to train”, “dedicate”, and even “consecrate” (an altar, a temple). Some of these definitions fit either the teacher, the student, or both.

The issue of how best to educate students is a topic for a full-blown master's thesis or PhD dissertation. I have decided instead to concentrate on the second half of the verse

גַם כִּי־יִזְקִין
לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמֶּנָּה

“so that even in old age it will have served the student well”. Again, I have to make a partial list of possible “ways” that a person eventually lives his or her life (in no order):

It does not necessarily come as a revelation;
it could be simmering in the mind for years;
from a heart-to-heart talk with a friend;
some offhand comment;
focused (and sometimes desperate) research;
a movie or play —
even a clever or powerful phrase or dialogue in a movie or play;
therapy;
being in the right place at the right time;
by chance or sheer luck;
through intensive self-examination;
after a realization of deeply-felt personal discontent;
being in an eleventh grade chemistry class
and witnessing the explosion of chemicals in a beaker;
a field trip to a museum;
meeting someone he or she admires, such as a Mitzvah hero,
and, of course, having exactly the right teacher
(whether in the restricted or the broadest meaning of the word).

Re-direction in Life:

I think it would be important also to mention the high percentage of second- and third-career students in our rabbinical schools. For individual stories, I list some examples:

Aleph — The late Professor H.L. Ginsberg, ז”ל, pre-eminent Bible scholar in my day, from whom I took many classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary: From an article I read, I was surprised to learn he had actually finished a year of medical school before devoting himself to Bible. The article was brief, so I did not discover the source of his redirection into Bible studies.

Bet — My late brother, Dr. Stanley Siegel, ז”ל, PhD in physics: I was informed that, after he had all answered the questions to the satisfaction of the members of his

dissertation committee, he actually announced right then and there that he was leaving the field of physics immediately. He had done his research thoroughly and realized that there was not much of a market for jobs in physics.

Not long afterward, he switched to computers and had a most successful career for the next almost half a century, spanning the era from punch cards and FORTRAN to co-authoring books on cyber-security, besides holding several university teaching positions.

Gimel — My late father, Dr. Julius Siegel, D.O., ז"ל, general practitioner for more than 50 years in Falls Church, Virginia: After graduating from Rutgers, he was *not* accepted to medical school. The mid-1930's was the heyday of the *numerus clausus* that restricted the number of Jews in medical schools, universities, and many other institutions of higher learning. At that point, he decided to go to the University of Michigan to take a summer course, as best as I can recall, in biology.

One day, as he was walking out of the library, he saw another student reading a book and asked what he was reading about. He answered, "Osteopathy". My father then asked The Classic Question, "What's that?" Though it is trite to say it — the rest is history. He applied to the Philadelphia College of Osteopathy.* Diploma in hand, he moved with the family to northern Virginia, passed the same licensing exams as the MD's, and established an immediately-successful practice treating three generations of families.

Dalet — In a completely different category of, and of much greater consequence, was the degree of redirection in the career and life of a British stockbroker named Nicholas Winton: In late 1938, he had planned to take a ski vacation in Switzerland but, for some reason that I could not ascertain, he went to Prague instead. While there, he visited a friend who was involved in helping refugees escape from the Nazis. Winton then personally took on the immense task of rescue. After arranging for British families to take children in, Winton then organized trains to England up to the very last possible minute. Ultimately, Winton saved 669 children. Historians refer to his life-saving project as the Czech *Kindertransport*, and to Winton as "The British Schindler".

Returning now to a teacher's place in this array of possibilities:

(a) [As mentioned in the separate *Dvar Torah* "Just Exactly What Happened On Mt. Sinai?"] Her or his essential "job" would be to give the students the training (חינוך), the fortitude, resilience, perseverance, and stamina to withstand *anything* they might encounter in life, whether it would be

disappointment,

illness,

the senseless death of friends before their time,

pandemic,

overcoming devastation from a natural disaster,

picking up the pieces of a business plundered in a riot,

or from any one of a number of other

unforeseen deeply distressing tragedies,

and — in a class by itself — teaching Survivors of the Shoah.

(b) In certain instances, the teacher may offer Life-direction, but with the proviso that there be none of the ego-trip of the teacher playing "rebbe", and

(c) exposing them to exceptional ideas and, (I believe, more importantly), *unforgettable experiences* that will remain an essential part of who they are and how they will live for the rest of their lives.

Hay — And so it happened, on a long flight back home from Israel, bored with the book I was reading, I scrolled down the long list of movies. I had already seen a few of them, and others did not interest me. Frustrated at finding nothing of interest in the English-language choices, and with many hours left before we would land, I checked the titles of foreign films. I stumbled on a Chinese-language movie (thankfully with subtitles) called *Little Big Master*. In my mind, it is ***The Greatest Movie About What It Means To***

Be A Teacher. — *Ever*. In it, a young teacher quit her job in a school filled with students overly-pressured to perfectionism. By chance, she saw an advertisement about a neglected kindergarten with five students that needed a teacher. The local officials had threatened to close the school unless they had six students the following year. The teacher and the students were a perfect match. *The rest is history.*

The movie is filled with profoundly moving, magical, and, yes, occasional appropriate tearjerking — but not maudlin — moments.

It's there with those students that she finds her real meaning and absolute contentment as a teacher.

It's based on a true story because at the end, the real-Life teacher and original five children appear on the screen, as well as an update on how the school has grown over the years — now filled with happy students .

The perfect ending comes with the line,

“In a lifetime, you must meet a good teacher who will change your life.”

As a Jewish educator of many years, I can only say,

“Amen.”

**It is a well-known historical fact that from their inception, schools of osteopathy were open to Jews, women, and people of any color.*

24. Meltdown and Tchatchkas

The word **להבדיל/Lehavdil-to make a distinction** is interjected into a conversation when someone wants to compare, but differentiate between, two perhaps inappropriate, outrageous, and yet apparently irresistible ideas, things, or people. The two *really* shouldn't be compared, but people feel compelled do it for emphasis or to express a humorous exaggeration to convey an important message. Two examples might be, comparing your 10-year-old daughter's smashing a baseball over the fence like — **להבדיל-Lehavdil** — to Babe Ruth in his prime, or your daughter's valedictorian speech to — **להבדיל-Lehavdil** — the eloquence and power of Churchill's "We will fight them on the beaches" address to Parliament.

That said, there may still be the expectation that something useful, meaningful or important might be derived from **להבדיל-Lehavdil** comparisons.

For this Dvar Torah, to compare parts 2 and 3 to part 1, I add **להבדיל-Lehavdil**:

1. On the Plane Between Paris and Washington

A French woman is sitting next to an American man and says, "You know, the French people have 24 ways to make love."

The American's replies, "We only do it in the missionary position."

"Ah, 25!" exclaims the French woman.

What I am working at in this Dvar Torah is that sometimes we have settled in comfortably with a topic, thinking we have covered, uncovered, and discovered everything, only to find later on that there is yet another insight to add to it that had not considered.

2. The Meltdown

Lehavdil — **להבדיל** — my friend Janis Knight is an exceptional Jewish educator, and an in-depth front-line classroom problem-solver far beyond my capabilities. Recently, we were talking about "classroom management", working with some students who function outside the normal, generally manageable range of behavior. One such 8- or 9-year-old student, with various emotional and intellectual challenges, would go into meltdown mode when faced with various non-routine or unexpected situations. One day, when there was a large gathering in the school with a great deal of commotion, Janis saw the meltdown coming. She took the student into the office and had the two of them count and roll the

coins from the accumulated school Tzedakah money. Not surprising to Janis, it worked.

(Here comes the **להבדיל**-*Lehavdil* to #1.) “Aha!” I said, I had thought that I had “solved” how to teach the importance of counting and packaging Tzedakah pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters as opposed to a coin-counting machine. I told my students (among other things) that it heightens one’s awareness of how only a little Tzedakah money can make a difference.

And that was that – I had thought I had “cracked” the underlying Tzedakah-principle behind the Mitzvah-act.

But there it was, in Janis’s hands, a new breakthrough.

להבדיל-*Lehavdil* from the mythical flight from Paris to New York.

3. *Tchatchkas*

In common parlance, *tchatchkas* are knick-knacks, trinkets, baubles, sometimes made into household collections, like little souvenir spoons or teacups from the person’s travels. As long as they are not deeply embedded in the owner’s psyche or soul in an overly-emotional or pathological way, they are ultimately *tchatchkas*. They’re nice, of some memorable importance, but usually not much beyond that.

We of the non-billionaires have been known to say that about the super-rich, the array of detailed, shiny Lamborghinis, Bentleys, and Ferraris in their garage are just *tchatchkas* to the owners. My personal favorite individual is Elizabeth Taylor and her fabulous collection of jewelry — her (incredibly expensive) *tchatchkas*.

When my former roommate in college, Steve Glazer, was the rabbi at Temple Beth El in Birmingham, Alabama, he told me an Aha! tale about a Rolls Royce, which, as I wrote above, until then was in my mind just a rich person’s *tchatchka*.

להבדיל-*Lehavdil* — One of Rabbi Glazer’s congregants owned a Rolls Royce, *but* with this gorgeous, incredibly expensive vehicle, he would pick up one of the elderly European-born members and bring him to the morning *minyan*. This **פשוטער ייד**/*poshiter yid-simple Jew* — riding in the same kind of grand vehicle as Queen Elizabeth (something he would never have been capable of imagining in The Old Country) — this simple Jew, felt like a king. This just would not have been the same even if it were a top-of-the-line Jaguar or Cadillac — only a Rolls. And there’s the Aha! story. What ostensibly was some wealthy person’s *tchatchka* was really a vehicle for a unique Mitzvah.

And there you have the **להבדיל**/*lehavdil*: A movie star’s Lamborhigni and — **להבדיל**/*lehavdil* — the Birmingham Rolls.

4. *In sum*

I believe that **להבדיל**/*lehavdil* is an excellent but much underused Jewish value-principle that should be returned to its proper place in our Torah study and teaching, and in our common discourse about Jewish values.

25. “Making” Rabbis and “Buying” Friends

(*Aleph*) *An ostensibly piece-of-cake-easy-to-understand Torah-lesson*: One frequently-quoted selection in *Pirkay Avot* (1:6) is Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachia’s (Second Century CE) aphoristic statement —

עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב
וּקְנֵה לְךָ חֵבֵר

Since then, it has been studied, written about, commented on, sermonized, and taught countless times and in innumerable ways. The *usual* translation is “*Provide yourself with a רב/Rav* (i.e., a teacher wise in Torah and Life and how they interact), *and get a friend.*” Rendered that way, this implies that these are two fundamental essentials for managing the full range of human experience — from enjoying Life’s High Moments fully

to weathering its inevitable vicissitudes. I think all would agree that our Talmudic sage's lesson is actually very sound practical advice.

(Bet) Problems: *However*, on hearing, reciting, teaching, and reviewing his words, I was troubled by several difficulties with the awkward Hebrew. The following sections will explore the problematic words and phrases לָךְ/lecha, עֲשֵׂה/asay, in לָךְ עֲשֵׂה/asay lecha, and וּקְנֵה/ukenay in לָךְ וּקְנֵה/ukenay lecha.

To begin: עֲשֵׂה in לָךְ רַב. Any kid in the earliest years of Hebrew school in Cheyenne, Honolulu, or New South Wales knows that the root עשה means “to make” or “to do”. So, too, even adult students in “א/aleph” (the lowest level Ulpan class) know to translate עשה as “to make”, “to do” – long before they can order a *falafel* from a *nosherei* stand at the Haifa bus station. So what (in the world) would Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachiah possibly mean by “רַב לָךְ עֲשֵׂה-*Make a Rav*” (*primary Teacher, guide in Life, Rabbi*)?

(Gimel) Possible solution #1 to the Hebrew: – The לָךְ/lecha in רַב לָךְ עֲשֵׂה/asay lecha Rav: It can mean “you”, “to you”, or “for you”. To begin, from the sound of עֲשֵׂה לָךְ, I sensed that there was a clear connection to God’s historic first words to Abraham (*Genesis 12:1*):

לָךְ לָךְ

lech lecha-Go

מֵאַרְצְךָ

mayartzecha-from your birthplace and homeland

לָךְ/lech-Go, לָךְ/lecha-“you”? “to you”? “for you?” None of those translations of “לָךְ/lecha” slides comfortably off the tongue of an English-speaking person. לָךְ/lech-“Go” would have been a sufficient command to Abraham. My own “feel” for the meaning of לָךְ/lecha in this verse is that it is for emphasis, meaning, “Abraham, my chosen one, You go...!” And similarly, with Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachiah’s statement: לָךְ/lecha is not meant as a simple, softspoken, low-key recommendation, but rather a forceful, urgent message, i.e., “You must...!”

Then I extended my translation: You must make (with emphatic לָךְ) for yourself (לָךְ again) a רַב/Rav, which would mean to *aggressively* choose someone you know, and designate (“upgrade”) him or her to serve as your רַב/Rebbi-Essential-Teacher (*capital “T”*) in תּוֹרָה-Torah, practical wisdom, and guidance in your life.

(Dalet) “Teacher” redefined: I believe we are long overdue to dispose of our psychologically-entrenched image of a “teacher” as someone standing in front of a class of students. By slightly adjusting my translation (for *Midrashic* purposes) I would suggest that the phrase in רַב לָךְ עֲשֵׂה/asay lecha Rav means “Make yourself into a Rav.” This means *not to underestimate yourself*, i.e., to allow yourself to think of yourself as a teacher.

Everyone has things to teach to others: If not a Torah-text, then sharing life-experiences such as

*being awestruck while sailing through the New Zealand fjords,
how you felt walking home alone from school as a seven-year-old,
disputing an unfair grade on an English paper in college,
shooting the Banzai Pipeline on the north shore of Oahu,
singing Lecha Dodi Friday night at summer camp
in the Great Smokey Mountains surrounded by friends,
baking challah with little kids,
teaching an adult how to read Hebrew or to chant a Torah portion,
a memorable birthday with friends in Jerusalem,
relating personal Tzedakah and Gemillut Chassadim stories
like the “God bless you” you received*

*when you bought a cup of coffee for a homeless person
on a sub-zero night in Washington,
spontaneous hugs from grandchildren,
narrating in graphic detail your thirteen hours in labor –
almost anything.*

If those who are listening to you value you as a person, they will pay close attention and will become your student for having learned something new. And when others do the same for you, they will become your **רב/Rav-Teacher (capital ר, capital “T”)** and you, their **תלמיד/Talmid-Student (capital ת/capital “S”)**.

I often recommend to friends that they might want to address their e-mails to others as **“מורי/mori”** and **“מורתני/morati-my Teacher”**. I believe this is a *practical* reminder that helps define the relationship. And when I am writing to a friend who is a rabbi, the salutation is **רבי מורי/Rabbi uMori-My Rabbi and My Teacher**.

(Hay) Possible solution #2 to the Hebrew: The root **קנה** means **“to buy”**. So how does a person “buy” a friend, and why (in the world) would Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachia tell us to do such a thing? The solution, I believe, is that the same root **קנה** also means **“to create”**, as, for example, in

קנה שמים וארץ

konay shamayim va’aretz-(God is the) Creator of heaven and earth
(Genesis 14:19 and five times in the Book of Psalms).

Once again, by adjusting the translation, I would suggest that Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachia’s words *could* hint at **“לך- (emphatic)-You קנה-create friends לך-for yourself!”** His message could well be directed at introverted people. What our Talmudic sage is then teaching is that there are individuals who may benefit by *actively* making an effort to overcome their shy inclinations, to reach out, and to “upgrade” selected “acquaintances” to “friends”, perhaps through a possible informal Torah study group group Mitzvah project. Whether the result will be one **חבר/chaver-friend** or a **חברה/chevra-group of friends**, the many benefits will soon become obvious.

The Midrash (*Avot deRabbi Natan A 3:6*) details some aspects of friendship:

**שיאכל עמו
וישתה עמו
...ויגלה לו כל סתרו
סתר תורה
וסתר דרך ארץ**

**One eats
and drinks with the friend...
and shares one’s own deepest insights
into Torah and
(no less) a way to live a meaningful life.**

(Vav) A personal statement: Unquestionably, I have strayed from Rabbi Yehoshu’a ben Perachiah’s intended meaning. Despite my free translations, I have done it with respect. Always with the respect that a **תלמיד/Talmid-Student (capital “ת”)** has for a **רב/Rav-Teacher (capital “ר”)**.

26. Talents

Back when we were first learning to read Hebrew, we often mis-read **ה** for **ח** and vice versa, even in the big-print books we used. New to us, they looked so much alike, but the teachers tolerated our mistakes because we were so young and just learning the letters. As it happens, the freewheeling creators of the Midrash often misread letters *intentionally*

in order to teach a Jewish Life-lesson. There are even instances of their switching letters when they are “doing **גמטריא/gematria**”, i.e. giving number values to letters. Sometimes they “fudged” the letter/numbers to reach a certain numerical total. They would simply substitute one for the other. For example, if they needed an **8=ח** and the text they were working with had a **5=ה**, no matter. They would simply switch the letters.

And beyond **גמטריא/gematria** math, they did the same exchange with letters if they wanted to teach an important Torah-lesson. Here is a prime example:

In the *Pesikta deRav Kahana [Mandelbaum edition] chapter 10 section 3*, which is devoted to the subject of tithing, a Midrash basing itself on Proverbs 3:9 reads:

כִּבְד אֶת יְהוָה מֵהוֹנֵךְ

Honor God with your wealth – מהוֹנֵךְ.

The Midrashist reads this as

“מחננך”

with your endowments from God.

The ה became a ח!

The Midrash then gives examples such as the gift of a good voice and using it to lead synagogue prayer.

In contemporary Jewish life, I think there are several aspects of this message to be examined:

I. The Positive

A. Noticeably in the past few years, Rabbinical schools and institutions granting higher degrees in Jewish education have seen many students who were on their second or even third careers. Their ages range from the late 20’s into the 60’s. It would seem that whatever their first career — law, business, consulting, Wall Street senior manager, graphic designer, academics — they must have felt that something was missing in their lives. Now, the students have discovered within themselves not only a desire but also a potential talent in these new Jewish professional fields of endeavor, whatever specific area within the field they might eventually choose such as a congregation, hospital or hospice chaplaincy, education, or camp.

B. Some people have reviewed their lives and re-discovered talents, interests, and *true loves* which had previously seemed peripheral but — for whatever personal reasons they now understood them to be crucial in their present lives.

C. Many have discovered that they have a real talent for Torah study and Mitzvahs and are soaring with the texts and doing dazzling things for others. With Torah study, it has often happened that when I am teaching text at a synagogue, there are some people in the audience who had *never* looked at Jewish texts who nevertheless still expressed profound insights. It was not uncommon for them to teach me things I had never thought of — much to my delight.

I tell them afterwards, “You are *really* good at this. You really should do more.”

II. The Negative

A. When I learn that a Jewish person is the spin doctor who wrote a particularly slanted report in the news, I ask myself, “Who was this person’s Rabbi? Who were her or his religious school or dayschool teachers?”* Why didn’t they teach this person when he or she was a child that their talents are meant to be used for Mitzvahs?

B. I think the same for those individuals who use their talent to create political campaign ads that distort facts to the very edge of — and beyond — falsehood.

III. What To Do

Think back, even to early childhood, and/or examine what you do in your life that is not strictly tied to making a living, and see if there might not be some other “endowment

from Above” that is waiting to be realized. Even if it is just a moment in time that you recall,** it may carry great significance. These could be things or events that would enable you to do something more meaningful in your life — or even *to become what you might have always wanted to be*. To make this happen will take courage, but at least you will have begun the process.

IV. Three Of My Friends

A. My friend Marc Pollick was studying, at Boston University for an advanced degree with Elie Wiesel, ז"ל. While I do not know the exact stimulus, Marc established the Giving Back Fund (givingback.org). He set out to work with some of the most famous sports stars – some still in their late teens, who suddenly found themselves with millions of dollars in salaries and endorsements. His work also attracted prominent celebrities and others with significant net worth. They come to Marc because they want to do good. Always aware of Jewish VIPs/Values, Ideals, and Principled, he advises Jews and non-Jews on how to choose the right Mitzvah, and what is the wisest and most efficient way to use their money for doing good.

B. For years, my good friend David Srebnick was successfully employed by a company that used his talent with computers. I don't know *exactly* what his job was. But at a certain point, he just *knew* he wanted to teach seventh and eighth grade math. After discussions with his wife, and taking a giant pay cut, he did it. And from what he told me, he has been overwhelmingly happy since he made the move. Now retired, he looks back at his decision with deep satisfaction.

C. Rabbi Claudio Kogan is also a doctor and a מוהל/mohel. Unquestionably, being a physician is a sublime form of Mitzvahs, and yet, he wanted to do more. *Then* Dr. Kogan went to Rabbinical School

V. To summarize

In the broadest sense, there is a lesson here:

Perhaps it is time to pay more attention to things that we may mis-hear, mis-read, mis-understand, mis-remember, or may have mis-read, mis-heard, mis-understood, re-remembered in our personal past, and then re-evaluate based on what we learn.

It may do us and the world a world of good.

**The same question applies to a horrifying story I saw in The Washington Post in 1986. A 38-year-old research chemist – Hillel Daniel Hodes – was arrested not more than a half hour drive from where I live. He was manufacturing sizable quantities of fentanyl. I remember the judge's words when he sentenced him, "This is a monstrous crime that could have been catastrophic" with the potential to kill "thousands of people".*

***I have asked teenagers and adults of all ages if they remembered how they felt when they were in the second grade in religious school and wrote Rosh HaShana cards to residents of the local nursing home and assisted living. Many of them remember not only the good feeling they had many years back, but also sensed that what they did was something special.*

Most striking is an annual program during United Synagogue Youth Israel Pilgrimage. We invite Yael Rosen to speak to one of the groups. For several years her "job" was to have personal contact with (and to help) the remaining חסידי אומות העולם/Chassidei Ummot HaOlam-Gentile rescuers of Jews from the שואה/Shoah. After the War, they had decided that their destiny was with the Jewish people in Israel. In 1948 there were more than 100 of them who had settled in the new state.

After the stories and slides, we distributed colored paper, crayons, and markers and asked the USY'ers to write and decorate a Rosh HaShana card to these heroes. The intensity of the USY'ers as they made the cards year after year was an unforgettable experience for me, as I am certain it was for them, too.

Now here is the sublime moment: The USY'ers were not allowed to include e-mail address or phone number, just their first name. One of the חסידי אומות העולם/Chassidei Ummot HaOlam was so moved, she contacted us so she could thank the USY'er who wrote the card. We found her, and passed on her message.

a few kilometers from Ben Gurion Airport. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and into a good percentage of the first third of the Second Century, it became one of the flourishing centers of Torah study. The great Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanos established his famed yeshiva there, gathering a large number of students from around the country. One of them, born in Lod, was Akiva Ben Yosef. Having learned the **אלף-בית/alphabet** and elementary Torah as an adult in childrens' schools, he then advanced sufficiently to study for several years with Rabbi Eliezer. Eventually, having established himself as the incomparable *Rabbi Akiva*, he founded his own yeshiva in Bnai Brak, with Rabbi Eliezer continuing to teach in Lod.

I was in #12 Lod Street at least 100 times, beginning in 1975, because I had been involved with the Rabbanit's Mitzvah work. Upstairs was the family apartment, where I would sit and talk with her; below was Rabbi Kapach's wall-to-ceiling library where he would work at a simple table and compose his unique commentaries — including a 23-volume commentary to Maimonides' Mishneh Torah law code. His reputation was vast; Rabbi Kapach was universally accepted as the pre-eminent Yemenite Torah scholar. I often went down to visit, sometimes bringing with me a dozen or more teenage United Synagogue Youth Pilgrims. He would look up from his manuscript, always greet us warmly, and spend a few minutes answering questions about his life in Yemen and his work. No matter how cordial and informal the atmosphere was, it was always an awesome experience. As I wrote above, Rabbi Kapach was the pre-eminent Yemenite Torah scholar, and was awarded the **פרס ישראל/Pras Yisrael-Israel Prize**, Israel's version of the Nobel.

Rabbi Kapach died in 2000, and not long after, the Street Name Committee changed **רחוב לוד/Rechov Lod-Lod Street** to **רחוב הרב יוסף קאפח/Rechov HaRav Yosef Kapach-Rabbi Yosef Kapach Street**.

But my main connection was with The Rabbanit. Her reputation throughout Jerusalem was that she was a classic example of a **צדקה/Tzadeket-righteous woman***. She also received the **פרס ישראל/Pras Yisrael-Israel Prize***.

The Rabbanit died in 2013, and, once again, the street was renamed, this time to **רחוב הרב והרבנית קאפח/Rechov HaRav veHaRabbanit Kapach-Rabbi and Rabbanit Kapach Street**.

**Dvar Torah #34 describes extensively the range of her Mitzvah activities.*

27. Two Things to Consider When Thinking about Your Self-Image

We are so used to sermons and Life-lessons based on Pirkey Avot, we are sometimes surprised to find something that we somehow missed right in front of us.*

One such passage (*Pirkey Avot 2:13*) stimulated me to further explore this topic of self-image:

**רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר...
וְאֵל תְּהִי רִשָּׁע בְּפִנֵּי עַצְמְךָ.**

Rabbi Shimon says:

...Do not consider yourself a bad person.

On the one hand, I might say, "Of course we shouldn't"; it is psychologically unhealthy to do so.** My sense is that we should become more self-aware, because lowering one's self-image, saps some of the energy we need to get on with living Life well and fully, for themselves and others.

There is another aspect to this problem. Some students find the Talmud's intricate argumentation too difficult to follow, while everyone else seems to sail comfortably along in the text***, those students may wonder if there is something wrong with themselves.

The following is a partial quote and paraphrased translation from a longer story

(תענית/Ta'anit 20a-b):

נזדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר
אמר לו: שלום עליך רבי
ולא החזיר לו
אמר לו: ריקה
כמה מכוער אותו האיש
שמה כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך
אמר לו: איני יודע
אלא לך ואמור לאומן שעשאני
כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית

**A certain Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon
was coming from the town of Migdal Gedor.
Riding high on his horse, he is feeling rather conceited and very good
because he has just learned a great deal of Torah
from his רב/Rav-Torah-teacher.**

Along the way he runs into a physically ugly person.

The man greets him, “Shalom, Rabbi!”

Rabbi Elazar does not respond.

But then the Rabbi says to him, “Empty one! You are so ugly.

Maybe everyone in your town is as ugly as you?”

The man then replies,

“I don’t know, but go to the Craftsperson who made me and say,

‘How ugly is this article that You have made.’”

Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon is appalled by his own behavior and the text then relates that he gets off his horse, prostrates himself before the man, and humbly asks to be forgiven.

But the damage has been done, and the message is clear: The Rabbi — of all people — made a personal and grave Jewish *theological* mistake.

That is the second issue about personally accepting a low self-image. You are implying that the Creator just didn’t do a very good job of it. This lesson is similar to another Talmudic statement (*Shevuot 35a*) that on first reading may make the student feel off balance:

המקלל עצמו וחבירו
בכולן
עובר בלא תעשה

**A person who curses oneself or another person —
in both cases**

it is a transgression”.

Of course, we know it is wrong to curse others, but here, right on the page, the clear message is that it is just as wrong to do it to ourselves. Now, I am certain from its usage in other passages that when the Talmud uses the word המקלל/*hamekalel*, it is referring to a formally-defined curse using God’s name. However, by extension, I think it is not unfair to include what we have described above – not to do it to ourselves even in a much milder form. It does no good for us either psychologically in the larger framework of our mindset. As *Deuteronomy 4:9* would have it:

רק השמר לך
ושמר נפשך מאד

**Watch yourself
and take very good care of yourself.**

**I have heard about some people who are astonished when they are reading through the Book of Psalms discover that “The Lord is my shepherd” is right there — #23.*

***After some review of my past week or two, I discovered that I had done exactly that, though to a much lesser degree. Often it was for something minor, like for the umpteenth time repeatedly mis-typing words in an e-mail or not proofreading it before I send, often with incomprehensible or embarrassing results, interrupting someone and saying something out-of-place, missing a step because I was not paying attention, spilling glasses of soda at the table. Often, my reaction is, “can’t you do anything right?”*

****This is expressed in Yiddish by, “You do not have a קאפ גמרא/gemara kup-a head for Talmud.*

28. Lost and Found

I. When We Lose or Misplace Something

(Almost) all people have done it — some more often than others — misplaced or lost something. In the Grand Scheme of Things, it might be something small such as their eyeglasses, a favorite tea or coffee cup, food they just know is *somewhere* in the pantry, a book almost finished that was distractedly put under a pillow or blanket. For most people it is merely *nudgedik*, a little bit of a bother, but some other people get upset, angry, or obsessed until they find it — *if* they ever find it.

*If they find it — this no-big-deal item —
it may have been somewhere right in front of them;
or when they weren’t even looking for it;
or in a “safe” and logical place where they had put it, i.e.,
in a place somewhere would easy to remember *exactly* where,
but forgot the location,
or some out-of-the-way place.*

Rarely is it ever somewhere ridiculous, like finding a carton of milk they had absentmindedly put in the microwave. At times, when they have already given up on finding it, they might be looking for some other object and find what they had been searching for originally. And now and again, a friend happens to come by and, with “fresh eyes”, finds it.

And there are those who wisely set a time limit for how long a misplaced or lost object will bother them. They have decided that it is emotionally not worth the psychological cost to be so upset to exceed that limit.

*Occasionally, they do not even know something is missing.**

If the people are successful in finding the small items, they may get a “mini-high”. It’s one of life’s little pleasures.

People naturally react differently if it is something big like a passport, credit card, or the first three chapters of their PhD dissertation.

My friend Rabbi Porath once left his computer on the train. After he discovered that he had forgotten to take it, he called AMTRAK’s lost and found at the station where he last saw it on the train. They had it, and he came back to pick it up.**

II. When Others Lose Something —

The Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Principles Understanding of “Finders keepers, losers weepers”

Our relevant Mitzvah is called אבדה/השבת/returning lost objects. The details in the Talmud are extensive, but here is Maimonides’ formulation of the Halachah that summarizes the Talmud’s discussions (*Hilchot Gezaylah Ve’avayda [Laws of Theft and Lost Objects] 13:1*):

המוצא אבדה שהוא חייב להחזירה
חייב להכריז עליה ולהודיעה ולומר
מי שאבד לו מין פלוני
יבוא ויתן סימנין ויטול
אפילו היתה שוה פרוטה

**If someone finds an object that another person has lost,
that person is required to return it,
and is required to announce it and make known**

(that he or she had found it)

**and to state, “Whoever has lost such-and-such type of object
should come, describe identifying details
and then take it.”**

Even if it was worth only a *pruta* (the smallest coin)”.

As I mentioned, the rules in the Talmud are extensive, including:

Was the object found

on the sidewalk

in a major thoroughfare,

in a busy store, or

in an out-of-the-way street or alleyway?

What time of day was it found?

Did the person provide an acceptably detailed description
when identifying the item?

How long must the finders wait

before they can assume

that the owner has given up finding it and, therefore,

and it is now considered ownerless property,

and the one who found it is allowed to keep it?***

At this point, I believe it is justified to extend this topic from “lost objects/things” to other categories of Lost-and-Found. We know people

who have lost their jobs

and what we might do to help them find another, appropriate one;

others who have health problems —

whether it be simply a persistent cough,

an aching shoulder,

or serious chest pains —

we could get them to a trustworthy medical facility,

pharmacy, or acupuncturist that we know and trust.

Perhaps as important:

there are people who have lost their dignity and self-esteem.

I believe that this Halachah also calls on us to do something to help those individuals recover the full range of these losses.

To summarize at this point, **אבדה/השבת אבדה/***hashavat avaydah* is not just the *menschlich* thing to do. It’s a Mitzvah just like making a *Motzi*, reciting the story of our Exodus to freedom in the Haggadah, fasting on Yom Kippur, not delaying salary payments, or sitting in a *sukkah*.

III. When Some People Feel That They May Have Lost Something of Themselves

Sometimes, some individuals may sense

that something doesn’t feel right about themselves;

that something about their Best Selves has been lost;

that they may have crossed the line about what they consider right, or

have concluded that, no matter how successful they have been in their fields

of endeavor and have earned high praise from others, something is missing about themselves, feels “off”, or *they just don't like themselves*. For some of these heavy personal issues, a classical Jewish response might be **תשובה/teshuvah-repentance**, a turning, a change of direction. But there are some people who have tried and — for whatever reason — found that the traditional Jewish method does not work for them. Nor have the psychological therapeutic approaches, yoga, or even the caring words of the closest friends — proven helpful.

What I propose is by way of analogy: That, *only perhaps*, because there are such a massive number and enormous variety of common examples of Lost-and-Found like the ones at the beginning of this Dvar Torah — finding in unexpected places; finding while not even looking, finding “right in front of the eyes” — it may be useful to adapt some of these ideas to a situation of *personal* loss and might possibly offer a key to restoring a person's missing piece-of-Self. In addition, when initiating the search, it would be important to pay attention to how much time, effort, and any mental strategies, techniques, or clever tricks that some people use to find *things*. All of these also might serve well in this all-important search and to apply them here.

While I would not be so *chutzpadik* as to suggest that *this is the* solution. I am only offering one additional possibility for rediscovering that lost vital part of the Self — even though it may not help for those individuals where nothing else seems to bring relief.

IV. An Afterthought

Having written this Dvar Torah, I was just wondering whether people who are in charge of a Lost and Found — a hotel, restaurant, airline, Target, or a grocery store — *really* understand how immensely important their work is?

**This happened to me: One summer in New York, I had the opportunity to move out of the dorm to live with a friend in a much bigger and air conditioned apartment until classes started again. But our arrangement didn't work out. A month or two later, I received a package in the mail. In it was the Kiddush cup that my synagogue had given me for my Bar Mitzvah. I had completely forgotten that I had even owned it.*

***I, myself, once absentmindedly tossed three half-price two-night coupons for luxury resorts in Hawaii in the trash. Luckily, I found them on the top of a pile of garbage in my apartment's dumpster.*

My worst was losing a hearing aid when I was in Cincinnati for a speaking engagement. After my search that would have made any police force proud, I had to give up. (I now refer to that area where it disappeared as The Black Hole of Cincinnati.)

That sloppy mistake cost me more than \$2,000.

****This happened to me once when I was on vacation. I was jetlagged from the long flights from Washington, DC, to Maui. So I took a walk late at night along a lovely path — the Pacific Ocean was on one side and some very upscale hotels on the other. On the way, I noticed what looked like a bill lying at the bottom of a few steps down from the Four Seasons' pool area. It was \$100! Because of what I knew of the Talmud's rules, I waited about an hour and a half, because it was a high-class resort, and because some understandably extremely relaxed vacationer might still be out and about from partying, or at a late dinner, and it was one of those unbelievably gorgeous feeling-of-Paradise Maui nights. The owner of the \$100 bill might very well notice that it was missing from his or her wallet or shorts' or skirt's pocket and would search for it. So, just in case, I waited. When no one showed up, I put the money in a separate part of my wallet, and began imagining all the Mitzvah heroes or Tzedakah projects I knew that could benefit.*

29. Maggie Kuhn, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the Talmud

I. On Being Old in American Society: My teacher and good friend, Rabbi Neal Gold, recently sent me a newspaper article with a retrospective of the life of Maggie Kuhn (1905-1995). This woman was deeply angered at being forced to retire from her job *because she was 65*. Like all Mitzvah heroes, she was determined to do something about the situation. So, she organized like-minded Elders and within a year founded the Gray Panthers. The name was a wise choice, since the Black Panthers were an in-your-face presence in America at that time. The Gray Panthers became a prominent, powerful, and celebrated voice of protest and advocacy on behalf of old people.

Maggie Kuhn became the spokesperson for this long-ignored segment of America's population that had been suffering greatly from a variety of open and subtle prejudices, discrimination, and the abuse of compulsory retirement. She traveled constantly and tirelessly, speaking hundreds of times before both small groups and enormous crowds. I personally had remembered her name almost from the beginning of her activities, and this newspaper article stimulated me to do some research on this stark and painful reality that obsessed her.

In some ways, Maggie Kuhn's later-in-life's work was parallel to the campaigns against sexism and racism. Matching the energy of those movements, Maggie Kuhn had an enormous effect on our cultural and personal attitudes toward old people — as well as on our laws. Many cultural historians would agree that her persistence and astonishingly vigorous efforts laid the groundwork for passage of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967. Nowadays, with few exceptions — such as air traffic controllers and airline pilots — mandatory retirement is no longer legal in America.

In America's popular culture, a few obvious examples of ageism are the extreme emphasis on clothing, accessories, perfumes, exercise, personal health, and clothing styles which cater to young people. Even the television program *The Golden Girls*, despite the excellent quality of the lead actors, reinforced many negative stereotypes.

Maggie Kuhn was certainly aware of a similarity to the feminist movement's battle for fairness, dignity, and justice in the courts. The feminists' confrontations included the fight against degrading actions, descriptions, double *entendres*, and demeaning vocabulary that were rampant everywhere in the workplace, from corporate boardrooms to the low-level workers and gofers standing around the water cooler. Nowadays, few bosses or co-workers would dare to pat a female on the rear or to make suggestive sexual comments. So, too, it is no longer acceptable to call a woman a "broad", "babe", or "chick" or make deprecating reference to a woman's body shape. In Maggie Kuhn's world, the same was true for referring to old people as a "geezer", "old coot", "codger", "crone", "biddy", "hag", or "old bag". To some people (myself included), "having a senior moment" is a demeaning phrase.*

Furthermore, there is a tendency in the minds of many people that — in certain areas of life — there is an *absolutely immutable rule* allowing for *very few* exceptions about a person's decline due to aging. For example, while few pitchers will stay at the top of their game at 40, some do. The same mythical physical limit is attributed to ballet dancers. Margot Fonteyn *began* dancing with Nureyev at age 42! And Satchel Paige on the pitcher's mound continued to confound even the greatest batters of his day well into his 40's.

Most striking are the exceptions (like *prima ballerina* Fonteyn) from politics:

(1) Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died at 87 after 27 years on the Court.

(2) Further back in American history, two years after John Quincy Adams completed his one-term presidency, he was elected to the House of Representatives, serving for nine terms. He collapsed during a speech in the House Chamber, dying two days later

at age 80.

(3) William Howard Taft was President until 1913. Two years later, he was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, serving until 1930.

(4) Across the Atlantic, Winston Churchill, in his late 70's returned for a second term as Prime Minister, acting on behalf of Britain's interests for almost four years.

Also to be remembered among the elderly, Dr. Dr. (for her two honorary degrees), Grandma Moses began her years-long career as a folk painter in her late 70's.

And let us certainly not forget that other Moses, chosen by God at 80 to free the Children of Israel from slavery.

We can only wonder how much our world has benefited because there was no mandatory retirement for these individuals who had become "old" and who would have been forced to retire.

II. Some Jewish Sources:

Text #1 (Gittin 28a): (which may surprise some insurance actuaries):

המביא גט
והניחו זקן
אפי' בן מאה שנה
נותן לה
בחזקת שהוא קיים

**A person delivering a גט-get-divorce document to a woman
on behalf of an elderly man —
even if the husband is 100 years old —
still delivers it to the woman
with the assumption that
he is still alive
(and her legal status is that of divorcée [and not a widow]).**

Text #2 (Kiddushin 32b), referring to Leviticus 19:32:

מפני שיבה תקום
והדרת פני זקן

**Stand up before an old person,
and show deference to an Elder.**

איסי בן יהודה אומר
מפני שיבה תקום
ואפילו כל שיבה במשמע
אמר ר' יוחנן
הלכה כאיסי בן יהודה
ר' יוחנן הוה קאי מקמי סבי דארמאי
אמר
כמה הרפתקי עדו עליהו

Issi ben Yehudah says, "This refers to all elders."

Rabbi Yochanan stated, "The Halachah is according to Issi Ben Yehudah."

**Rabbi Yochanan used to rise in the presence even of a non-Jewish elder,
commenting,**

**"How many experiences (including difficult challenges and hard times)
has this person lived through!"**

What Rabbi Yochanan meant is that the simple fact that the person has lived a long

life is sufficient reason to stand up as a sign of respect.

Text #3 (also Kiddushin 32b):

ואין זקן
אלא חכם

The word זקן
means a חכם.

The Talmudic sages re-defined זקן-*zaken*, transferring the meaning of the term from **an old person**, to a **חכם/chacham-Torah-sage**. This became a nearly universally-accepted interpretation in their world, though in some appropriate contexts the meaning remained “**an elderly person**”. I *do* understand why they gave this other definition to the term. They were Torah-sages who occupied themselves with, and were absolutely devoted to, Torah-study.

BUT, here is where I strongly, but respectfully, disagree with the Talmudic sages. This emphasis on Torah-wisdom instead of the simple fact of old age would inevitably distract a student from associating זקן with all of the following figures from the people’s consciousness: *savtas/bubbles/omas/abuelas/grand-mères/grandmothers* or *sabbas/zeydes/ opas/abuelos/grand-pères/grandfathers* (or aunts, uncles, older cousins, elderly friends of the family) who — *for whatever reason* — had not acquired substantial Torah knowledge. They might be loving, huggy, just “great with kids”, and just as likely to be inspirational Life-Rebbis. The Elders who are ignorant of Torah have been reduced, as it were, to a second-class status. The danger is that young people might no longer relate to זקן in its original meaning of “an old person”, and, as a result, they might possibly miss out on the benefits that all these non-Torah-educated Elders have to offer. In my opinion, that is a most unfortunate bias and undoubtedly detrimental to the children and grandchildren, and, for that matter, any young person.

Enough said.

***III. In Memory of, and Tribute to, Maggie Kuhn and Ruth Bader Ginsburg —
A Few Lines From Tennyson’s “Ulysses”***

Now old, Ulysses, hero of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, reflects on his past life and future plans. I believe his words eloquently capture the lives of Maggie Kuhn and Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

***It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees...***

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...

and though

***We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are -
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.***

**I refrain from translating the ugly Yiddish term קאקער אלטער for an old person.*

30. Unquestionably The Greatest Love Line In The Midrash (Some Jewish Aspects of Blessings and Loss)

This Dvar Torah is not a psychological study, nor a review of those aspects of how we deal with loss in our lives. Hundreds of experts in various fields have studied and written about this issue much more extensively and profoundly than what I am presenting. My purpose is only to explore a mixture of texts in order to inject some additional thoughts into the discussion.

(1) Blessings:

היה רבי מאיר אומר
חייב אדם לברך
מאה ברכות בכל יום

**Rabbi Meir used to say,
A person is required to recite
100 blessings a day. (Menachot 43b)**

For Halachically-oriented Jews, the regular daily prayers and blessings at meals already provide close to that number. Though, in a more general sense, Rabbi Meir's words mean that every day people should be constantly and *frequently* aware of the blessings, and the gift of Life.

(2) **Losses:** The Torah has two lengthy chapters (*Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28*) graphically detailing blessings and curses for obeying or disobeying God. One curse (*Deuteronomy 28:48*) states:

וְעַבַדְתָּ אֶת־אֹיְבֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלַחֲנֵנוּ יְהוָה בְּךָ בְרָעַב וּבְצָמָא וּבְעִירֹם וּבְחָסֵר כָּל
You shall have to serve the enemies
that God will let loose against you
in hunger and thirst, and naked,
לְכֹל/uvuchoser kol-and lacking everything.

The Talmudic sages commented (*Nedarim 41a*) on what "lacking everything" means:

בחוסר כל
א"ר אמי אמר רב
בלא נר ובלא שלחן
רב חסדא אמר: בלא אשה,
רב ששת אמר: בלא שמש, רב נחמן אמר: בלא דעה,
תנא: בלא מלח ובלא רבב.
אמר אביי, נקטינן: אין עני אלא בדעה
במערבא אמרי: דדא ביה כולא ביה, דלא דא ביה מה ביה

"lacking everything"

Rabbi Ammi said in the name of Rav — "a candle and a table",

Rav Chisda — "a wife",

Rav Sheshet — "a servant",

Rav Nachman — "Torah-knowledge",

A *Tanna* — "salt and fat" (as dips for the bread to give it flavor).

Abbaye said, "We have a trustworthy tradition —

lack of Torah-knowledge is the ultimate poverty.

In the West (Eretz Yisrael) they say, "Whoever has it, has everything.

Whoever doesn't have it, what does that person really have?"

I think that the variety of opinions, and the juxtaposition of the down-to-earth and the intellectual is not only interesting, but an inducement for anyone to consider — "What would people be missing in life, if they didn't have X or Y?"

Loss would seem to be one of the best teachers of value:

(A) Loss in general: The Mitzvah of **השבת אבדה/ hashavat avaydah-returning something someone has lost** is no less a Mitzvah than visiting a person who is ill, lighting Chanukkah candles, or bringing joy to a bride and groom. The great number of procedural details concerning this Mitzvah are discussed in an entire chapter in *Bava Metzia*.

(B) The fire truck: A few specific examples of loss (and occasional retrieval) are:

(i) The best way I can focus on which things are most valuable to me personally, and for which I would profoundly feel their loss, is when the fire alarm goes off in my building and, shortly afterward, the big, loud red trucks with their flashing lights, and screaming sirens pull up out front. The first thing I would grab is my laptop, since it has “most of my life” contained in its sequences of 0’s and 1’s, and two large albums of photographs.*

(ii) Jews and non-Jews running into burning or flooded synagogues to save the **ספרי תורה/Sifray Torah**.

(iii) The catastrophic Jewish Theological Seminary Library fire April 18, 1966, which I personally witnessed, when so many priceless manuscripts and extremely rare books were destroyed.

(iv) During the War of 1812, with the White House in flames, First Lady Dolley Madison fled, carrying the portrait of George Washington.

(C) So-called sentimental value: In 1924, the Nobel Prize Laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s residence burned, consuming manuscripts of his writings and many rare books he had collected.**

In such situations of total loss, there are two categories:

(I) Objectively valuable items, and

(II) Items that the insurance company labels “of sentimental value”. But to the people who suffer the loss, these items are far more than “sentimental”. They represent vital, irreplaceable aspects of their lives. Even then, these sentimental items may include an astonishing number of *tchatchkas*, outdated electronics, extra coats and suits that have hung untouched in the closet for many years, T-shirts from a Rolling Stones concert, the first grade book from which they first learned how to read, etc., that people manage to accumulate over time.

Most painful are when relatives empty a deceased parent’s home and have to throw away some items that their beloved one had valued and loved, but you would no longer feel are significant enough for you yourselves to keep. The process of sorting through is arduous and wearing. In addition, having disposed of many items, later on the relatives sometimes wonder whether or not they made the right decisions.

(D) My ophthalmologist: One Shabbat at *Kiddush*, my ophthalmologist Dr. David Levine, explained to me that a blind person doesn’t see black; he or she sees *nothing*. For a long time I just could not shake this image from my mind. The “nothingness” led me to think of the recent deaths of my brother Stanley, sister Leslye, and an increasing number of friends, **ז”ל**. As a result, I felt a need to personally deal with whether or not there possibly is any form of **העולם הבא/haOlam haBa-existence afterwards**.

When I asked two friends about Life Afterwards, both told me that there was *nothing* after someone dies. This really (for lack of a better word) spooked me, since I was mentally unable to imagine that “nothingness”. So I began to think of Jewish and secular ways of compensating:

(a) I am not mystically inclined, so I don’t *know* “what’s on the other side”.

(b) Mount Vernon and Monticello somewhat preserve the lives of Washington and Jefferson, as do presidential libraries.

(c) Even if a person concludes that “nothingness” is the reality, still, Jewish tradition, offers ways for us to memorialize the loved one, and — for ourselves — to help confront the harsh, stark emptiness and to offer some measure of consolation: Placing a

gravestone and reflecting on **מְנוּחַת תְּצִיל מִמָּוֶת וְצְדָקָה**/Tzedakah tatzil mimavet-Tzedakah saves from death, (Proverbs 10:2, 11:4), one interpretation is that the effect of a person's generosity (money, time, physical efforts) lives of the beneficiaries after them after they have died.

(d) When they hear of a death, Yemenites recite

מנוחתו/ה עדן

menuchato/menuchata Eden,
may he or she find eternal rest in The Garden of Eden
– whether or not it exists.

(e) Telling the stories of a person's life which I experienced at the more-than-triple-minyan live gathering (*before the virus*) at *shiva* for my brother Stanley, **מנוחתו עדן-menuchato Eden-may he find eternal rest in The Garden of Eden**. The assembled friends and relatives reviewed many events and incidents from his wonderful life, particularly emphasizing his having taught Torah for almost 30 years on Shabbat between *mincha* and *ma'ariv*. *And it was real, and it was comforting*. Similarly, on the thirtieth day after the death of my beloved friend Rabbi Mordecai Kieffer, **עדן מנוחתו-menuchato Eden-may he find eternal rest in The Garden of Eden**, in the eighth month of the virus, a dozen of us gathered on Zoom to recite Tales of Mordy — *and it was real, and it was comforting*.

It would appear that loss is one of the best teachers of what we should value.

(E) *Perspective — The love story*: The original Halachah states that if a marriage has not produced children after 10 years, the couple must divorce. Several Halachic authorities in the past, and certainly we, ourselves, in the Twenty-First Century, have reservations about this law with its underlying assumption that only the woman is the cause; *she* must be the infertile one. Nevertheless, the following story (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:30*) is from centuries ago when divorce was the accepted practice.

Paraphrasing:

A certain childless couple that had been married for 10 years went to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai for the divorce.

He told them that — just as they were first joined together with a feast of food and drink — so, too, they should separate with a similar meal of food and drink.

Following his instructions, they had a big dinner, during which the husband became drunk.

When he began to be somewhat sober, he said, “My dear, go look at all the valuable things in our home, take the most precious one, and return to your father's house.”

What did she do?

After he had fallen asleep, she told the servants to take the bed with him on it to her parents' house.

In the middle of the night, after the effects of the wine had worn off, he awoke, and asked, “My dear, where am I?”

She said, “In my father's house.”

He asked, “Why am I here?”

She said, “Did you not tell me to take the most precious thing from home and bring it to my father's house?”

“אין חפץ טוב לי בעולם יותר ממך”

“There is nothing more precious in the world to me than you.”

**Susceptible to frequent wildfires, friends in California described to me at great length what it felt like when they had to evacuate their homes, and worse for some people when the fire destroyed everything.*

***A number of years ago a friend and his family lost everything in a fire, including their pet dog.*

31. The Flashlight In Rabbinic Literature

Many Jews— including those not steeped in higher-level Torah study, have heard the line about how one of a parent's obligations is to teach the child how to swim. It is an attractive law, and visually powerful. The source is in the Talmud (*Kiddushin 29b*), in a list that includes the obligation to circumcise a son*, redeem a child from captivity, to teach Torah, marry a child off, and **וללמדו אומנות—to teach the child way to make a living**. The list adds,

וי"א
אף להשיטו במים

And there are those who say, even to teach the child how to swim.

That text was my earliest stimulus that would eventually lead me (by my usual circuitous route) to “flashlights” in the world of our ancient Rabbis. From there I was looking into how Jewish law spelled out in detail the ways children should perform the Mitzvah of honoring parents. When I teach, one specific item – rising when a parent enters the room – produces a small number reactions, and then I ask, “How many of you had special chairs at the dining room table where *only* your mother and father sat?” This has a greater number of positive answers

From rising in the presence of another person, I was led to teacher-student relations (Talmudically: **רב/Rav-תלמיד/Talmid**). Some of the material I *do* remember, but at least an equal amount remained fuzzy in my mind. Every one agreed that we rise when a judge enters the courtroom, or when the President or another person of high office enters. I also remember some people who told me that they had a particular professor in college before whom they would rise when he or she entered the classroom, but it is now rarely positive a response. The custom is rarely practiced nowadays in America, though it may be true to a certain extent in parts of Europe and Asia.

Occasionally I would hear of members of the audience who stood up when their Rabbi entered.

Things became more complex in the texts when the topic moved to servants' relations to their owners because there was so much material. For that, I could only absorb a few scraps of knowledge.

The culmination of this journey came when I discovered the phrase in an early Midrash collection the *Pesikta deRav Kahana, Beshalach (11:8 [Mandelbaum Edition])*, **The proper practice is for the Talmid to walk before the Rav, carrying a פנס/panass-a lantern or torch.**** The context is a list things a student is supposed to do for his teacher: wash, dress, put the shoes on, **טוען/to-ayn-carry** (?), and to stand by the bedside while the teacher sleeps. Some of these seem ed too intimate and far-fetched to me, but a later Midrash (*Exodus Rabba 25:6*) changes every one on the list and applies it to servants do for their owners – except for carrying the torch, which remains **רב/Rav-תלמיד/Talmid**. This made more sense to me.

I remain fascinated by this entire string of descriptions of interrelationships, and the following are a few of my comments and clarifications:

1. The visual image of the student carrying a torch in the darkness so that the teacher will not stumble or fall is very powerful. Add to that, the fear of robbers and the ancient belief in demons who come out at night. More powerful still, in their day, sages were assumed to be more vulnerable to demons. Metaphorically it means that one of the student's responsibilities is to protect the teacher – *something I was never taught* – and something which I think we should definitely teach in our present times.

2. There *are* several passages in the Talmud which explain that, if the teacher listens carefully to students, (i.e., see the torch the student is carrying), the teacher's own Torah will become more insightful and will be the better for it. Pedagogically, students

should be made aware of this from the outset, since it will inform them early on that the classroom is not one-directional. If the teacher tells the students of this acceptable classroom-rule from the beginning, it should also serve as a humbling reminder to the teacher.

3. The Talmudic references are not to just any teacher. The texts are speaking of those who taught the student **רוֹב חִכְמָתוֹ/rov chochmato** the most meaningful things about Life and helped mold our own lives — including inside and outside the classroom, Jewish and secular.

4. Based on the student's obligations to the teacher, or as this practice is known in the texts, **שִׁמּוּשׁ תַּלְמִידֵי חַכְמִים/shimmush talmiday chachamim**, I believe that this is an appropriate plan of action for ourselves. We should seek out those people who profoundly contributed to our having become who we are as individuals — teachers, friends all the way back to childhood, life-guides, relatives in our extended families, and, most certainly, parents. We should find them and tell them what they mean to us. Second best is calling them. And, as a last resort, is reaching them through e-mail and other social media.

a. Last year, I contacted the principal of my high school, Sandy Orr. He and his wife Eleanor founded The Hawthorne School in Washington a couple of years before I started in 1960 — to reach out and teach creative students, students who learn differently, and an interesting mix of misfits, others who were troubled and difficult, and some who had been thrown out of other schools. When Sandy came to meet me for lunch, he was 90 years old. He had driven across town from the northern Virginia side of Washington to me in the Maryland suburb of Rockville. **He brought my “folder”!** — report cards, College Board scores, teacher's comments, parents' reactions, and all! Face to face at lunch, I told him exactly why I had to see him. I told him that I am who I am in no small part because of him and his late wife, Eleanor.

b. My latest summers in Israel I visited my first high-level Bible teacher, the late Professor Shalom Paul ז"ל, and my unique Talmud teacher, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, **“The עֵילוּי/Ilui-Talmudic child prodigy of Sighet”**, **יִבְדֵּל לַחַיִּים טוֹבִים, וְיִבְדֵּל לַחַיִּים טוֹבִים/yibadel lechaim tovim ve'aruchim-May he live a long, good life.** While they may not have been aware of what they had done for me in the 1960's, I made clear by my respectful words, manner, and my affection that my continuing study of Torah and its connection to my life is his legacy to me.

I believe it is entirely appropriate to do this. I would say there is not only an element of Mitzvah in these acts of gratitude, but also a touch of holiness.

It's the least that we can do.

**In our time, this would include to have a baby naming ceremony in the synagogue for a girl. So, too for all the other examples.*

****פִּנְס*** is the modern Hebrew word for a flashlight.

32. The Speed Of Light, Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, And Us

I'm not really sure why, but a certain line in the Talmud (*Ta'anit 8a*) has stuck in my mind:

שֵׁאֵין הַבְּרָכָה מְצוּיָה
לֹא בְּדַבֵּר הַשְּׂקוּל
וְלֹא בְּדַבֵּר הַמְדוּד
וְלֹא בְּדַבֵּר הַמְנוּי
אַלֵּא בְּדַבֵּר הַסְמוּי מִן הָעֵין

**Blessings are not to be found in things
that are weighed,
or measured,
or counted, but only in things
that are סמוי מן העין/samu'i min haAyin-hidden from the eye.**

As early as elementary school, I loved numbers, calculating, and measuring. Maybe it was because I always got straight A's or A+'s in math from elementary school through twelfth grade. For a few years I let this thing about numbers percolate in my mind, and only recently began to delve into a few of the implication.

Some adjustments to numbers, weights, and measures:

First — absolute and fuzzy numbers and phenomena in the world:

1. **Absolute:** the speed of light, Avogadro's number and Planck's constant (whatever they are), Pi though its digits run infinitely after the decimal point.
2. **Used to be absolute:**
 - A. Einstein upset many of what were thought to be some of Newton's absolutes.
 - B. Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky disputed one of Euclid's sacred rules, declaring that two parallel lines *can* in fact, meet somewhere, and developed the implications of his discovery into an entirely new system of mathematics.*

Second — ones that might not to be what they seem:

- a. Polls depend on whether or not the pollsters followed the hard-and-fast rules of poll taking. The same for statistics.
- b. Commercial product surveys and research: A classic is the study of bad hair days that found that men are less productive than women if they are having a bad hair day. However, the study was conducted by Proctor and Gamble, manufacturer of shampoo.
- c. Reports of CEO salaries: The salary may be \$100,000, but the bonus might be \$15,000,000 or \$20,000,000.
- d. Even Tzedakah watchdog ratings on certain websites need to be examined: What percentage of overhead is acceptable to them – if it is 40%, or 30%, would you still donate?

Third — smallest of errors in calculation or numbers:

Calculating the trajectory of a rocket carrying astronauts to the moon must be done so extremely accurately, and involves higher mathematics and physics that are beyond a layperson's grasp — otherwise the spacecraft will miss it by thousands of miles and sail off course into Star Trek deeper space. have lethal consequences.

A few more miscellaneous ones:

- α . The speed limit is an absolute, but not for emergency vehicles.
 - β . Your health:
- Aleph.*** Fasting on Yom Kippur – except for some people with diabetes or other medical conditions. This is why some *siddurim* and *machzorim* have the text of the *Birkat HaMazon* for Yom Kippur.
- Bet.*** Only an endocrinologist can explain to a patient with diabetes if having an a1c of 7.1 instead of the accepted upper limit of 7.0 is significant or not, that .2 points higher is dangerous or not, or a severely *lower* blood sugar two days in a row is or is not of major consequence.

- Gimel.** Health club supervisors and personal trainers will tell you when an additional 8 repetitions or 6 more pounds of weights is damaging to your body, or that you are moving too fast in your increases.
- Dalet.** Losing weight: Your physician may tell you that an obsessive-compulsive reaction to the number on the scale is *not* the most effective way to lose weight and keep it off.
- Hay.** Finally, the law: Watch any cop show on TV, where sentencing deals are made with perpetrators in order to get a confession and, despite what law books may print, judges have considerable discretion when weighing any mitigating circumstances before sentencing. That is why these are called “sentencing guidelines.”

My conclusions: My interpretation of the Midrash: From the conflicting notes above, indeed, the messiness, there *can* be a blessing in numbers, weight, and measures, as well as dangers and — to use the Biblical term — curses.

I understand **עין מן העין/samu'i min haAyin-hidden from the eye** to emphasize three things:

(א) We should not *obsess* about those calculable things that surround us in our lives. Rather, they are only one aspect of ourselves as human beings.

(ב) Consequently, we should carefully differentiate which numbers do or don't make a *real* difference in our lives.

(ג) Concerning things that are **עין מן העין/samu'i min haAyin-hidden from the eye**: Perhaps, we would often do well to focus our minds, hearts, and **שכל/sechel-God-given common sense** more on unmeasurable, higher things — some of them hidden from the eye — such as the passage of time, friendship, peace of mind, *Menschlichkeit*, being present in moments, events — *almost anything* larger than ourselves.

And, of course, the countless blessings every day that are all around us in the entirety of Life itself.

**For non-Euclidean geometry I made the mistake of consulting Google to explain some details and quickly got totally lost.*

33. סימנים/Simanim-Memory Aids

(Aleph) The Talmudic Source (Eruvin 54b)

אמר רב חסדא
אין תורה נקנית
אלא בסימנין

**Rav Chisda said:
Torah is only acquired
with the help of memory aids.**

I would only modify the sage's word to read, “...*is best acquired* with the help of memory aids.”

(Bet) Examples of some forms of mnemonic devices

1. The first one we learned was probably **Roy G Biv**=the colors of the rainbow — *red orange yellow green blue indigo violet* .

2. **My Very Excellent Mom Just Served Us Noodles**=the order of the planets from the Sun [without Pluto] — *Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune*.

3. **HoJAm...**=the order of the twelve Minor Prophets — *Hosea, Joel, Amos* (I forgot the other nine).

4. *Dear King Philip Came Over For Good Soup*=the order of the categories of plants — *Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species*.

5. *Send Lily to Paris to tame carnal hunger*=the bones of the wrist (too technical to list).

6. *Talmudic Methods*

a. In many places, if there are a series of, say, four topics to be discussed, the Talmud will give a **סימן/siman-a mnemonic**, and then list the first word of each topic. This is similar to a construction engineer opening a meeting with a quick review of the agenda items: Federal and state laws, local building codes, materials, cost-estimate, and projected time to complete the project.

b. As with Roy G Biv, the Talmud also uses initial letters as reminders. A well known example is **זיקנה/yaknehaz**, for the order of Havdalah blessings when a holiday begins on a Saturday night.*

Anything that works to remember all the elements or to keep things in order — even meaningless words, senseless or downright dumb phrases, taglines, color coding, or jingles all help us function when we need to remember something.

Epigrams aphorisms are particularly effective. Epigrammatic and aphoristic literature goes way back. The Greeks had it, our own Book of Proverbs and selections from Pirkey Avot have kept teachers, preachers, and rabbis occupied for many centuries. Brevity is, of course, essential, for “memorability”, as are rhythm and rhyme if possible.

BUT – somehow some **סימנים/simanim** stick in your mind, even if they sound silly standing alone or have a ring of being a bit too clever. This kind of stimulus happened to me a while back. Someone had told me “It’s not good for a person to live a shoulda, coulda, woulda life.” For days, the phrase wouldn’t leave me alone. I knew it was a clever way of telling me how to avoid many pitfalls in life, and I knew that if I added up all the shoulda-coulda-wouldas in my life I would need as many Yom Kippurs to make up for them if I lived as long as Methuselah: All the missed opportunities, bad decisions, stupid things I had racked up over the years, with no end in sight. That kind of Life-review would be a very unwise psychological course of action.

But today, I chose a cure for this malady by choosing only one shoulda that I thought of, namely, something about teachers.

As I grew up from kindergarten through high school, “teacher” only meant that person who stood in front of the classroom. In college, it was different, because we referred to the teachers as “professor”, but the concept was the same – the man or woman in front of the classroom sharing her and his expertise or wisdom as we scribbled down** as quickly as much as we could.

That “teacher” thing was an unfortunate part of my upbringing, though really nobody’s fault. Adding to that, in my Talmud studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary — replete with **רב/רבי/Rabbi** this and **תלמיד/Talmid-student** that — page after page, they didn’t register as a reflection of reality. It was so far away in time and place, and most of it just the words of whoever stated a legal opinion or told the stories, and not necessarily what had actually happened historically.

Fortunately, I have attempted to remedy the situation for myself. This is mostly exemplified by how many e-mails to friends I start with the word **“מורי/Mori”** or **“מורתי/Morati-My Teacher”** — even to my friends, and to others who might have brought me some insight into whatever subject large or small. Even to Rabbis (I know about 500 of them), I have been writing **מורינו/Moraynu** or **מורתינו/Morataynu-Our Teacher**, instead of using the formal “Rabbi” — even though “*Rabbi*” means “*teacher*”.

Now, everywhere I look, or to whomever I listen, I am thinking “teacher”, and when they have transmitted something of even relatively minor importance, I *tell* them that

they are my teacher. I cannot stress enough how important it is for me to *say it* to them.

I believe this approach has opened up new worlds for me; I find teachers among the people behind the counter at the post office, the maintenance people in my building, receptionists, cashiers, the employee at Costco shelving huge containers of shampoo, the UPS delivery people. Even at this late age, while I shoulda been aware of it decades ago, I see no need to beat myself up about not having known this and done this years ago. Instead, I am grateful that I finally “got” it.

(Gimel) Two relevant Talmudic quotes:

הַלּוֹמֵד מִחֵבְרוֹ
פָּרַק אֶחָד אוֹ
הִלְכָה אֶחָת אוֹ
פְּסוּק אֶחָד אוֹ
דְּבוּר אֶחָד אוֹ
אֶפִּילוֹ אוֹת אֶחָת
צָרִיךְ לְנַהֵג בּוֹ כְּבוֹד

**Someone who learns from another person
a single chapter
or Halachah
or verse
or a sage’s word of Torah —
even a single letter —
must treat that person with respect. (Pirkay Avot 6:3)**

Living a life suffused with these words, thus did Rabbi Akiva toast his son at his wedding:

לְחַיֵּי רַבֵּנָא וְלְחַיֵּי תַלְמִידֵיהוֹן
Here’s to the life of our teachers, and here’s to the life of their students!
(Tosefta Shabbat 8:3)

(Dalet) A special case — The Torah of bumper stickers

I discovered a unique modern form of the epigram: Bumper stickers. Years ago I started collecting them. Among my favorites are: ***Only you can prevent narcissism*** and ***Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition***, both of which can lead to great discussions about Jewish values.

But, bumper stickers can be tricky. A rare few are profound, some are catchy enough to grab our attention and make us think, some are 100% untrue, and a few are as downright silly as the first lines of some of the Rock and Roll lyrics of my teen-age years in all their dreadful superficiality. When I was the guest speaker or teacher, I used the “juicy” ones for two purposes: (1) If they were funny, to “loosen up” my audience or students because my topic was so heavy, and (2) to reinforce my teaching which focused on Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Principles.

In addition to the ones I had personally collected, I went to the Internet for Funny Bumper Stickers, and despite my years of experience with Google and other search engines, I was astonished at the hundreds that Some People Out There had collected, photographed, and posted. How naïve of me! Some were over-the-top irreverent, nasty, off-color, gross, or downright obscene.*** I also excluded ones that were merely funny. Had I made a pages-long list, it would have made this Dvar Torah seem like a stand-up comic’s *shtick* of one-liners. Nowadays, what is true of bumper stickers also applies, no doubt, to t-shirts, coffee cups, refrigerator magnets, billboards, and media ads.

Of course, I would like my students to read serious books about Torah and Mitzvahs. I want them to read pages and pages of beautiful well-thought-out printed and

digital material and extract and ponder the inspiring gems recorded throughout the centuries from our Jewish texts, thinkers, and poets, and from the world's great literature. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen as much as I would like it to happen. Too many people are moving through life too quickly, or nowadays don't have the attention span or patience to read long books, or books at all, or multiple pages on their computer, tablet or cellphone screens.

So, much as I do not prefer Torah-by-bumper-sticker (-or-by-T-shirt, -by-coffee-cup, or -by-refrigerator-magnet), I offer a selection of useful Mitzvah material from less-than-university-level sources. All of the quotes are concise, some are clever, and a few are thought-provoking. The best of them may allow us to pause and think, sometimes with a smile. If we read them with Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Pinciples in mind, I believe we can learn a great deal of Torah. The same unscientific study can be done with billboards, radio, TV, and internet commercials, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and, of course, T-shirts, refrigerator magnets, and coffee cups.

Below, bumper stickers that are specifically Jewish or Jewish-teachable are in bold. My Rashi-comments are in italics.

Here are a few bumper stickers from my accumulated goodies:

From the '60's, *Those were our years of heightened activism about civil rights, the War in Vietnam, and the war on poverty:*

(AA) Give Peace a Chance,

(BB) Flower Power,

(CC) Make Love Not War, and

(DD) It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.

Some miscellany, with my comments in Italics.

Stop Global Whining. *(DO something. Ideal for teaching Mitzvahs.)*

Superman had foster parents. *(Truth in striking brevity. Good for thinking about צדק/Tzedek, i.e., fixing the bureaucratic weaknesses of foster care and adoption agencies.)*

If Momma Ain't Happy, Ain't Nobody Happy. *(Another Ultimate. Substitute the word "Rabbi" or "religious school teacher", or "dayschool teacher for "Momma.)*

You Nonconformists Are All Alike. *(Commendable for its terse humor. An excellent point of departure for discussions about courage and courageous people, and standing up against the masses if they are wrong.*

The following bumper stickers clearly reflect serious Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Pinciples.

If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention.

Equal rights are not special rights.

Ageism will catch up with you.

Better a bleeding heart than none at all. *(Ah! Very nice!)*

Practice random acts of kindness. *(My friend Rabbi Donald Rossoff's comment [relating to an identical phrase on a T-shirt]: It should read instead "Do planned acts of צדק/Chessed-deeds of deep-and-enduring lovingkindness.)*

The following four are to be read as a single unit. They are frequently discussed with my students and audiences:

My child is an honor student at...*Many parents in the audience do not like this one because it creates a flawed criterion for the true value of their children.******

My Child Is. *(Very nice.)*

My Kid Is a Mensch. *(Several people have commented that they need one in the plural. Others need one that says "grandchild" or "grandchildren". [At times, when I accidentally slip into a scornful tone, I recommend covering the "My child's an honor student at..." with this "My kid is a Mensch". It's now also a refrigerator magnet!)*

My Mensch Learns at Congregation Beth Am. (From a Synagogue in Buffalo Grove, IL. That one word – “Mensch” – says so much.)

If you can read this, thank a teacher. (As a teacher, I LOVE this one. It can generate many discussions about literacy and the historical Jewish emphasis on education throughout the centuries.)

Winston Churchill: **We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.** (This is about as Jewish as you can get. It is loaded Jewish VIPs-Values, Ideals, and Pinciples.)

There must be more to life than having everything. (Also a very great Torah lesson, from Jewish Maurice Sendak, author of Where The Wild Things Are.)

I Caught You Caring. (Stickers given to students at a Jewish day school at those magic moments when students demonstrate their Best Selves by acts of Menschlichkeit. A fabulous pedagogic technique for teaching Gemillut Chassadim and Chessed.)

And, finally, one of the best – succinctly emphasizing one of the VIPs- Jewish Values, Ideals, and Pinciples:

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN BUMPER STICKERS

There you have it. A Torah-lesson right on the bumper of the SUV in front of you as you crawl around the Washington Beltway in rush hour.

(There you have it. A Torah-lesson right on the bumper of the car in front of you as you crawl around the Washington Beltway in rush hour.)

**It would be too long and complicated to explain.*

***These were the years before androids and Macintosh, tablets, and laptops.*

****None of the offensive or indecent ones are included here.*

*****A woman once suddenly interrupted one of my lectures and most emphatically exclaimed, “All these brilliant children – where do all the stupid adults come from?”*

Her outburst would make a great bumper sticker.

34. Boker Tov, Lylah Tov

(Aleph) Boker Tov-בוקר טוב

Jingles are written to be remembered, to penetrate deeply into whatever geographical part of the brain God created for that purpose, to be recalled again and again, even maddingly so. This week, the one I could still hear has been from a coffee commercial a few years ago, “The best part of waking up is Folger’s in your cup.”

My Hebrew school teacher in Arlington, Virginia, Mrs. Rachel Reinitz, ז"ל, would have disagreed most vigorously with the manufacturers of Folgers coffee. From our earliest days as her students, we were told to recite the traditional **מודה אני /Modeh Ani** single-line thank You prayer, reminding us that *the best part of waking up is waking up*, and acknowledging at those first moments God’s gift, for which we should be thankful. And whether or not that practice has fallen by the personal wayside, it’s very brevity stays in the memory decades after religious school class.

Caffeine freak that I am, it is tempting to make the coffee the very first thing in the morning. Then to relax, disconnect the cellphone from the charger, open it, check the local (and Jerusalem) weather report, how Dow Jones did the day before, and (sometimes) three or four news media websites (if I want to get depressed). Since it takes 20 minutes for caffeine to be absorbed by the organs and cells, this procedure makes sense.

It would seem to me, though, that there is something to be done between *Modeh*

Ani, and the coffee: a brief stop at the **פּוּשְׁקָא/pushka-Tzedakah box**, to put something in, even a small coin. The Talmud (*Bava Batra 10a*, based on *Psalm 17:15*) has something to say about that practice that is very striking:

דרש רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי...
אדם נותן פרוטה לעני זוכה ומקבל פני שכינה שנאמר
אֲנִי בְּצַדִּיק אֶחְזָק פְּנֵיךְ אֶשְׁבְּעָה בְּהַקְיִץ תִּמְוֹנָתְךָ

Rabbi Dosta'i the son of Rabbi Yannai taught in a public lecture:...

**If a person gives even a *perutah* (the smallest coin) to a poor person,
that person is privileged**

to see the *שכינה/Shechinah*-God's Intimate Presence, as the verse states,

**"I, through just-and-righteous acts,
will see Your face..."**

Before the miracle of God-created coffee and the human-invented World Wide Web, we are back again at *Modeh Ani*. This simple, minimal act of Tzedakah that takes less time than to make even a Keurig cup of coffee, now allows us to enter the Upper Worlds of God's Intimate Presence.

לילה טוב-*(Bet) Lylah Tov*

According to our tradition, the last thing to do before going to sleep is to recite the *Shema*. Whether it is a purely religious act — or as some scholarly traditional commentators explained to the simple folk, a formula to ward off the night demons — the bedtime **שמע/*Shema*** has been a part of Jewish tradition for centuries. That is what I understood until I stumbled across one more item (*Midrash Mishlay*, [*Visotzky edition*]/ *Proverbs 12:20*) to do as we drift off —

ר' זעירא...
כל מי שהוא ישן על מטתו בלילה
ומחשב בלבו
ואומר
אני משכים מחר ואעשה טובה עם פלוני
הוא עתיד לשמוח עם הצדיקים בגן עדן לעתיד לבא,
שנאמר וליועצי שלום שמחה

Rabbi Zeira said:

**Whoever thinks to himself or herself before going to sleep at night
and says,***

**"When I wake up tomorrow,
I will do good things for Person X,"
that person will ultimately share great joy
with The Good People
in the Future, in the Next World,
as the verse states,
"...For those who plan good, there is joy."**

(Gimel) Boker Tov-בוקר טוב When we are finished with whatever morning preliminaries described above, as we sit down to the computer or to do errands or housekeeping, we should remember which person we thought of as we drifted off to sleep, and then to choose any one of countless ways to do something good for him or her.

Now — with all due deference to Folger's — *that's* the way to start the day!

**After teaching this selection many times, I just noticed today "and says". Verbalizing your intended action serves as a crucial reinforcement for what you will do.*

35. Seven Years and 153 days — #1 Practical Suggestions

(Aleph) The Origin of יומי דף/Daf Yomi-The study of the daily page of Talmud:

In 1931, Rabbi Meir Shapiro, **ראש הישיבה של חכמי לובלין/The Leader of Yeshivat Chochmei Lublin** established the practice of studying one page of Talmud a day. In contrast to the years when Talmud study was the exclusive purview of men, videos panning MetLife Stadium in New Jersey now unmistakably show the presence of hundreds of women.

(Bet) Essential Aids

The one book you will absolutely need: ***A Dictionary of Babylonian Jewish Aramaic*, Michael Sokoloff, Bar Ilan University Press, 2002.** This is the *only* reliable contemporary repository of Talmudic vocabulary.

You may also want different editions of the Talmud – one, the full-size with the big print and multiple commentaries in the back, and another more physically manageable for flights, train trips, standing in a long line at the bank or sitting in your car in the grocery store parking lot waiting for the employee to bring your order to your car, or for balancing on your stomach lying in bed before you go to sleep.

(Gimel) Some Things I Learned From My Own Experience

The following are some things that I learned as I zipped, plowed, or slowly worked my way through the entire Talmud in my own reading method and style of in the late 1960's and early 1970's. I offer some of the following thoughts and suggestions which — consciously or subconsciously — may be of use to you in your **יומי דף/Daf Yomi** experience:

There is something uniquely wonderful about waking up to a new day and knowing that, during the day, there will be an experience that is of great personal significance — **דף יומי/Daf Yomi**. After you have had your coffee, you can anticipate moments of **שמחה של מצוה/Simcha shel Mitzvah, the special joy of doing a Mitzvah**, the Mitzvah of studying Torah. This feeling will also help clarify different categories of joy and happiness in your life.

Whether you are barreling, breezing, or slogging through, never doubt that, *whichever way* you are doing **יומי דף/Daf Yomi**, it's just fine. It's *your* unique method.* Do not look over your shoulder and imagine there are other dissatisfied, disappointed, or grumpy people who may criticize you, grumbling, "This is not the *real* way to do it."

Never doubt *why* you are doing this. Whatever you're thinking, it's just fine. It's Torah, and studying Torah in and of itself is a Mitzvah.

A. After 23, 127, or 1,432 pages, do not sigh, as you picture the long road ahead. Do not say to yourself, "Lordy, Lordy. How much more is left to do!"

B. You will be absorbing a lot more than you thought you were. Thank of this scenario: Imagine yourself in the recovery room after surgery. Gathered around your bed are relatives and friends, talking and assuming that you can't hear what they are saying. Many studies have shown that you *are* taking in every word, even though the anesthesia hasn't worn off completely. So, too in your **יומי דף/Daf Yomi** studies, words are sinking in even without you being consciously aware of them.

If you originally began by solemnly allotting one hour a day for Daf Yomi, inevitably you will encounter topics, ideas, stories, or phrases or even single words that interest, or even intrigue, you then you will want 90 minutes, 2 or 3 hours, or an entire morning, afternoon, or possibly you might have to burn the midnight oil. Think how much time in 1985 the explorer ship's crew spent searching for the broken hull of the magnificent and tragic Titanic until they found the treasure. On the other hand, it might

magnificent and tragic frame until they found the treasure. On the other hand, it might take you only take a day or two to discover something personally inspirational.

Keep in mind — always — that mid-terms and final exams are a thing of the past. *No one* is going to test you on your Daf Yomi studies.

Every day of the seven years and 153 days may not provide you with discovering a thought or practice that will serve you well in your Jewish life. However, as you continue, the percentage of practical and spiritual “goodies” will inevitably climb, 23%, 48%, 75%, maybe up to 95%, depending on how your mind, soul, and kishkas interact with the text.

Be aware: Your “takeaways” will be many, and not long after you begin Daf Yomi you will become aware of three distinct types:

(א) Texts that you absorb immediately and integrate into your thinking and functioning as a Jew and human being.

(ב) Texts that you sense you will understand better if you come back to them at some later date.

(ג) Things that you will *never* “get”. (And I mean *never*.)

(AA) Like basic training in the military, every day you are getting in better “shape” and are more prepared for the next day.

(BB) Somewhere along the way, you will discover what your own personal tastes and preferences are, and these will lead you to better focus your energies, for example:

(I) You are better at “getting” the key Talmudic terms, or you “get” the structure of a story or a Halachic argument.

(II) You may not understand the *content* of a **תוספות/Tosafot**, but now you can understand the rhythms, flow, and structure. This is similar to knowing the rules and method of highschool debate tournaments — even without necessarily following the substance of the actual arguments.

(III) You begin to understand that you are dealing with distinct Rabbinic personalities with fortés and flaws — and that the few hundred sages’ do not represent a monolithic picture that you may have first imagined, and even that you may have long held sacred.

(CC) My personal interests included the etymology of words, biographical sketches and sketches of the sages, and the enormous quantities of **אגדות/Aggadot** too numerous to count. Of course, focus will be on what interests of moves you emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually.

(DD) You may find yourself “getting very good” on the day’s page. This experience is not unlike a person who has read 73 detective novels who knows halfway through the book “who done the dirty deed”.

Breakthroughs: Just try to recall that powerful, almost magical moment in high school when you sat in French class, and you realized you had just said your first complete sentence without hesitation, fumbling, or mumbling. This experience is similar to the exhilarating experience when you realized that, while you couldn’t manage the mechanics and details of geometry, the vast vocabulary of geology, or examining bones and skulls in the Olduvai Gorge, *you “got” what they were all about*. So, too, with your experience with Talmud. *Trust me* — Daf Yomi breakthroughs *will* happen. And hopefully some of these personal discoveries will feel intimate and near-revelatory. For those Daf Yominiks who are inclined to mysticism, they may even experience transcendental moments.

(Dalet) Conclusion: You and the 2,711 pages: Whatever Works For You:

(אא) Early morning if you are “a morning person” and that’s how you want to set the tone for your day, or

(בב) at night, to assure yourself that you have done something meaningful during that particular day beyond doing the laundry, ordering a Dustbuster from Amazon, or deciding what costume to wear on Purim, or you may be someone who absorbs material best if you are tired, or any time during the day, when you are feeling swept up uncontrollably with things-to-do of lesser import in the Grand Scheme of Things and

unconsciously with things to do of lesser import in the grand scheme of things, and tedium sets in.

(גג) Whichever time of day you choose, you will redeem the “meaning” of that day in your life with an anchored, positive, deeper perspective, and you should feel good about it. Whichever hour works best for you, after you finish your Daf Yomi, you can say to yourself, “It made my day”.

(דד) There is a psychological comfort, calm, and peace of mind to this, similar to a secular moment when it is almost bedtime and you know that, soon, you will crawl under a thick comforter and will drift off to a well-deserved pleasant night’s sleep

(Hay) *Final Conclusion — The famous journey into The פרדס/Pardes-Orchard (Chagiga 14a):*

Whatever the ultimate meaning of The פרדס/pardes-The Orchard, that the four sages entered, Rabbi Akiva **בשלום/nichnas beShalom-entered BeShalom, whole, at peace, ויצא בשלום/veyatza beShalom-emerged בשלום-BeShalom whole, at peace.** I would surmise that seven years and 153 days studying the Talmud is a much more enormous and complex experience than going into whatever in this world (or another world) that was in that orchard.

To every Daf Yominik who entered this vast landscape wholeheartedly, determined, and dedicated to the study of Torah on such a grand scale — i.e., who **נכנס בשלום/nichnas beShalom-who entered BeShalom** — may you also, as our teacher, the unique Rabbi Akiva, **תצא בשלום/Taytzay Beshalom, — May you also emerge with a deeper, more enriched sense of peace in your Jewish soul.**

**My personal commitment was to read every single word, mostly reciting the text out loud.*

Seven Years and 153 Days - #2

I: The Event

On January 1, 2020, thousands of students of the Talmud around the Jewish world participated in the traditional ceremony of **סייום הש"ס/Siyyum haShass**. This marked their having completed studying the entire 2,711 two-sided pages of the Babylonian Talmud, one page every day in seven years (actually, seven years and 153 days). **This is the “דף יומי-daf yomi-the daily page”.**

To get a sense of how prodigious completing *daf yomi* is, you simply have to look at the bookshelf where the full-size 20 volumes of the Babylonian Talmud are arranged.

Some celebrated this momentous event, at home, others among their friends, students or teachers, and some locations such as New York City’s Madison Square Garden could witness a huge sports arena packed with students sharing the *simcha* — as well as in arenas and stadiums in other locations.

Now, it is customary to celebrate a **סייום/Siyyum** after completing even *one* of the 37 sections **מסכתות/masechtot-tractates-major sections**.* Finishing the *entire* Talmud, only to begin the cycle again the next day, is truly spectacular. Despite the extraordinarily difficult material on some of the pages for many students, there are several reasons I have heard why they do it, among them:

Part II: The Students

1. The most obvious reason for a certain significant percentage of Daf Yominiks, they did it because *the study of Torah is a Mitzvah*.

2. The fact that a Daf Yominik knows that all over the world other Jews are simultaneously doing the same as he or she, has a strong emotional appeal. It is a step up from being aware that everyone was reading the same Torah portion everywhere on Shabbat and holidays.** This was more than “mere” **חומש/Chumash**. This was **תלמוד/Talmud!**

3. The absolute long-term regularity of accomplishing this task, of having something important and meaningful to do *every day* is very appealing. This commitment extending long into the future from Day One offers different personalities a reason to plunge into **הים של התלמוד**—“The sea of Talmud”.

4. The very difficulty of some of the material offers many Talmud students the opportunity to test their intellectual abilities.

5. The immense challenge of the project is that it is something huge that they have never done before, much like, in the secular realm, a casual jogger deciding to run a marathon or the author of occasional blogs to undertake writing a novel.

6. There are also possibly many students who had been in classrooms or lectures that seemed to be stuck for months on 15 pages of *Gittin*, *Betzah*, or *Yoma*, and they began to wonder what they might be missing by never finding possible life-enriching passages on *Megillah 16b*. This was their chance to find out.

III: More About The Students:

(A) To say that the task of completing Daf Yomi is daunting is an extreme understatement. I believe that it takes a certain kinds of disposition to commit to beginning on *Brachot page 2a*. Similar types of people who devote themselves so completely are those who are comfortable with long-term projects — (1) cancer researchers (2) or astronomers, for example — intensely (even obsessively) (1) searching for that one sub-microscopic, genetic clue, or (2) for the stargazers discovering an until-then-unseen supernova somewhere in the heavens. Their ultimate hope is (1) to relieve the suffering of thousands of people or (2) to explain the origins of the universe.

(B) Similarly in some ways, there are some Daf Yominiks who take on this colossal task seeking some insight — even possibly a revelation — that will bring more peace-of-mind to whatever may be troubling their own lives and the lives of others.

(C) Others include students raised in day schools or Yeshivas where Talmud was integral to the regimen of the curriculum. While Talmud may not actually be in their DNA, it still constitutes a significant part of their deepest memory.

(D) Within that category are students whose minds are configured to enjoy this kind of strenuous mental exercise. This is comparable in some ways to “no pain, no gain” for regular frequenters of a gym or swimmers who know that they will comfortably do their 60 laps. These Talmud students can manage the most complex multi-level and multi-faceted arguments, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and members of juries.)

(E) From their experience in class, these students already know ahead of time that there will be passages, pages, and even some entire chapters that have no relevance to their daily lives as a person or as a Jew, but in no way did that deter them. For them, this, too, was *Torah*.

(F) Most of all, there are those individuals who love Torah study and know in their souls that it is a Mitzvah (maybe even a Big Time Mitzvah), and, therefore, of personal Jewish importance.

III: Coming Clean

In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s I, myself, once read through the entire **בבלי/Bavli- Babylonian Talmud**, and about 1/3 of the **ירושלמי/Yerushalmi-The Talmud of the Land of Israel**. I am not certain *exactly* why I undertook this project, but not long after I began, I had a feeling that I would continue until the end. I read every word and just kept going, ignoring everything I did not understand. Sometimes it was 99% of what that page was meant to teach. I was already well aware that I did not have a **קאפ גמרא/gemara kup-a head for Talmud**, nor the patience. Sometimes, the most I could salvage on a page was a word or phrase that interested me or piqued my curiosity, or a text that I suspected I would enjoy or understand if I returned to it later. (I did, and it happened often.) But *on every page* there is at least one thing that I underlined or annotated in the margin.

(Mentioned in II:6 above:) At one point, in the thick of this process which took an hour, or two, or five hours a day, it was clear to me that a major motivation was that sense that if I didn't get to *Gittin 53a*, I would be missing something holding deep meaning for my life and about Life itself.

To review my feelings about the huge **סייום הש"ס/Siyyum HaShass** on January first, I would say:

1. **Aleph.** I admire those who spent every day of seven years and 153 days focused on the words of our sages from centuries ago.
2. **Bet.** I do *not* feel any jealousy that they did it.*** Not so with this recent huge Talmudic venture — because I knew that at this stage of life **דף יומי daf yomi** just wasn't me.
3. **Gimel.** What it *did* do for me was:
 - a. I *did* discover hundreds of thoughts, stories, simple arguments, and historical and biographical descriptions on *Shabbat 30a*, *Kiddushin 41b*, and several large blocks of text — such as in *Massechet Megillah* and *Ta'anit*, and chapters like the last one in *Sanhedrin* and *Brachot* that have played a significant part in my Torah teaching and in my life.
 - b. Looking back, I think, that most significant was that “Daf Yomi and Me” freed me once and for all for the need to think Talmudically (and logically, and sequentially) and left me to the free association and lyrical mode of functioning that is much more natural to my own mind. No doubt this also allowed me to write lyrical poetry rather than continuing as a math major after two terrible semesters of calculus, or attempting to enter a PhD program on Modern Jewish Historiography. The relief is incalculable.

IV: Bracha of congratulations: So, I wish a **מזל טוב/Mazal Tov** and **יישר כוחכם/Yasher Koach** to the celebrants. **כל הכבוד/Kol HaKavod-All the more honor** to the Torah students who reached *Niddah 73a*. All honor and all the more strength to them as in early January, 2020, when they opened up *Brachot 2a* to begin the next cycle of seven years and 153 days immersed in the 2,711 pages of our ancient, sacred text.

**This is one of those words that 99.99999% of humanity doesn't know, doesn't need to know, never heard of, or ever appeared on a College Board exam or as a trick question in a spelling bee competition.*

***There occasionally some differences between the reading in Israel and in the **גלות/Galut-Outside of Israel**. One reason is one-day holiday days in Israel, an two days everywhere else.*

****When I struck out my only time at the plate in Little League baseball, I was jealous of the others who could get on base with a hit, even an unimpressive infield single. But I was only 12 years old.*

Seven Years and 153 Days - #3

(Aleph) Daf Yomi January 1, 2010

For some reason, this morning my mind wandered to images of my college professors. At Columbia, I can't even summon a picture of the ones who tried in vain to teach me philosophy, calculus, and the glories of John Milton's poetry.* One comes to mind because of his name: Daniel Boone Dodson. And I *do remember* my professor of Medieval and Renaissance Lit — the gorgeous Prof. F. I was barely out of my teens, and I would occasionally fantasize about being the father of her children, the kids sitting with us around a warm fire on a cold New York City night reading lines from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to each other.

At the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), my studies in Bible included several

professors who were already famous, and above them all, the incomparable H.L. Ginsberg, who was referred to around the sacred halls simply as “H.L.”

In Talmud, there were different categories. There were the more-than-competent ones, totally in command of the text. Some were great lecturers, others were boring. Beyond them, were the ones who had memorized the entire Talmud, two of whom were my professors, and one — Prof. Saul Lieberman — I had seen around frequently, though I was never in his class. He was unquestionably *the* universally accepted Giant of the Generation. He not only had command of the Talmud, but all of Rabbinical literature, the Medieval commentators, with all their thousands of scribal variants and accumulated mistakes, up to the latest scholarly articles in the contemporary journals, and *all* of ancient Greek and Roman literature. The entirety of this vast quantity of knowledge, down to the smallest, ostensibly insignificant detail, was stored in his mind and available for immediate retrieval.

I find it pushing the limits beyond my ability to grasp how someone could memorize *just* the 2,711 pages of the Talmud, let alone the extent and breadth of Prof. Lieberman’s mind.

We hear stories of people who, indeed, had memorized the Talmud. The following is just one example from my own personal experience: Every summer I was invited to have a Kiddush lunch with Prof. Daniel Sperber in Jerusalem. His library, is so immense it has to be spread over two storeys with bookcases jammed with books. In the shelf of books he, himself, has written, if you were to read *just one of his footnotes* with its numerous references, you would think it would take him a full day or two just to physically look them up, or, that he has a computer that would allow him to access all of Jewish ancient, medieval, and modern literature. ***But he doesn’t own a computer***, and the only conclusion anyone can reach is that it is all in his memory. He doesn’t have to run up and down the stairs to the right bookshelf to see on what page in the Meiri or Herodotus that the words appear — not even the number of a footnote — in the **דקדוקי סופרים/Dikdukay Soferim** and hundreds of other volumes in his library.**

Another story: I heard this from my student, friend, and teacher Rabbi Mark Greenspan, who was in one of Prof. Moshe Zucker’s classes. Professor Zucker would come to class without a volume of Talmud since he didn’t need it. After a while a student approached and mentioned that the students were embarrassed by this, and would he please at least bring the volume of text to class? He did, and opened it on the desk in front of him. But at the end of class, he apologized that he had brought the wrong volume.

Most familiar to me personally was Rabbi David Weiss HaLivni, my personal Rebbi, with whom I took eight or nine courses. Known as **“The עילוי/Illui—Talmudic child prodigy of Sighet”**, by age nine he had memorized 200 pages of Talmud. Now the fact is, that not every prodigy — whether in music, mathematics, Talmud, or some other field — pursues that talent throughout life. Rabbi Weiss Halivni’s life, though, has been totally devoted to the Talmud. When I visited in 2019 Prof. Weiss Halivni in his apartment in Jerusalem, he was working on Volume Nine of **מסורות ומקורות/Mekorot uMesorot**, his phenomenal groundbreaking *magnum opus* about the development of the Talmud. He was 93 at the time. While his Rabbinic-text library was to the right of his desk in the next room, all he needed was the single volume he had set aside within reach on the couch near his easy chair to show me what he was working on, though I doubt that he needed to look inside. And, like Prof. Sperber, he did not need to get up from his easy chair to consult the closed volumes on the shelves. Everything was at his immediate recall. And I’m only one of many witnesses to his phenomenal Talmudic memory. ***

I have heard similar stories about Rabbi Weiss Halivni from other people, and have no reason not to believe every single one of them.

(Bet) Conclusion to some of my thoughts about the Daf Yomi event:

I can picture myself with a therapist who asks me, “Now, Daniel, what’s on your

mind?” I tell her that there are certain things that cause my mind to stretch so far that not only do they confound me, but it sometimes becomes painful. I list only three examples for her:

- (1) With the loss of my brother Stanley and sister Leslye, and a growing number of close friends, trying to grasp life after death is incredibly difficult.
- (2) If, as astrophysicists teach us, the universe is expanding, what is out there beyond the edge? What is it expanding into? And
- (3) How can anyone possibly memorize the entire Talmud?

She says, “Daniel, you would do well to pay attention to the scattered Talmudic warnings not to inquire about what is infinitely above and below, nor what is behind us at the beginning of time, nor forward to The End Time, or any other topic that bends your mind and distorts your thinking. Continuing to pursue these and similar ideas is detrimental to your psychological wellbeing. Walk away from them. Go back to your intellectual and talent comfort zones. Otherwise, this crashing against the wall may cause you to become dysfunctional.”

I know that she is correct. I already feel relieved having written this out. The stress has *hopefully* disappeared completely from my subconscious.

**On very rare occasions, I wonder just as a passing thought why I chose that course instead of Shakespeare.*

***Dikdukay Soferim is an immense multi-volume work that compares the Talmud as it appears in The Munich Manuscript (the oldest [1342] complete Talmud) to the variations that appear in other manuscripts and fragments. It is considered an absolutely essential resource for any serious scholar of Talmud.*

****Truthfully, I was going to write “awesome” instead of “phenomenal”, but the word is so overused, it has become hackneyed. Nevertheless, I believe that the accurate adjective here is, in fact, “awesome”.*

Seven Years and 153 Days – #4

Some More Thoughts On Those Few Scholars and Sages

Who In The Past Knew And Who Today Know The Entire Talmud By Heart

I can precisely pinpoint a few quotes in our Jewish texts verbally, visually in my mind without looking directly in the books.

1. In the תנ"ך/Tanach:

a. “Love others as you love yourself” is easy — *Leviticus 19:18* — the year World War I ended; the long poems in *Genesis 49, Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32 and 33, and Judges 5* (General Devorah’s poem) — because they are laid out on the page in a distinctly different pattern than the rest of the text, and *Psalms 119* — by far the longest Psalm, with 176 verses

b. I can also immediately locate some personal favorites: *Genesis 28 and 32* — Jacob’s ladder dream and his wrestling with The Angel — because my Hebrew name is יעקב/Ya’akov; *Jeremiah chapter 31* — the image of Mother Rachel sitting and weeping, patiently waiting by the wayside for her children to return from the Babylonian Exile; *Exodus 2 or 3* (it’ll only take a second to find) — Moshe at the burning bush; *Exodus 20* — the Revelation at Sinai; *Ezekiel Chapter 1* (the bizarre vision of the Divine Chariot), *Exodus chapter 24* — the Elders eating a meal and seeing the God of Israel, and perhaps a dozen or 15 or 20 more selections scattered throughout the text.

2. In the Talmud

א. On specific pages: *Brachot 17a at the bottom* — a prayer I have paraphrased into a poem; *Bava Batra 134a in the middle* — the statement that Hillel had 80 students who were particularly close to him, easy because 134 in Hebrew letters is קלד

which I pronounce “clod” as a mnemonic; *Shabbat 30a* Hillel and the pagan, “Teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot”, *the last Mishnah in the fourth chapter of Sanhedrin*

וְכֹל הַמְקִיִּים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל
כְּאִלוֹ קַיִם עוֹלָם מְלֵא

Whoever saves a single life, it is as if that person has saved an entire world.

ב. In blocks of text: *Somewhere between pages 8 and 11 in Bava Batra, side a 1/3 to ½ down the page* — the story of King Munbaz emptying the royal treasury to feed his subjects, and *in the same block of text* — the communal leader Binyamin HaTzaddik who supported a woman and her seven children from his own money because the community Tzedakah funds were exhausted.

ג. Entire chapters: *The ninth in Brachot* — describing and discussing all the “miscellaneous **ברכות/brachot-blessings**” such as seeing the rainbow or trees in first bloom, hearing thunder and seeing lightning or being moved by the sight of majestic mountains. There is also a large section describing weird dreams and their interpretations as well as giving details of the rules of interpretation. Also, *the last chapter of Sanhedrin* — with its various statements about the **משיח/Mashiach** and other eschatological topics. Outside of the Talmud but from the same historical period, *Leviticus Rabba chapter 34* is the single most extensive mass of Midrash on Tzedakah and Gemillut Chassadim in Rabbinic literature that I have found.

So when I write that one of my favorite Talmudic passages is in *Yerushalmi Kiddushin*:

רבי חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן
דין וחשבון על כל שראת עינו ולא אכל

**Rabbi Chizkiya said in the name of Rabbi Kohayn in the name of Rav:
In the Future (the Next World),**

**everyone will have to give an accounting of everything his or her eyes saw
but did not eat (enjoy).**

I know *exactly* where to find it. It is **the next-to-the-last line in Yerushalmi Kiddushin.**

Admittedly, none of the above examples describes a special power of memorization.

3. Other kinds of memory and memorizing

aa. Jewishly: I still find it difficult to imagine how some students can recite — in order — all the kings and queens of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, how long or short they reigned, and how many years who overlapped with whom.

bb. Secularly: In junior high and high school, we had classmates who knew every president in order, which number they were (including James Buchanan, John Tyler, and William Henry Harrison), who their wives were, what years they were President, and how many years they lived after leaving office.

Others knew all the kings and queens of England including which Georges and which Edwards were I, II, or III, and so, too with the names of the popes all the way to the XXIIIrd.*

And then there are some special minds that we hear about or learn from books or the media — not actually memorizing but similarly dazzling is their ability to know that June 3, 1921, was a Wednesday, or persons who can glance at a map and memorize every detail as accurately as any GPS. Some unique configuration of their brains' functions allows them to to accomplish these amazing feats.

Somewhat related — though also not a matter of memorization — a 9-year-old girl who can't read a note of music who listens to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* only once, and

who can't read a note of music who listens to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* only once, and immediately plays it perfectly. At the extreme — and I believe still shrouded in mystery to students and researchers of this wonder — *savants* whose certified IQ may be well below the norm, but who can play Tchaikovsky or Chopin brilliantly.

4. Returning to the Daf Yomi celebration of January first, 2020

All the individuals in the “special minds” above are, no doubt, of interest, perhaps for another blog, essay, or chapter in a book for some other time and by another author. I want to focus here strictly on “regular” memory and memorization. The presidential, monarch, and papal performers** are at best (excuse the colloquialism) “kid’s stuff”, “small potatoes”, “paltry” compared to those few today and over the centuries who knew and know the entire Talmud by heart.

To be more specific — on a single side of a page of Talmud you see:

(אא) In the middle of the page is the Talmud text itself;

(בב) on the side next to the binding is רש"י/Rashi and his user-friendly, generally lucid, mostly brief explanations,

(גג) on the outer edge is תוספות-Tosafot-the “additional” commentary, the frequently long, and as often, complex analyses of specific topics with comparisons to various texts scattered on other pages and in other volumes throughout the entire Talmud — the bane of many a student.

The spectacular fact that *anybody* can memorize even one side of a page filled with such intricate argumentation is *very* far beyond my personal grasp. How it actually works seems to me something other than the phenomenon of a photographic memory. Had I not witnessed it personally, I would have most certainly not have believed it. It would have seemed like the stories of the Paul Bunyan tales of my childhood.

I deal with that topic more extensively in my the Dvar Torah “Seven Years and 153 Days #2. In this one, I want to deal with the text I cited above (*Yerushalmi Kiddushin, end*):

רבי חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן
דין וחשבון על כל שראת עיניו ולא אכל

Rabbi Chizkiya said in the name of Rabbi Kohayn in the name of Rav:

In the Future [the Next World],

a person will have to give an accounting of everything his eye saw

but did not eat (enjoy) it.

a. I believe that the underlying meaning of the Sage’s statement is that all of the abundance and variety we experience in Life are God’s gifts to us and we are to appreciate every one of them.

b. Halachah reinforces this awareness by having us recite a ברכה/bracha before eating a peach, loquat, or ear of corn, and a שהחינו/Shehecheyanu if we have not tasted any of them since a year before.

c. This texts brings me back to a Mitzvah hero — The Rabbanit Bracha Kapach. She was an adventurer and a world traveller, taking tours with a busload or two of her friends to Hungary, Scandinavia, and other European countries besides traveling as far as Chicago and Brazil to organize and supervise exhibits of Yemenite culture. When her husband, the pre-eminent Yemenite Torah scholar, Rav Rosef Kapach, expressed his preference for remaining in Eretz Yisrael, he asked her why she felt compelled to travel to other countries? She responded that this world was God’s creation and she felt that it was a Mitzvah to take it all in.

d. Finally, my Rebbi, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, once taught the meaning of this text about all that is offered to us as God’s creations: If someone is born with a talent for science, or music, or fixing things (appliances, cars, computers), he or she should not ignore it or set it aside — even at the cost of diminished Torah study. These, too, are God’s gifts to be enjoyed and made use of, and are fundamental aspects of being a Jew.

**I also remember that some of them were particularly obnoxious and arrogant when they recited the list.*

**Others, on a 3rd, 4th, or 5th tier would include doctors who are considered authorities in their specialty who are capable of diagnosing everything presented to them. Much further down the list are card counters in casinos and employees of megastores like Bed Bath and Beyond who know exactly where every single item can be found.*

Biblical Texts
(As Often Interpreted [And Sometimes Rewritten]
By the Talmud and Midrash)

**36. How A Sheepdog Helped To Save
The Jewish People**

(Aleph) Some Background – Medical literature universally agrees that walking is healthy for you. How many times a week and how long vary depending on several factors. People have different styles:

(A) In Eastern Europe before the **שואה/Shoah**, students took a Shabbat afternoon **שפאציר/shpatzier-stroll** with the Rabbi;

(B) some people just want to get out into the fresh air and walk around nowhere in particular;

(C) somewhat related are people who just want to clear their mind of clutter or stress;

(D) still others have a specific goal — a half hour, two miles, 10,000 steps — fast, medium, or slow depending on their personality and physical constitution. They check their watch or FitBit frequently;

(E) in shorts, parkas, hipboots, raging thunderstorm, 10 below zero in Fairbanks or 40 Celsius (=104 Fahrenheit) above in July in Eilat,

(F) even up the 555 steps to the top of Washington Monument.

(Bet) Enter Moses — Long before he became **משה רבינו/Moshe Rabbeynu-Our Ultimate Teacher**, he was his father-in-law Yitro's shepherd, taking the sheep and goats out to pasture. Now, kids can be especially hyperactive and have a tendency to stray from the flock. The Midrash (*Exodus Rabbah 2:2*) describes such an instance:

ברח ממנו גדי ורץ אחריו

(one day) a kid strayed, and Moses ran after it

like all good first responders — afraid that a predator might attack. I am certain this happened frequently. The text teaches that — when God saw that Moses was concerned for every individual, and acted on his concern by going to retrieve it and then carrying the animal back to the flock* — *that is when* God decided that this was the one person who could lead the Children of Israel.

(Gimel) More Background — In a book interviewing several recipients of Macarthur “genius” awards (artists, authors, poets, scientists, inventors, and other creative types), they explain that their “Big Idea” often came when their minds were empty, either by chance or intentionally emptied [*like the walkers in (C) above*].**

(Dalet) Moses At The Burning Bush (Exodus 3:2) —

וַיֵּרָא מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו
בְּלִבְתַּיִשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּקֶה
וַיֵּרָא
וְהָיָה
הַסֵּקֶה בְּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ
וְהַסֵּקֶה אֵינָנו אֹכֵל

**God's angel appeared to him in a flame in a bush,
and, when looked,
וְהָיָה/veHinay-astonishingly,
the bush was on fire
and was not consumed.**

Since Moses was on familiar pasture land, we have to wonder why he never noticed the burning bush and the angel previously since I assume God had it burning many days to get Moshe's attention. He must have walked right by it many times. But he was always preoccupied with conscientiously watching the sheep and goats.

(Hay) Enter The Sheepdog That Saved Us — Of course, Moshe's hardworking, tireless sheepdog לַאֲסִי/Lassie always accompanied him. One historic day in our Jewish history, לַאֲסִי/Lassie had done an exceptionally fine job, and at that crucial moment, all the sheep and goats were lying down and drowsing in a perfect circle in the warm sunshine. So, Moses' undistracted mind was free of any concerns and responsibilities whatsoever, and he could let his eyes roam freely everywhere — with no need to focus on anything.

His mind was completely empty.

That's when he saw the angel and burning bush.

At the risk of being repetitious —

The rest is history-our history.

**(That is the way I taught this Midrash dozens of times. Now, having read the text more carefully and paid attention to וְרָץ אַחֲרָיו -he ran after it, I understand the thrust of this text better. The truth is, maybe in light of the response of the firefighters, police, and other first responders who rushed into the two towers at the risk of — and in many cases — the cost of their lives, it was the fact that Moses ran after the stray animal that proved his worthiness. During COVID's complex, frightening, and emotionally exhausting reign of terror, this is also certainly true of the doctors, nurses, social workers and others who went to — and stayed at — their jobs day in and day out, night in and night out, beyond exhaustion, at the risk of their health, and sadly for many, at the risk of their lives.*

*** (Arthur Koestler's deals thoroughly with this phenomenon in his book The Act of Creation.)*

37. Nobody Asked Me To, But If They Had, I Would Have Written These Love Stories Differently (Composed With Intentional Bias)

I. What you need to know to follow this Dvar Torah:

(1) I am a romantic at heart; I intentionally wrote this Dvar Torah without researching the Talmud and Midrash and having to pull 27 books off my shelves. With due deference to the sages of the past, there is just too much material (TMI) in other texts, which would have interfered with my own ideas.

(2) For the same reason, I rarely looked up the relevant Biblical verses, relying instead on my memory.

(3) On a different note, always pay attention to some Biblical and Talmudic *round numbers* and their multiples: “seven years” is a long time; “12” is longer, “40” years is a very long time; 600,000 is the largest round number in the תַּנַּ"ךְ/Tanach, 2 X 600,000 is

the highest one in the Talmud.

II. The Main Characters:

Ruth (and Boaz):

(A) The Book of Ruth is the shortest of the five **מגילות/Megillot**. In my opinion, it is too short, and some of “my kind of details” are missing.

(B) Justifiably, the most often-quoted words are Ruth’s memorable lines to Naomi (1:16):

אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי
אֵלַי

**Wherever you go,
I will go.**

(C) Boaz is considerably older than Ruth, but not old enough to be considered “a dirty old man”. I later found a Midrash that gave his exact age, but in the Book of Ruth itself, no number is given.

(D) I wonder whether Moabite women looked exotic to an ancient Israelite male, similar to, how, a few decades ago, Asian, African-American, and South Sea Islander women were attractive to American men.

(E) What I like the most is what I feel is the Bible’s “sweet revenge” in this story: All too often, Biblical women are nameless and treated as things, chattel, vehicles — to move the story line along, or actors in some transcendent design. Now it is the male Boaz’s turn. .

The real turning point of the Book of Ruth is when he “does the deed” on that intimate night on his threshing floor, and Ruth becomes pregnant. After that event, we don’t really know anything about him, and though he appears again in 4:13, that is simply a description of the **גאולה/ge’ulah-the formal legal procedure for redeeming Naomi’s land** (and acquiring Ruth). There’s not much more to Boaz than that.

But, to flesh out Boaz as a person, we need to ask:

Did Boaz even once change a diaper?

Talk babytalk and babble in his ancient Hebrew to the infant?

Did he tell fantastic wonderful bedtime stories about the heroes in **ספר שופטים/Sefer Shofetim-The Book of Judges?**

Or play patty cake with the baby?

Gone, like some Biblical women, he just disappeared after the formalities because he was no longer useful to the Biblical plot.

Rachel-and-Jacob-and-Leah: Forget all the sleaziness and the Grand Deception by Lavan, the **ממזר למהדרין/arch-mamzer**. I want to know a few things:

(#a)

וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר
וַהֲגִהָהּ הוּא לְאֵה

Vayehi vaboker vehinay hee Leah

So it was in the morning, and הנה-hinay it was Leah.

Just what is the best translation of **הנה-hinay** when Jacob wakes up and finds Leah in bed with him instead of Rachel? Maybe a confused, painful “Huh?” or “OMG!”

(#b) And, I want to know how lousy Jacob felt day-in and day-out during the second round of seven years particularly when he saw Rachel in the house? All we are given is a portrait of a love-struck young man.

(#c) As for Leah, modern scholars and the Midrash have a field day about her eyes (Genesis 29:17) —

וְעֵינֵי לְאָה רְכוּת

veAynay Leah Rakkot

And Leah’s eyes were רכות-rakkot.

Delicate? Worn out from weeping (as a Midrash would have it)? Or were they ordinary, expressionless, or a non-exotic brown (what nowadays we would call **סתם-stam**), with no hint of a Norwegian goddess's blue. I was bothered by these difficult, negative, and unfair interpretations of **רכות-rakkot**, and, in this case felt compelled to do some research. As it happens, and — quite different from the negative translations — **תרגום אונקלוס/Targum Onkelos-the standard Aramaic translation** reads **יאין/ya'ayan-beautiful**. But other than **Onkelos' יאין**, (which I would think would have positively altered Jacob's relationship to Leah), I believe she is unfairly portrayed as physically unattractive compared to sister Rachel, a **פארביסענע/farbissene/bitter, sad, and lonely woman**.

(#d) My great teacher Rabbi Jack Riemer, in my opinion the greatest sermon writer of our day, brilliantly re-ports her as A Great Woman, not the least of his powerful insights is when he asks, "*After Rachel dies, who do you think raised Yosef and Binyamin?!*"

Beruria, Rabbi Meir's Wife:

(AA) In a few places, the Talmud refers to Beruria's brilliance in both life and Halachah.

(BB) As any feminist commentator will justifiably remind us, what we read about her and other women in the Talmud was taught orally by men and then, later when it was transmitted in writing, that, too, was done by men.

(CC) With all due respect, I can't shake the feeling that the sages, men of their times, are (forgive the colloquialism) "throwing the women a tidbit", i.e., "See, there were women who weren't shallow, frivolous, or licentious."

(DD) I don't think they could have imagined that centuries later, a women's Yeshivah in Elizabeth, New Jersey, would be named Beruriah High School for Girls. I like the irony of picturing parents in Elizabeth *schmoozing*, when a father brags that his daughter "goes to Beruriah". And in addition, there's a women's institute of intensive higher Torah study in Israel named **מכללת ברוריא-Michlelet Bruriah/Beruriah College**.* In both places, the Talmud is a serious part of the curriculum, which until relatively recently Talmud was not taught to girls and women in many places in the Orthodox world.

Rabbi Akiva and Rachel:

(i) It's difficult to imagine a love story more beautiful than the legendary rich man's delicate high-class daughter (Rachel), raised in luxury, falling in love with Akiva, her father's employee, a coarse (and no doubt malodorous) shepherd.

(ii) Rachel's famously wealthy father disowned her when she married Akiva. As I mentioned above, I am a romantic, but I think the following tender scene from the early days of their marriage is extraordinarily moving (*Nedarim 50a*):

**בסיתוא הוה גנו בי תיבנא
הוה קא מנקיט ליה תיבנא מן מזייה**

In the winter they lived in a storeroom for straw.

He would pick out pieces of straw from her hair.

(iii) Her proposal, "I'll let you marry me, if you promise to go study Torah" is simple, straightforward, and legendary.

(iv) The wonderful scene with Akiva sitting in class with his young son, holding both ends of a slate for taking notes, awaits a painting worthy of its beauty.

(v) But I have a serious question:

מה היה תחלתו של רבי עקיבא

אמרו

בן ארבעים שנה היה

ולא שנה כלום

What was Rabbi Akiva's "beginning"?

It was said

that he was 40 years old,

and he had not studied any Torah. (*Avot deRabbi Natan A 6:2*)

I had always assumed that when Akiva promised Rachel to go study Torah, he would do so *immediately* after they had eloped. Assuming he was in his mid-30's when Rachel proposed, why did he wait 5-6 years to however-long-after her proposal?

My Re-Write Of The Story: My big issue, then, is —

(א) Not-yet-Rabbi Akiva goes away to study Torah for 12 years,

(ב) returns surrounded by a multitude of students,

(ג) and then, with Rachel's permission, goes back for another 12 years.

As follows, my commentary is obviously being written from a Twenty-First Century perspective: In my opinion, Rachel's and Akiva's life together ought to have been like many present-day two-profession couples. The husband and wife agree to alternate in pursuing their destinies according to whose career-needs took priority at that juncture. Naturally, this will also determine where they will live according to whose occupation is due.

Rachel was certainly no slouch when it came to intelligence and insight. Just for one example: From the beginning, she understood that this simple, crude-looking shepherd was

צניע ומעילי

tzeni'a uma' alay-gentle and had a refined soul.** (*Ketubot 62b*)

She just *knew* there was greatness in this man.

So, too, I sense that she could have just as well had the talent and ability to manage any complex, high-level Torah discussion with the male sages. I would have let her take, say, the first six years, and leave Akiva at home to do the laundry and dishes, clean the house for Shabbat and Pesach, think up children's games and tell fantastic sheep and goat stories to entertain their growing child. And, since we assume (as Rachel did) that he already had the aptitude for Torah, he could start his son on **the יומי דף/Daf Yomi-the daily page of Talmud**.

As I mentioned above, according to my calculation Akiva was probably in his mid-thirties when Rachel proposed. Whether 34 or 40, it wouldn't have made much difference to Akiva when he began to study. We know many late-bloomer geniuses (painters, sculptors, inventors, authors, others) who delayed or were sidetracked in other pursuits before they reached their destined place in history. Had the Talmud recorded the story the way that I imagine it, there would have been at least two great benefits to this glorious couple:

(אא) The two of them would have so much more to talk about when Rachel came home from her first six-year cycle (and subsequent ones) of study because of her deep Torah-knowledge, and

(בב) Akiva would have grasped the Torah-material he would be studying so much better and more profoundly during *his* years of study for having lived those years of "Real Life".

**Later, the name was changed to Midreshet Lindenbaum.*

***A good Yiddish transition would be that he had an איידלע נשמה/edele neshama.*

38. Two Things Most Of Us Didn't Know About Father Abraham

(Aleph) I was leafing through the Midrash *Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer*, looking for a source about our women refusing to give their jewelry for molding the golden calf, when I

re-discovered some old underlinings. When I reached Chapter 29, I got sidetracked. I found something that I had forgotten long ago: Abraham's son Yishmael married a woman from **עֲרֻבוֹת מוֹאָב**/Arvot Moav. It is not clear to me how many years after Sara banished him and his mother Hagar, but the Midrash states that three years later, Abraham went to see his son. Before setting out, Sarah made him swear not to get off the donkey when he saw Yishmael. Abraham, after having made the same promise to Sarah a second time, visited him yet again after another three years.

The Torah text itself leaves us with a huge gap in the years between when Yishmael and Hagar left Abraham's home, and his final reunion with his father – to bury him. But this Midrash leaves the imagination much fertile material for Divray Torah:

- a. Once he decided that he wanted to go, how long did Abraham wait until he asked Sarah's permission?
- b. Did he stammer and not look her in the eye when he asked?
- c. What did Sarah actually say in her reply?
 - Was she understanding when she heard the longing in his voice?
 - That she knew he *had* to do it?
 - Did she just sigh and realize that she just had to give her consent?
 - What was her tone of voice when she made her husband swear to keep his distance?
- d. From on top of the beast, what did Abraham say to Yishmael, and how did his son respond, or did Yishmael not respond at all because of the resentment he felt toward his father having given into Sarah years before?
- e. I leave these to rabbis and teachers, and sermonizers, and when they are through, they can also deal with some of the following:

(Bet) Farther down in that same chapter, the Midrash states that, after Sarah died, Abraham remarried Hagar. This is so astonishing: So many things swirled around in my mind when I re-discovered it. I had to force myself to focus on only one thing that the Midrash reminded me of: In 2002, David McCullough published what is generally acclaimed by many critics as the authoritative biography of President John Adams. Certainly Adams' exchange of some 1,100 letters of affection and love for his wife Abigail are among the most extraordinary documents in any presidential archive.

One particular scene that McCullough describes greatly moved me:

President Adams lived long after he had finished his term of office, dying at 90. Abigail had passed away eight years earlier. Some time after she died, a certain woman came to visit Adams at his home. She had been someone he had loved decades before, before he had married Abigail. Though he was in his 80's, the moment he saw her, he rose from his chair and suggested they take a walk in the garden. What a tremendously moving scene McCullough describes! Years and years those emotions lay latent, and after a very long and happy marriage, there was still something about her in Adams' mind and heart — even as an old man.

I leave these Midrashim of Abraham and Hagar and the story of the aged former President Adams and his old flame to the imaginations of lyrical poets and those people who remember Old Loves.

39. Amos and Moses

The scene at the burning bush early on in the Book of Exodus is so well known that even most Jewish children who only attend the few hours of a synagogue's afternoon religious school know it: Moses is reluctant to go back to Egypt as God's messenger to free the Israelite slaves. He begs off because he has a speech impediment and, argues that, because of this, Pharaoh will not listen to him. My sense is that almost everyone who has

because of this, Pharaoh will not listen to him. My sense is that almost everyone who has studied this story thinks it is because Pharaoh simply would not be able to understand what Moses is saying.

Now, my very favorite commentator on Jewish texts is Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941). As with other Torah-Greats, he had an encyclopedic memory for knowing and recalling the near-infinite quantity of past and contemporary Jewish material. Unique, though, are his consistently astonishing and creative Torah-and-human insights. When I study his commentaries, I find something awesome on almost every page, and I know I will be rewarded even if I am only skipping around in his many books.*

Rabbi Epstein, like several other **גדולים/Gedolim-Torah Giants** throughout the ages, also “tackled” the story of Moses at the burning bush. In his *Tosefet Bracha*, he begins with the following quote from the Midrash (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:2*):

למה נקרא שמו עמוס
א"ר פנחס
שהיה עמוס בלשונו

Why was the prophet Amos named “עָמוֹס-Amos”?

Rabbi Pinchas said:

Because his speech was עָמוֹס/amus-burdened, labored.

(The three-letter root of the name עָמוֹס is עמס and the passive form/adjective is כבד-פה וכבד לשון/kevad peh uchevad lashon-literally “mouth-heavy” and “tongue-heavy”. The meaning of both Amos’s and Moshe’s phrases is the same: They did not speak the way “normal” people do. (I leave it to Biblical scholars to determine whether the Hebrew means “mumbly”, “garbled”, “stuttering”, “pronounces the letter ל like a ר”, “slurring”, “disjointed”, “stammering”, “tongue-tied”, “physiologically unable to pronounce certain letters”, or some other type of speech disorder.) Rabbi Epstein comments that, if the content of what Moses said were important enough, Pharaoh could have reached beyond Moses’ struggles to express himself, and would understand the *content* of Moses’ words. In some ways this is similar to experiences *some* people might have had when deciphering an infant’s first words, engaging in conversation with *some* persons who have had a stroke, or with *some* persons who might have a degree of cerebral palsy that has affected their speech, or with *some* deaf people who have learned to speak. Similarly, the assembled Israelites hearing the prophet Amos transmit God’s message could listen carefully and understand the message.**

Rabbi Epstein wrote that the *real* issue with Pharaoh is *not* that he would not understand what Moses was saying. Rather, he simply could not comprehend how a God such as Moses described why that God would select this “defective” Moses to deliver the message. The God of the Israelites obviously could have chosen a “perfect” human being. It was simply inconceivable to him to pay attention to such a *chutzpadik* demand to free his slaves from the ridiculous-sounding man confronting him.

In the context of ancient Egypt, this is understandable. To Pharaoh — a god himself to the Egyptians and in his own mind — the richest and most powerful king, who had rooms full of every kind of priceless jewel imaginable, who could afford the absolutely finest marble for his palaces, the most exquisite fabrics for his robes, chariots of the most expensive wood and metal fashioned by the world’s most skilled craftspeople — to Pharaoh, the fact and presence of such a flawed messenger just did not make any sense.**

A similar instance of Pharaoh’s inability to grasp what makes a person a person is the tale from Roman times (*Ta’anit 7a*) of Caesar’s daughter’s reaction to meeting the great, but physically ugly, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah. She blurts out (in Talmudic Hebrew):

אי חכמה מפוארה בכלי מכוּער

“Oh! [or “Oy***!”] What glorious Torah in such an ugly vessel!”

She just didn’t “get” it.

make things right. This action is the classic definition of **חַסָּדִים/Chassadim**.

(G3) As a curious aside, some ancient myths record that Prometheus also molded human beings and the animals out of clay.

(G4) At one point, Zeus's eagle is killed. [**ברוך השם/Baruch HaShem-Thank God. This is too much suffering even for a Titan.**] Again, I could not follow whether this was done by a god or a demigod. (Although I *did* think of the many mind-bending last-minute rescues in spy and police TV shows and movies.) Once again, Prometheus, no longer tortured daily, lives on, but, at that point in the mythological material, his subsequent adventures become too entangled in the names and details for me to follow.

(J1) Diametrically opposed to Zeus's remoteness and detachment, throughout Creation, God is intimately involved and is responsive to Adam's anxiety.

(J2) Prometheus could only mold humans and animals, but could not breathe the breath of life into them.

(J3) When Adam was given the two stones, God also endowed him with

דיעה

day'ah-knowledge, wisdom, skill

מעין דוגמא של מעלה

may'ayn dugma shel ma'alah-similar to the capabilities of the heavenly powers.

Otherwise, Adam would not have known that rubbing stones together would produce fire.****

(J4) When Adam saw the fire, naturally — as Jews have done for two millennia — he recited a blessing thanking God for this precious gift.

(Hay) **Havdalah:** Surprise, surprise! You probably guessed it — this happened right after Shabbat ended: Fire and a blessing. Rabbi Levi stated in the name of Rabbi Zeira (*Genesis Rabbah 11:2*) that the blessing Adam recited was

בורא מאורי האש

(God) creates light from fire

...the very words we sing in *Havdalah*. And the wording "light from fire" is derived from his having rubbed the two stones together to produce the sparks that became a fire that provided the light that removed Adam's anxiety.

(Vav) And so goes the creative, intricate, winding, enlightening path of the Midrash.

**This was surely a Prometheus's hepatologist's diagnostic nightmare.*

***You may wonder why Adam was not afraid at dusk the night before, which was the first **ערב שבת/erev Shabbat-Friday night** in history. A separate Midrash explains that he was, indeed, anxious then. Our source, though, ignores that Midrash. The **ערב שבת/Erev Shabbat** text is too long, complicated, and convoluted to deal with in this Dvar Torah.*

****In fact, in ancient Mesopotamian mythology, humans were created specifically to slavishly provide food for the gods...a far cry from **אלוהים בצלם/beTZelem Elohim-being created in God's image.***

*****Eons later, innumerable girl scouts and boy scouts will do the same with two sticks in order to earn their merit badges.*

41. Uncle Walt, Jacob's Daughter Dinah, Esther, and Job

(Aleph) Uncle Walt — Even though Disney popularized the Grimms' grisly stories by sanitizing them, he must have been in some alternate universe when he produced *Song of the South*, with the slaves and sharecroppers singing "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay, my, oh, my, what a wonderful day" as they come back from a hot, backbreaking day working in the massa's cotton fields. Still, he brought us Mickey and Donald, Bambi, Snow White, and so many others

show white, and so many others.

Walt Disney unquestionably had one of the most creative imaginations in American history.

(Bet) להבדיל/Lehavdil — by remote comparison and contrast — the creators of Midrash over the past two millennia:

*they played irregular, albeit serious, games with Biblical grammar and syntax,
calculated גמטריא/gematrias (the numerical value of the Hebrew letters)
with such mathematical inaccuracies
they would certainly have gotten red marks on their papers
from their 4th grade teacher,
warped time at a warp speed faster than any Star Trek Starship Enterprise,
squashing together generations and centuries without hesitation,
had the unbelievable chutzpah for their pedagogic purposes
to intentionally read words differently
than how they are written in the Holy Torah!
(though, obviously not changing the words in the actual Sefer Torah
deliberately changed vowels! and
repeatedly substituted implausible or fanciful translations
of the three-letter Hebrew roots —
but always for the purpose of teaching a Torah-lesson.*

Sometimes they revealed how they derived their message; at other times, working hard as we might to guess, the connection remains undecipherable. More often than not, though, the end-product is admirable, dazzling, fantastic (as in “fantasy”), or even outrageous — but always to teach a Torah Life-lesson.

The following are two examples of their “far out” Midrashim:

(1) The second plague (*Exodus 8:2*) is written in the text:

ותעל הצפרדע

The frog came up

(from the Nile).

Even though הצפרדע (singular) is grammatically a collective noun meaning “the frogs”, Rabbi Akiva interpreted that (*Sanhedrin 67b*):

צפרדע אחת היתה

it was one single (גודזילה/Godzilla-sized) frog.

The Talmud does not tell us if the assembled sages found this insightful or amusing.

(2) In the book of Jonah, the King of Nineveh (*according to Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's Ba'al HaTurim Bible commentary, [quoting an earlier Midrash]*) was really none other than the nefarious Pharaoh of the Exodus, who was the only survivor after his army drowned in the sea. This incredible “fact” explains why he and his subjects heeded Jonah's words and immediately repented. Pharaoh had learned his lesson not to “mess with” the God of Israel.

(Gimel) Maybe the wildest one of all: איוב/Job and אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ/Achashvayrosh —

(A) Since no date is mentioned in the Biblical Book of Job itself, the Talmudic sages (*Bava Batra 15a-b*) provide a long list of free-associated and (often remote) linguistic acrobatics in an attempt to determine when Job lived. Their opinions include:

*In the time of Abraham,
in the period of the Judges, and
when Ezra returned with some of the exiles
from Babylonia to the Land of Israel.
Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani goes so far as to say
that Job never existed,
and that the story is only a metaphoric tale meant to describe
the relationship of The Divine to human beings.*

One opinion, “ויש אומרים/veYesh omrim-And others say”, states that Job lived in the days of Jacob and, that he married Jacob’s daughter Dinah!*

(B) Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha stated that Job lived at the time of King Achashvayrosh.

After Vashti was banished, the king’s servants’ followed the king’s instructions, and brought all the beautiful virgins of his realm to Shushan.** Each one spends a night, leaves in the morning, then, the next night, another is brought in. And yet, hard as it is to believe, this weak, wishy-washy, incompetent king, with his insatiable libido, chose **אסתר**/Esther.

My favorite Torah commentator Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (Eastern Europe, 1860-1942) records the following in his **גשמי ברכה**/Gishmay Bracha:

Esther was *not* picked because she was gorgeous. In fact, the Midrash (*Megillah 13a*) describes her as

ירקרוקת

yerakroket-having a yellowish or greenish (pale?) pallor.

The color of her skin was irrelevant. What was clear about his final choice was that **וחוט של חסד משוך עליה**

she dazzled the king (perhaps in her interview) with her personal distinguishing quality of **חסד**/chessed-compassion. So overwhelmed was he by Esther’s *Menschlichkeit*, I would wager that Achashvayrosh himself was surprised to discover that there was more to his search than just beautiful bodies.

(Dalet) *I promised you* **איוב**/Job. — *Here goes:* This is a story of one-up-personship: The king’s young women were brought to Shushan from all 127 provinces in his realm. But Job, after all the catastrophic events that happened to him (**אויף די שונאים**), everything, including seven sons and three daughters, is restored to him. If we follow the opinion that Job*** lived in Esther’s*** day, we can understand *Job 42:15* as background to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha’s Midrash:

ולא נמצא נשים יפות כבנות איוב בכל הארץ

Job’s daughters were the most beautiful women in the entire world

and what follows:

Even though Esther was up against the absolutely toughest competition imaginable — Job’s daughters — in the end, her *Menschlich* character was so remarkable and transparent, she was the king’s *obvious* choice to become Queen.

Lordy Lordy! Getting from point A to point B — from Snow White’s to Esther’s skin color — has been quite a long-and-winding, dazzling, and mind-bending trip that would challenge any cerebral GPS programmer’s skills.

To quote Rabbi Akiva (*Tosefta Shabbat 8:3*),

“לחיי רבנא/Lechayay Rabbanana!-Lechaim to our Torah-teachers!

ולחיי תלמידיהון/Ulechayay Talmidayhon-And Lechaim to their Students!”

He means us!

*This **שידוך**/shidduch-match explains what happened to Dinah after she was forced to have sex with Shechem (Genesis Chapter 34). How in the world our Midrash-minded sages came up with this is really is quite a stretch.

**Picture the crowds of bikini-clad nubile women on Waikiki beach in re-reruns of Hawaii 5-0, Magnum PI, and NCIS Hawaii.

***Besides the historical distance that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha describes, *The Book of Job and Megillat Esther* are far apart in the printed **תנ"ך**/Tanach.

42. A Particularly Challenging Verse In The Book of Psalms

I. Printing the תנ"ך/Tanach: If I were next in line to print a new edition of a Hebrew-English תנ"ך/Tanach – Genesis through II Chronicles — I would of course print it in the traditional black ink. However, Psalm 139:14 — because it is so overwhelmingly full of potential meanings and opportunities for Life-fulfillment — would appear on the page in bold letters, underlined, and with a font enlarged at least two points to like this:

אוֹדֹךָ עַל כִּי נִרְאוֹת נִפְלִיתִי נִפְלָאִים מַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְנַפְשִׁי יָדַעַת מְאֹד

Just before it went to press, I would also print it entirely in bright red.*

(My own English translations will be discussed below.)

II. Approaching This Text:

Having been trained for seven years in Biblical studies by some The Greats in Biblical studies I am considered fairly competent with the text. What a Bible scholar and I have in common is that we approach the text with the utmost seriousness. However, the only way I can clarify the distance between my knowledge to the vast quantitative amount of that of a *real* Bible scholar* is by analogy: (*Analogy #1*) Me — in my 13-year-old Dodge Charger vs. the real Bible scholar — in a Formula One Ferrari at the Indianapolis 500.

But, as I wrote, I *am* serious student of תנ"ך/Tanach, not merely a dabbler, and, beside, I have a poetic *feel* for the meaning and translation of texts. This should give me a measure of qualification for this work.

III. What Happened When I Pursued My “Feel” for Psalm 139:14: Some Biblical verses have straightforward translations, e.g, in what is commonly called “The Ten Commandments”:

לא תרצח

lo tirtzach

You shall not murder (not “kill”),

להבדיל/Lehavdil-of a much lesser societal importance — Genesis 46:21:

וּבְנֵי בְנֵימֹן בְּלַע וּבְכֹר וְאַשְׁבֵּל גְּרָא וְנַעֲמֹן אַחִי וְרֹאשׁ מִפִּים וְחַפִּים וְאַרְדֹּךְ
Benjamin’s sons were Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Na’aman, Aychi, and Rosh, Muppim, Chuppim, and Ard.

By contrast, I knew from the outset that Psalm 139:14 would be a difficult text because of so many possible translations of the Hebrew.

At this point, I must resort again to comparisons to analogies: (#2) Initially, I felt I was up to the task, like being confronted by an eighth-grade bully — because of certain training that I had had in self-defense — I knew I could handle him. Even though I was a year younger and considerably smaller. (*Analogy #3*) Later on, I felt a little like that ram at the עקדה/Akedah, in Genesis 22 entangled in a thicket at a distance from Abraham, hoping in that animal’s deepest soul, that Abraham, the knife still in his hand, would not notice me.

(*Analogy #4*) Still later, The analogy to my relationship with Psalm 139:14 became clearer when I stumbled across NHK-JP, the Japanese TV news channel. After its regular half-hourly 15 minutes of news, NHK features special clips about life in Japan, occasionally including championship sumo matches. I became absorbed with these contests of 300- and 400-pound wrestlers, and, after a long time thinking about them, and working with 139:14, I juxtaposed sumo and my תנ"ך/Tanach studies in my mind.

להבדיל/Lehavdil-again, a remote comparison: I began to feel more like I was in the circle with Mr. Noshimuri, a 423-pound champion. In my imagination, I was terrified. As it happened, though, this image turned out to be a significant turning point. As I pictured it, this mountain of a man would chase me around the ring for no more than 10 seconds. With luck, I hoped to escape the wrestling match with only black and blue marks

and sore limbs.

So, too, I knew that I would consider my hours with Psalm 139:14 successful if I could wrest from the words even only one or two insights.

IV. The Difficulties With The Hebrew, And How Many Possible Translations?

Mathematicians have a formula that calculates how many possible combinations are in the 26-letter English alphabet, in a deck of 52 cards, or word combinations in the 100 English *Scrabble* tiles. In Psalm 139 verse 14, the root of almost every word has two or more (and even many more) — meanings: **ידה/אודך-ידה/acknowledge, thank =TWO**; **ירא/נוראות-ירא/fear, awe=TWO**; **פלא/נפלאים-פלא and נפליתי-פלה/astonishing, amazing, miraculous, awesome, incomprehensible by human intelligence, sublime, extraordinary, in a category by itself=NINE**; **נפש/ונפשי-נפש/I, me, my entire self, throat, dead body, gravestone=SIX**; **ידע/ידעת-ידע/know, be aware of, recognize, distinguish, know by experience, consider, recognize, know thoroughly, perceive, be skilled, have wisdom, take notice of, know intimately, i.e., engage in sex [Adam and Eve, Genesis 4:1]=THIRTEEN**, and even **מאד/much, many, very many=THREE**. Since I have long forgotten the actual mathematical formula, the best I could do was multiply everything:

2 x 2 x 9 X 6 X 13 X 3 = 8,424 possible combinations.

V. What To Do With 8,424 (Or More) Possibilities?: Again, the best way I can explain it brings me back to comparisons. I was first attracted to this verse because of these two astoundingly powerful roots — **ירא/נוראות-ירא/fear, awe** and **נפליתי** and **נפלאים פלא/פלה** — *astonishing, amazing, miraculous, incomprehensible by normal intelligence, awesome, sublime, extraordinary, beyond intellectual grasp, in a category by itself – in the same verse!* Actually, there were *two* related words **נפלאים** and **נפליתי** for “amazing”, plus another **נוראות** for “awesome”, which constituted *three* incredibly powerful words bunched together. This was like a triple, possibly exponential, amount of heightened awareness, wonder, Heschel’s awe and radical amazement. I knew for certain that whatever I learn from this verse would be built around those fundamental words.

My final comparison is this: *Sometimes, when you meet someone, something tells you that, over time, he or she will reveal more and more beautiful, sensitive, and deep thoughts and emotions which will produce shared exhilarating moments. And, if I return on occasion, or often, to spend time with that person (or the verse), then something always wonderful and meaningful is bound to happen.* So, after a long while “living” with Psalm 139:14, here are some of my translations [substitute “human being” for “I” or “me” in each]:

(1) *Deep in my soul is the awareness of how awesome You have made me.*

(2) *As a human being, it is surely impossible to thank You for Your having created such a sublime creation as myself.*

(3) *This human being — me — is unbelievably miraculous, I am absolutely aware of this, and I am thankful for Your having created me this way.*

(4) *Though it is a mystery to me how You fashioned me, I acknowledge this reality, and am grateful to You for the sublime creation you made me to be.*

(5) *Whenever — even for a moment — I consider how marvelously complex this Me that You have made is, the least I can do is show my gratitude.*

VI. If I Had Been Asked To Compose The Next Verse: It might look like this... *and, therefore, I should show my gratitude by doing something about it, specifically, by responding with an attempt to live a Menschlich life*

VII. One Final Important Element From The Midrash:

In his book *Nautica Talmudica*, Professor Daniel Sperber mentions a text (*Leviticus Rabbah 21:5*) that is definitely to this Dvar Torah:

בקש שלום ורדפהו
ר' יוחנן פתר קריא בקברניטין
דא"ר יוחנן
לעולם יעשה אדם עצמו קברניט
האיך יכול לעשות מצוה

“Seek peace and pursue it.” (Psalm 34:15)

**Rabbi Yochanan commented that
a person should always be like a ship’s pilot,
constantly on the lookout for how to do a Mitzvah.**

Aa amazing fact: Once, when I was on a cruise, I joined other passengers on a tour of this magnificent ship. The fascinating part (beside the enormous pots and ovens in the kitchen) was standing on the bridge. I was surrounded by all the latest sophisticated electronic equipment any captain would want to safely guide a 200,000-ton vessel to the next port. What astonished me was that there was a member of the crew standing in the front of the bridge facing forward, looking through the glass, and scanning the near, middle, and far distance**. Crew members are stationed there in shifts 24 hours a day.

The human element was still an absolutely crucial part of the journey!

The additional element here is that, to express our gratitude completely, we are to search *actively, carefully, and constantly* for opportunities to live Life like a Mensch.

**I would make a small concession for the 23rd Psalm in blue, since it is so popular.*

***The true Bible scholar, however, has to know at least 10 languages: seven ancient ones, and three modern ones in order to stay current with the scholarly literature. In addition, they have a commanding knowledge of the massive amount of the traditional medieval Jewish commentaries, the ancient Greek, Latin, and Syriac translations, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Those are the true scholars.*

***This is reminiscent of Mark Twain’s description in Life on the Mississippi as a cub pilot on a riverboat going down the America’s Great River.*

43. A Specific Contemporary Situation Where The Torah-Lesson Is Crucial (Early 2021)

מִנֵּעַ בָּר
יִקְבְּהוּ לְאוֹם
וּבְרָכָה
לְרֹאשׁ מִשְׁבִּיר

**A person who withholds grain
earns the curses of the people,
But blessings are on the head
of a person who readily dispenses it. (Proverbs (11:26)**

(Aleph) Two words: Part of this verse uses the phrase **בר מונע/monay’a bar-** someone who withholds **בר/bar-grain** (from people who need it). The Midrash (*Pesikta deRav Kahana, VeZot HaBeracha 1:4 [Mandelbaum Edition, volume II, p. 439]*) takes **בר** in this negative message to refer to

ברה של תורה

bara shel Torah-the grain of Torah

that a person withholds from others who need it. Commenting on the second half of the verse, the Midrash explains the opposite, positive side

וּבְרָכָה לְרֹאשׁ מְשָׁבִיר

but blessings are on the head of the one who dispenses it,

זֶהוּ שֶׁמִּלְמַד תּוֹרָה
בְּעֵין יָפֵה

**this refers to people who generously share
their Torah knowledge with others..**

It was this aspect of **בר מונע/monay'a bar** — the analogy of grain to words of Torah — that caught my attention. Words of Torah as nutrients for a person's Jewish wellbeing is a fitting parallel to the grain's carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals for the body.

(Bet) Some bad things that some people do: On a scale of 1 to 10 — a 10: Scandalous — corporations that have high-handedly grabbed enormous and unconscionable sums of government stimulus money that should have been distributed to struggling Americans barely holding on financially. Add to that the vast sums taken fraudulently from all funds relating to COVID.* This abuse of power is appalling. They do it *because they can* — and with no moral compunctions. The Midrash (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 5:2) discusses an analogous situation of theft: When the owner of a field does not leave the required portions of a crop for poor people —

לְקַט שְׂכַחָה וּפְאֵה וּמַעֲשֵׂר עֲנִי

**לקט/leket, שכחה/shichecha, פאה/pe'ah, and מעשר עני/ma'aser ani
gleanings, forgotten sheaves, the sheaves at the corners of the field, and poor
person's tithe.**

The Torah explicitly states that those four portions *legally* belong to the poor person. The owner of the field who withholds those portions of the harvest is called a thief for stealing from others who are in need and who are *entitled* to it.

**(Gimel) Some bad things that some people do; on a scale of 1 to 10
which some people rate a 2 or 3:**

The Talmud (*Gittin 7b*) requires poor people to give Tzedakah —

אִפִּי עֲנֵי הַמִּתְפַּרְנֵס מִן הַצְּדָקָה

even if the poor person is supported by Tzedakah.

Not allowing them to do so excludes them from the *chevra* and deprives them of their Jewish and human dignity as givers. Another text extends this principle (*Brachot 6b*):

וְאָמַר רַבִּי חֵלְבּוֹ אָמַר רַב הוֹנָא:
כָּל שִׂוְדָע בְּחִבְרוֹ שֶׁהוּא רְגִיל לִיתֵן לוֹ שְׁלוֹם...
וְאִם נִתֵּן לוֹ וְלֹא הַחֲזִיר נִקְרָא גִזְלוֹן

Rabbi Chelbo said in the name of Rav Huna:

If you know someone who customarily greets you,

If that person greeted you

and you did not respond

then you would be considered a thief

(for ignoring that person's presence).

I believe that Rabbi Chelbo's in the name of Rav Huna's words contain a lesson for Life in the Time of COVID: Isolation is eating away at us. We know that there are great numbers of people who take the initiative to call, text, e-mail, Zoom, and use other social media to be in touch with others. When we *receive* those messages from others, we are *obligated* to respond. Granted that the Rabbi's language "thief" is very strong; nevertheless, the ethical principle that he is teaching is that it is irresponsible and disrespectful not to respond. We *owe* them to acknowledge their concern and affection.

(Dalet) Back to a 10: To our distress, the American justice system treats white-collar crime (as with the stimulus money) much too leniently. While this may be wishful thinking, I would like to believe that the sheer terrifying thuggism of the January 6th, 2021,

assault on the Capitol** will be a wake-up call. *Some* social media and news outlets that helped foment the insurgents' terrorist acts have responsibly shut down their plethora of electronic avenues of hate; *some* individuals, businesses, and corporations have stopped the flow of money to campaigns of the members of Congress who actively — or by their complicit silence — encouraged or condoned the rioters' violence and killings. Hopefully in the next elections, voters will call those legislators to account for their toxic and lethal actions and inactions.

So, too, our courts should hand down severe sentences to white-collar criminals.

(Hay) On a scale of 1 to 10 — for you to rate: Three examples —

(A) At long last, bullying and cyber-bullying in our schools are being dealt with. There is a growing awareness that the sting and psychological damage of embarrassment and humiliation are profound and long-lasting. Some sources of the suffering that bullying causes include hazing in fraternities, sororities, sports teams, and other *chevras*. These are slowly being recognized for what they are — absolutely unacceptable sadistic activities.

(B) Similarly for teachers and professors who abuse their position by public embarrassment, humiliation, unfair grading, and personally-biased writing negative job recommendations. None of these should be permitted. Especially in the classroom, the embarrassment excuse that

לחדד בה התלמידים

lechadayd bah haTalmidim-to sharpen the students (Zevachim 13a),

i.e., “It makes them better students”, “It is for their own good” — should be rejected outright. So, too should we reject a student's often-heard misguided statement of acquiescence, “Still, I learned a lot from Mr./Ms. X or Professor Y”.

(C) The same is true in business for bosses' unwarranted brutality to subordinates — unacceptable.

(D) In many other contexts, the phrase parental “tough love” must also be re-evaluated and clear parameters set for when it is appropriate, and when it is not.

(E) An extreme example relates to the military: When is a drill sergeant's brutal behavior towards the recruits acceptable, i.e., because it will save the soldiers' lives and those of their buddies, and when is it not? Otherwise, it is sadism.

(Vav) January, 2021: I believe that the following relevant lesson is to be drawn from the verse in Proverbs I quoted in the beginning: Obviously in our day, **בָּר**/*bar* refers to the vaccine. Examples include the equitable distribution of vaccines to Third World and other poor countries, and defining and prioritizing the most vulnerable human beings; people in America and worldwide are confused by government officials and other policymakers on all levels who have laid out for Americans an often-baffling disarray of the rules, distribution schedule, and access to the vaccine. Furthermore — like the one who withholds the grain — there are prominent individuals in positions of power who are grossly and contemptibly cruel and abuse their power to manipulate the system. The end result is that every day there are unnecessarily enormous numbers of new people testing positive, increased hospitalizations, and unconscionable deaths.

(Zayin) Today's crucial Mitzvah: The virus is dragging on, the numbers spike disastrously, and even with two or three vaccines available, there is no clear end in sight. Everywhere plans have been suspended or cancelled for celebrations, critical medical treatments, reunions with loved ones, and a staggering host of other events. People are on edge, worn down by the “new reality”, drained of a portion of their will to move on to fulfilling their life's mission. They are “tired of being tired”.

In these trying times, I believe that a fundamental personal response is to begin with a review of the Jewish VIPs-Values Ideals and Pinciples called into play. Immediately one might think of **שמע/shema-listening**, paying close attention to another person's problems of readjustments, inconveniences, delay, and interruptions — even minor upsets and

bothersome glitches — in life's important personal encounters.

We should sympathetically share our own similar struggles. A well-known Hebrew phrase is applicable:

צרת רבים חצי נחמה

tsarat rabbim chatzi nechama

There is comfort knowing others have similar troubles.

In my opinion, the order of the day is to show our sympathy, to comfort others, and, for our part, to ease another person's anxiety and pain. A Biblical verse (*Proverbs 3:27*) (similar to the **בר מונע/monay'a bar's** principle) is particularly relevant:

**אַל־תִּמְנַע־טוֹב מִבְּעַלְיוֹ
בְּהִיּוֹת לְאֵל יוֹדֵד [יִדְדָה] לַעֲשׂוֹת**

**Do not withhold good from one who deserves it
when you have it in your power to do something.**

This is certainly a Jewish value-principle.

We would also do well to recall the end of our grain=Torah verse in Proverbs:

וּבְרָכָה לְרֹאשׁ מִשְׁבִּיר

But blessings are on the head who dispenses it (the grain), meaning

זהו שמלמד תורה בעין יפה

the person who shares Torah generously

— that the grain, the nourishment others need at this time is our Torah wisdom of optimism, hope, and spiritual uplift, offered generously in a soothing, gentle, and heartening manner. At these moments, we are called upon to rise to this occasion, to summon our soul's deepest insights, and to respond with all the Jewish and human power that we possess.

**A recently heard a report that put the figure at 8 billion dollars!*

***There were moments while watching the live coverage on TV that some people — astonished that this could ever happen in America — might have recalled the line from Hamlet, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."*

44. On Why It Is So Important To Keep Your Annual Appointment With Your Optometrist

I was fortunate, actually blessed, to have studied with some of The Greats of Bible scholarship. I was awed by their ability to jump from Hosea to Chronicles, then Ruth and Numbers, to elucidate some historical or etymological point. This morning, to a considerably lesser and more humble degree, I found myself doing the same, from Genesis to Jeremiah and finally to Exodus.

First, to understand today's subject, we need to have a mental picture in our minds the description of the settings. And second, we have to clearly understand that the word **מדבר/midbar** in many instances means "wilderness"*, not "desert".

Now, we want to examine Mother Rachel in the Book of Jeremiah in Chapter 31 and Hagar in Genesis 21.

(א) Rachel:

**קול בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמַע
נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים
רָחֵל מִבְּכָה עַל־בְּנֵיהָ
מֵאַנָּה לְהַנְחִים עַל־בְּנֵיהָ כִּי אֵינָנוּ
טוֹ כֹּה | אָמַר יְהוָה
מִנְעֵי הַגּוֹלָה מִבְּכֵי וְעֵינֶיךָ מִדְּמָעָה**

כִּי יִשְׁכַּר לַפְּעֻלָּתְךָ נְאֻם־יְהוָה
וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיֵב
וְיִשְׁתַּקְּוּהָ לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נְאֻם־יְהוָה
וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם

**Thus said God: A cry is heard in Ramah —
Wailing, bitter weeping —
Rachel is weeping for her children.
She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone.
Thus said God: Restrain your voice from weeping,
your eyes from shedding tears;
for there is a reward for your labor — declares God:
They shall return from the enemy's land.
And there is hope for your future — declares God:
Your children shall return to their country.**

Distraught over her children in Exile, she waits, continually weeping, by the wayside for them to return to the Land of Israel. God's words of comfort and reassurance of their return is apparently enough to turn her despair to hope.

(2) Hagar:

Abraham leaves Hagar and Yishmael with bread, and water in the **מדבר-midbar**. The child is moaning from thirst while Hagar, a short distance away, hearing Yishmael in his misery, bursts into tears. God hears Yishmael, comforts Hagar, and says (*Genesis 21:18*):

קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר
וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדְךָ בּוֹ
כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימְנֵוּ

**Come, lift up the boy
and hold him by the hand,
for I will make a great nation of him.**

וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ
וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם

**Then God opened her eyes,
and she saw a well of water.**

Initially, we would have thought that Hagar would be visually searching intensely for a source of water. This is similar to when you urgently search for your car keys when you need to take someone to the emergency room. But there is no mention of that in the text. Also, and this is what seized my imagination, why does God have to open her eyes when God's comforting words were enough for Mother Rachel to stop her flow of tears? And *then* (and I am certainly not the first one to point this out), she sees the well of water – *a well that had been there all the time!* Why hadn't Hagar seen the well? *Physically*, it was because her tears impaired her vision. I think, though, what is being described here is a combination of things. Hagar was not only weeping to see her son in such a life-threatening state, *but also for herself*, now having lost her master-husband and home life with Abraham. And *that's* why the additional effort by God, i.e., opening her eyes. For Mother Rachel, her tears were purely-and-simply about the distress of others, so words were sufficient.

That, beside suffering a mother's pain for her son, her own life was torn apart, was understandable. It's not for me to comment that this discredits her as a mother and a person. Who knows what complex emotions and thoughts would rush through our mind

were we to find ourselves in such a terrible situation? (**חס ושלום/chass/veShalom-God forbid**). Reading these verses in Genesis, I believe the student is called upon to know Hagar better, to do our utmost to see not only what is on the surface but also to try to understand from what depth-of-soul she drew to go on with her own life, and to raise her son.

We have to remain aware of this Hagar's pain every time we read this passage.

Considering Hagar in her full humanity may be a difficult task, but for us, the students of Torah, it is the right thing to do for her.

(ג) The more obvious message of this story, however, is considering how many wonders, how much direction in our lives, is right there in front of us, waiting for us just to see it, just like Hagar's well in Genesis 21:19.

**Americans — picture Daniel Boone in his coonskin cap working his way through Kentucky.*

45. Orpah-ערפה, Ruth's Sister-In-Law

I. One Way the Talmud and Midrash Understand Torah: As often happens in synagogues on the first Shabbat after *Simchat Torah*, Rabbis will deliver sermons about the question, “Why does the Torah begin with the letter **ב** in the word “**בראשית/beraysheet?**” Then they will analyze the shape of the letter **ב** itself, closed above, below, and behind, but open in front. Building on Midrashic statements (*Genesis Rabbah 1:10, Chagiga 11b, and others*) our texts and our rabbis teach a practical lesson, i.e., that we should not expend our efforts speculating about what existed before Creation, what is above the heavens, and what is (metaphorically) below the earth. Rather we should only live our lives looking forward. As the rabbis explained it: The **ב** is open, facing forward, meaning our purpose is to live our everyday lives in *this* world without the need for more obscure philosophizing, ontological and eschatological musings, or mystical thinking about Reality.

I would think that God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 18:19 is an appropriate response and guide to grasping the importance the forward-facing **ב**:

כִּי יִדְעֵתִי לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו
וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט

**For I [God] have selected him [Abraham]
so that he may instruct his children and his posterity after him
to keep God's ways:
To do what is just and right.**

Many weeks later, the rabbis will give the same type of sermons with, “Why do the Ten Commandments begin with the letter **א** as in the word **אנוכי/Anochi/I?**” One explanation is because **א** has no sound. This implies that students of Torah — constantly immersed in words — should simultaneously be aware of the many possible meanings to be found in silence.*

Also, this **א**-insight brings to mind a passage (*Exodus Rabbah 29:9*):

א"ר אבהו בשם ר' יוחנן
כשנתן הקב"ה את התורה...
העולם שותק ומחריש
ויצא הקול אנכי ה' אלהיך

Rabbi Abbahu said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan:...
**When God gave the Torah, the entire world was completely silent,
and only then did The Voice proclaim, “I am Adonai your God.”**

No sound was heard — not even the initial silent **א** in the first word **אנוכי** — before the first words of Revelation were spoken.

Returning to the rabbis' sermons about "Why the **ב** and **א**?" mentioned above, my rabbi commented that the Torah and 10 Commandments had to start with *some* letter. They could just as well have begun with a **ו**, **פ**, the shortest **י**, or the LeBron-James-tall **ל**, and no doubt they would also have derived important moral, ethical, or religious lessons from them. It was as if in the Torah and 10 Commandments themselves the letters **ב** and **א** in the Creation story and the Ten Commandments were written big, Italic, or in red or some other way to signal to them — *do something with us*. The Rabbis of the Midrash taught what they did this because just the very shape of these letters was also Torah, and they were attuned to any possible hint of a Jewish Life-lesson.

II. Another Way the Rabbis Used Their Imaginative Talents: One of the other specialties the rabbis cultivated and developed was taking an ostensibly secondary, peripheral, or unimportant person, thing, or event, and derive a didactic, practical, or otherwise special message. Three examples:

(#1) קוהלת/Kohelet/Ecclesiastes, for many people a real "downer", is read on the joyous holiday of Sukkot. Many sermons and Divray Torah have been delivered connecting the two, but as my rabbi taught that, quite possibly the real reason is, because the other four **מגילות/Megillot** were already "taken", attached to other significant days and holidays in the calendar, and this was the only match-up that was left.

(#2) אבישג השונמית/Avishag HaShunammit in the opening verses of the First Book of Kings. She is certainly not a major Biblical figure like Isaiah, Aaron, Joseph, or Solomon.

The story goes like this: When King David was old, despite covering himself with blankets, he just couldn't get warm. So his servants found a young woman — **אבישג/Avishag** — to lie in bed with him to keep his royal teeth from chattering and his old bones from twitching. I didn't look further into the Talmud and traditional Midrash, but I am certain that there are many detailed descriptions of that nightly scene in the royal bedroom in our texts (the sages liked to fill in the gaps)— even though the **תנ"ך/Tanach** itself states that King David did not engage in sex with Avishag. However, this fact never stood in the way of our Midrashists' imaginations.

Ultimately, the best Midrash that I know is a non-traditional one. It is in the book *Midrash Itzik* by the Yiddish poet and storyteller Itzik Manger. Manger imagines Avishag's thoughts. He writes that she is thinking,

"דער מלך דוד איז אלט און פרום"

"Der maylech Dovid iz alt un frumm"

"King David is old and religious."

He won't even touch me! Big deal! What will I get out of this bizarre situation? A couple of lines in the Bible! Big deal!"***

(#3) The ram in the thicket at the near-sacrifice of Isaac: The Midrash (*Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer 31*) states that nothing went to waste from the sacrificed body of the **שלימזלדיקע/schlimazeldicke-out-of-luck** ram Abraham substituted for Isaac. For example, both horns [one shofar for **הר סיני/מעמד הר סיני/The Revelation at Sinai**, the other for the **קיבוץ גלויות/Ingathering of all the Jews to Israel from The Exile Around the World**]. According to *Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer*, all the rest of the carcass was also put to later Jewish historical use. As I thought about this most unfortunate creature, I knew that this scene at the *Akedah* was a classic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. All I could imagine was: When the ram saw the angel restrain Abraham's arm from killing Isaac, it said to itself, "Uh, oh!"

III. A Third Way: Clearly, the heroes of the Book of Ruth are Ruth and Naomi. Boaz merely acts at *their* instigation.

[A personal aside: It's nice to see a concrete example in the Bible [though all too rare] of women as the moving force in one of the narratives. {My personal favorite is General Deborah,

Judges Chapters 4 and 5.}

However, I recently began to think more about Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law. Though certainly not the main focus of The Book, the text states that she went back to Moab. I think there is much to consider about her:

(A) Understandably apprehensive about the tremendous uncertainties that Naomi would face when she would return to the Land of Canaan, Orpah did what I think many of us would have done: She returned to the familiarity and safety of her own people.

(B) Not everyone can be a heroic Ruth.

(C) There is also an etymological curiosity: The very root of her name – ערף – means “the back of one's neck”, implying that she (unreasonably, unethically) turned her back on Naomi and Ruth. I don't know if the name she was given was accidental, intentional, or meant to be prophetic. Whatever the origin, the (I believe unfairly) negative overtone remained in the minds of some commentators

(D) I am certain that many Midrashic texts develop Orpah's story in their own unique way, but I only pursued one text that I found. In the Talmud (*Sotah 42b*), we are told that, among her descendants, her great-grandson was none other than the giant Philistine warrior Goliath (*I Samuel 22:10*). The timing works: *Ruth's* great-grandson was David, the kid with the slingshot; *Orpah's* was David's abnormally huge, taunting, armed opponent. I would suggest that this Midrashic connection is also unfair to Orpah. As I understand the story, this young widow, who only acted as many of us no doubt would have, was simply being human. She certainly was not a bad person. In my opinion, she did not deserve such an unworthy descendant. And let us not forget that she *did* follow Naomi at least to the border of the Land of Israel.

To be honest, there are doubtless many other ways to interpret the purpose of this quote about Goliath in the Midrash. But as I wrote above, there is much more to consider about Orpah. I am only one of many who have thought about her, and no doubt others have an equally valid understanding of exactly the kind of person Orpah was.

I would welcome any other interpretation someone might teach me.

Ultimately, I think that this kind of exchange of thoughts and insights is what Torah study is all about.

**I once heard a sermon or read a text that explained that we should we should consider the meaning of the empty spaces between the words and sections, besides paying attention to the words in the Torah, .*

*** [A personal aside: It's nice to see a concrete example in the Bible [though all too rare] of women as the moving force in one of the narratives. {My personal favorite is General Deborah, Judges Chapters 4 and 5.}*

****I also wonder how Bar and Bat Mitzvah tutors explain this story to the hormone-throbbing kid if she or he – by the unluck of the draw – has this as a Haftarah.*

Concluding Thoughts

**Aleph: What are the authentic Jewish VIP's — Values Ideals and Principles?
And where and how to find them — סיני/Sinai #1 and סיני/Sinai #2**

סיני/Sinai #1 refers, of course, to God's Revelation at Mt. Sinai (*Exodus 20*.)

סיני/Sinai #2 appears in the Talmud (*Horayot 14a*) concerning who is the most qualified teacher:

אמר רבי יוחנן
פליגו בה רבן שמעון בן גמליאל ורבנן
חד אמר: סיני עדיף
וחד אמר: עוקר הרים עדיף...
שלחו לתמן: איזה מהם קודם
שלחו להו: סיני עדיף
דאמר מר: הכל צריכין למרי חטיא

Rabbi Yochanan said:

There is a disagreement between Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and the Sages:

One side said: סיני/Sinai is preferable

(the one who has command of the requisite amount of texts
and can keep the material in order.

[Rashi: as clearly as when it was given on Mt. Sinai.]

**The other side said: עוקר הרים/oker harim-one who can uproot mountains
is preferable**

(the one who has an incisive intellect
and can derive insights and Halachah from the material)...

They sent the question there, "Which one takes preference?"

They* sent back the reply, "Sinai is the preferred choice" as someone said,**

Everyone needs the owners of the wheat.

(One who has sufficient supplies of text to feed everyone).

**I'm not certain where they sent it, nor do I know to whom they sent it.*

*** The exact meaning of "דאמר מר/as someone said" in the Talmud is unclear to me.*

The practical takeaways from this discussions are:

1. The best teacher is one who knows a sufficient quantity of texts and
2. can present them in a prioritized and teachable order.

Determining authentic Torah texts to teach:

A. In America —

- a. The original Declaration of Independence is in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.
- b. Examples of two relatively minor popular stories that historians have dismissed as well-intentioned myths:
There is no historical evidence that Patrick Henry ever said,
(1) "Give me liberty or give me death,"
(2) and the story of George Washington cutting down a cherry tree has been traced to a later preacher who made it up for his sermon

B. Jewish texts —

- I. As with the Declaration of Independence, there *do* exist authentic *autographed* manuscripts of several of Maimonides' writings.
- II. However, barring the reliable kind as these Maimonides texts, there are a number of problems concerning finding trustworthy texts on which we could depend for ascertaining authentic Jewish VIP's — Values Ideals and Principles

- א. The continued discovery of lost manuscripts scattered in libraries all over the world especially in isolated Jewish communities that might have more authentic texts.
- ב. The development of linguistic and electronic tools which can facilitate clarifying and deciphering previously misunderstood values.
- ג. *The need for constant, continuous deep scholarship in order to*
 - (1) exclude foreign sources that contradict Jewish values,
 - (2) exclude outmoded morally-wrong values (e.g., the Halachic mistreatment of deaf-mute Jews).
 - (3) exclude repugnant texts as later or foreign additions the best example: (*Rashi, Avoda Zara 18b*) the story of of the besmirching the reputation of the learned **צדקת/Tzadeket** and scholarly Beruria, wife of Rabbi Meir.

c. Finally, an easier opening to finding *authentic* Jewish values:

When a Yiddish-speaking person (referring to ethical behavior) says, **“מע טאר ניט/Me tor nit-Jews just don’t do things like that.”**

d. An example of an unfortunate result of a misreading of a text:

After a relative passes away, many people give away all the deceased person’s clothing, *except the shoes*. However, the original text prohibits giving away shoes made of leather from *an animal that died of itself*, i.e., not by **שחיטה/shechitah**-Kosher slaughter. The reason was suspicion that the animal was diseased and there would be dangerous toxic materials in the leather. (Before shoe manufacturing became mechanized, it was easier to trace the source of the leather.) The sad and sinful result of the misreading, though, is that thousands of pairs of shoes are trashed, when there are certainly many people who need them.

***Bet: On the need for analogies
in the search for Jewish VIP’s — Values Ideals and Pinciples***

When people are confronted by the totality of Jewish texts, the The Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, and their multitude of accumulated ancient, medieval and modern commentaries, they may quite understandably feel simultaneously awed and yet intimidated by the colossal quantity of the material.

Like having to wear sunglasses during a solar eclipse or diluting a dosage of medication.

There is a need for some filtration or protective measures to counter this reaction.

This anthology is intended not only to provide “Danny Siegel’s Biggest Hits”, but also, in many Divray Torah, to offer search-suggestions about managing the material. The search suggestions are meant both for students with experience in text, and those who are new to this type and content of material.

That’s the “how” part of this volume.

Gimel: Why do it at all?

I believe there is an enormous quantity of Jewish VIP’s-Values Ideals and Pinciples to be found in our texts that may give direction and meaning to our lives. *And*, no less, ***this is ours***. It has been given to us over the centuries as a gift that will possibly contribute to shaping our uniqueness as Jews.

Dalet: The practical logistics for the text-student — ratios and statistics

So much depends on the personality and nature of the student. I think a good portion of it is a matter of psychological and emotional tolerance, i.e.,:

How much extraneous material does someone have to work through to get to the “goodies”, “the juicy stuff” — material that will carry great personal meaning?

Some people can tolerate an enormous amount of pain, others (like me) cringe when I have to get a shot.

Your own assessment of the ratio of “good stuff” to boring or irrelevant material will certainly be both helpful and practical.

But know, that just as there are successful techniques for managing stress or pain — such as taking deep breaths or doing *tai chi* or crossword puzzles — you will develop your own methods that will enhance your ability to find what you are looking for.

Still, in all, I think it is important to periodically ask yourself questions like, “What percentage of satisfaction, emotional and spiritual growth am I getting from these texts?”

Or, if it is easier for you to think in Las Vegas terms, “Are the odds 3 to 1, 10 to 1, better or worse today that Torah will provide me something meaningful?”

Or “Is this just too much to wade through?”

Or “No worries. I can handle it.”

Hay: A hard fact

בן בג בג אומר,
הפך בה והפך בה,
דכלא בה

The sage Ben Bag Bag says:

**Go over it (Torah) again and again,
turning it this way and that,
because everything is in it. (Pirkay Avot 5:22)**

As with some other statements I have found in our texts, I must, respectfully, also disagree with **בג בג בן/Ben Bag Bag**. I do not believe that a person who studies Jewish texts will find *everything* in it. I have partially addressed this in Dvar Torah #14. For example, you will *not* always find relief from the despair that comes from the loss of a parent or friends. You will *not* find every single universal or eternal problem solved, nor the mysteries-in-Life revealed to your satisfaction.

You should be prepared to recognize that *if what you are looking for isn't there, it just isn't there.*

Vav: סוף הדבר/Sof haDavar-My final Conclusion

1. It is obviously my opinion that text study and the search and actualization of Jewish VIP's — Values Ideals and Pinciples can be *potentially* of great practical significance in a Jew's life.

2. The importance of tailor-making the extent and method of text study depends solely on you as a person, as outlined in ***Dalet*** above.

3. The only additional restriction/qualification/proviso is outlined in ***Hay***, i.e., to benefit from your study, to discover as much as the texts have to offer, it might be beneficial to always keep in the back of your mind what you *won't* discover.

May your journey through this marvelous Jewish material be comfortable, smooth, joyous — at times exhilarating — and personally meaningful.

אמן/Amen!

Ezekiel's Vision of The Dry Bones

One of my favorite gospel songs is “O, Mary, Don’t You Weep, Don’t You Mourn”. (*Bruce Springsteen’s rendition is particularly beautiful and powerful.*) The words of the song continue: “Pharaoh’s army got drowned/O Mary, don’t you weep”. As a poet, I love the colloquial English.

My favorite verse, though, is

“If I could, I surely would/stand on the rock where Moses stood”.

Those words really got me thinking:

I asked myself, “At which of the Great Moments in The Bible would I have wanted *personally* to be present?” I wouldn’t choose to stand with Moses on Mt. Nebo looking longingly into the Promised Land, nor to be among the Children of Israel the night of the Exodus, nor standing during The Revelation at Mt. Sinai. I thought about all of them, but decided instead — finally, and without hesitation — to stand *right beside* the prophet Ezekiel, as he prophesied among the Israelite exiles in Babylonia while gazing out at a vast valley filled with dry bones.

(Aleph) The valley, the bones: For centuries, sages and commentators have offered various opinions about the meaning, implications, and possible truths of Ezekiel’s sublime vision in chapter 37, verses 1-14.

The prophecy describes a valley covered with bones — **וְהָיָה רַבּוֹת מְאֹד** / *there were very many bones* **וְהָיָה יְבִשׁוֹת מְאֹד** / *and they were very dry!* (“הנה”/hinay is emphatic.) in verse 11, God explains to the prophet

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי
בְּרָאֲדָם
הָעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה
כֹּל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה

(God) said,

“O mortal,

These bones are the entire House of Israel.”

Then I went to a passage in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 92b*) for clarification.

As expected, on that page the Sages’ opinions differ. **(A)** Rabbi Eliezer stated that, after the bones formed skeletons, were covered with flesh and skin, and were revived by God’s life-giving breath, they stood up, sang a verse about life, death, and resurrection, and then died again. **(B)** Rabbi Yehoshua said that it was only a visionary metaphor and never really happened. **(C)** Rabbi Yehudah ben Betayrah said, that those who were resurrected went to the land of Israel, gave birth to sons and daughters, and that *he himself was one of their descendants!*

(Bet) Some thoughts: In verse 14, God tells Ezekiel that the Israelites are in despair about when the Babylonian Exile would end and they could return to the Land of Israel. God assures them,

הִנֵּה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת-קְבֻרוֹתֵיכֶם
וְהֶעֱלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבֻרוֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי
וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל-אֲדַמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל

Listen! I will open your graves,

and I will lift you out of your graves, O My people,

and take you to The Land of Israel.

One phrase back in verse 11 has the exiles saying “**וְאֶבְדָּה תְּקוּתָנוּ**” / *veAvdah tikvataynu-our hope is lost*”, which is why in **הַתְּקוּוּהָ/Hatikvah** we sing, “**עוֹד לֹא אֲבָדָה**”.

תקוותנו/od lo avda Tikvataynu-We have not lost our (two thousand years of) hope”.

I can't help but wonder how Jews in The Middle Ages felt – 1,000 or 1,500 years and more into the Exile.

Or for that matter, what was in the minds of Herzl and the other early Zionist dreamers?

And I can't help but imagine what Jews everywhere were feeling as they listened to the radio on November 29, 1947, when the United Nations voted to end the British Mandate and to partition Palestine.

On May 14, 1948, the day before the first Israel's **יום העצמעות/yom ha'Atzma'ut-Independence Day** the military expressed hesitation about the viability of Israel in the face of massive numbers of seven Arab armies prepared to drive the Jews into the sea. What was going through David Ben Gurion's mind when he nevertheless proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel?

(Gimel) Some thoughts I had while standing right beside Ezekiel and hearing him proclaim his vision: In general, we should not simply ignore astonishing thoughts, ideas, intuitions, insights, imaginings, visions (even dreams) — even if they seem wild, outrageous, or unreal — however and whenever we might encounter them. Even if we miss “the point”, there is much to gain from the discovery itself. To the contrary, we should pay special attention.

Quite possibly we ought to be *especially* attuned to people who *think or act* differently than “the norm”. For example, (1) Einstein, intimately connected mass and energy; (2) Edward Jenner used cowpox microbes to cure smallpox, and (3) the Wright brothers – mere bicycle shop owners – who believed and proved that people could fly in machines. Picture them at Kitty Hawk the next time you board a Boeing 747 or A380.

(4) Some scholars have commented that, though it contradicts verse 11 — that the bones are those of *all the House of Israel* — verse 9 refers to the bones as **הַרוּגִים/harugim-those who were killed** (in some indeterminate war). In verse 10 — they translate **חַיִל/chayil** as “army” — then **חַיִל גָּדוֹל מְאֹד מְאֹד**, the bones were a “very, very great army”. I think we would naturally call to mind Israel's **יום הזכרון/Yom HaZikaron-Memorial Day**. The entire population completely stops as sirens go off for a couple of minutes throughout the country. In 2021, **יום הזכרון/Yom HaZikaron** commemorated the 23,928 soldiers and victims of terror who had been killed since 1948.

(5) Working backwards in time, we might well think of the victims of the Crusades, Inquisition, Chmelnitzky massacres, Russian pogroms, and the especially the **שואה/Shoah**. *Who would not want all of them to be restored to life?*

(6) Genesis 3:9 states that the *ultimate* fate of human beings is **כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאַל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב**-**You are dust and you shall return to dust**. Ezekiel's prophecy teaches that there is still something beyond that “ultimate” — that resurrection is possible.

(7) In particular, as the months of COVID drag on and the number of infections and deaths climbs horribly, many people have had the deeply unsettling feeling that they may never see their friends and family again. That finality eats away at their souls. Ezekiel's vision *can* be a source of comfort for them. Some would say that this is naïve sentimentality. In my opinion, that's all right — each his or her own. It is only human to have doubts.

(Dalet) Returning to the valley: I know there is much more to learn from Ezekiel 37:1-14. I consider this Dvar Torah only the beginning of my thinking about this unique, truly sublime, and inspiring prophecy. This passage is one of our Biblical texts which I believe will continue to yield more and more depth and meaning. If hope is one of the fundamental Jewish VIP's — Values, Ideals, and Pinciples, we would do well to put our hearts, minds souls, and emotional energy into returning to Ezekiel's words many times.