

OHRNET

THE OHR SOMAYACH TORAH MAGAZINE ON THE INTERNET

Adapted from an essay by Rabbi Michael Schoen

The Concept of TESHUVAH

Teshuvah, repentance, seems illogical. True, a sinner must change his ways to avoid further punishment. Yet by what logic can a previous sin be forgiven? Why shouldn't he be punished for the bad he has done?

One might answer that Hashem wipes away our sins because He is all-merciful. This answer, however, doesn't stand up to scrutiny. For, consider the fact that a person can also erase his good deeds if he sincerely regrets them. As Rambam states: "Whoever regrets the *mitzvot* he has fulfilled...and says to himself: 'What did I get out of doing them? I wish I hadn't done them,' loses all of them, and

no merit is remembered in his favor." (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:3)

The Rambam's insight shows that Hashem's "forgetting" our past is not merely a question of His mercy, for the concept can work against us as well. How, then, does *teshuvah* work?

When G-d judges a person, He doesn't simply weigh his sins and *mitzvot* on a scale. Rather, Hashem judges the individual himself. What is he? What does he represent? Does he embody good or evil?

True, a person's essential being depends on his past actions; but he is actually judged for the gestalt of his

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

YOM KIPPUR INSIGHTS

ORIGINAL PAINTWORK

A car wash is a great business. Within thirty seconds of driving out of the car wash your car has already lost 100% of its pristine gleam and within a week it starts to look like any other dirty car. So if people know that their car is going to get dirty, why do they bother spending the time and money to clean it in the first place?

Sometimes Yom Kippur feels a lot like a car wash. Is there a person in the world who repented on Yom Kippur for all his sins and never sinned again? And most of us have trouble seeing even the smallest improvement from one Yom Kippur to the next. Isn't it all a bit of a waste of time? I mean, who are we fooling? Certainly not G-d. And if we're honest — not even ourselves.

Have you ever tried to clean a car that hasn't seen

Continued on page two

water in two years? It's almost impossible. The dirt and the grime have eaten into the paint. It's impossible to make the car shine.

It's true that the gleam on our car when we leave the car wash is very short-lived, but there's a more important reason we make our weekly pilgrimage to the car wash. It gives us the possibility of returning to the shine of the original paint-work.

Yom Kippur is the same. The sheen with which we leave shul after Yom Kippur may wear off pretty quickly, but if we never experienced a Yom Kippur, soon we'd become so spiritually dulled that we would never be able to get back to the luster of our "original paint-work."

WEATHER REPORT

In the town of Radin, there was a fellow in his fifties who never quite managed to get married. Yom Kippur was a very lonely time for him. In Europe, the *Kol Nidrei* service would finish well before nine o'clock and people would return to their homes. On Shabbat and Yom Tov, he had lack no of meal invitations, but on *Kol Nidrei* evening there was no meal to which he could be invited. For this poor fellow it was the loneliest night of the year.

One year on *Kol Nidre* evening, he was sitting in the shul long after everyone had gone home. He leaned forward, his forehead on his arm, and gently started to weep. After a few moments, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and found himself looking into the eyes of the Chafetz Chaim. The Chafetz Chaim asked him if he could sit down. He said yes. The Chafetz Chaim proceeded to talk

to this fellow about every subject under the sun: His family, the weather. Anything to lighten this fellow's spirits. No subject seemed too trivial for the Chafetz Chaim to speak about.

They spoke for a very long time indeed. In fact they spoke the whole night long. About this. About that. The entire night.

If you or I were to conjecture the *Kol Nidrei* of the Chafetz Chaim, I doubt that it would include a discussion on the proclivities of the weather. We would picture him immersed in study and *teshuva*.

The barometer of the way we feel about G-d is mirrored in the way we treat people. A lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others shows a lacking, not just in our *mitzvot* between ourselves and our fellow, but in our *mitzvot* between ourselves and G-d.

Sometimes talking about the weather can be a very great mitzvah indeed.

A MIR YOM KIPPUR

Of all the places where you can feel the awe of Yom Kippur, the great Yeshiva of Mir must be one of the most intense.

Not so many years ago, it happened that all the younger students and the married men, the rabbis, the wives, the children, everyone had, as usual, prepared themselves for this awesome day. And on Yom Kippur itself, the service was performed with absolute punctiliousness. Everyone sang when it was time to sing, *klopped* their chests when it was time to *klop*, prostrated themselves when it was time to prostrate. The Yeshiva was a model of devotion.

Which is why it came as something of a surprise when, just before *Neilah* — the final prayer at the time of the "closing of the gates" — the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, sent a young man up to make an announcement. The young man gave a solitary bang on the table to draw everyone's attention, cleared his throat, and said in a loud voice: "The Rosh Yeshiva wishes to announce to the congregation that there is a G-d in the world."

What was the purpose of such a statement? At that highest holiest moment of the year, people needed to be reminded that there is a G-d in the world? After a month

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General Editor:

Rabbi Moshe Newman

Editorial & Web Consultant:

Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Associate Editors:

Rabbi Mordechai Becher,

Rabbi Reuven Subar

Produced by the Office of Communications

Rabbi Eliezer Shapiro, Director

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THIS IS ISSUE IS DEDICATED

לע"נ

ר' אליעזר ליפא בן ר' יחזקאל ז"ל
ת.ג.צ.ב.ה.

of Elul, two days of Rosh Hashana and ten days of *teshuvah*, after twenty-four hours of fasting and chest beating, right then, the congregation needed reminding that there is a G-d in the world?

Yes.

Sometimes it is exactly at those peak moments that we can forget what things are really all about. We can become so embroiled with all the Highness and the Holiness, that we forget the most important thing of all. We can forget why we are doing all of this. Because there is a G-d in the world.

THE GATE OF TEARS

There are many gates to Heaven. Nowadays, however, they are all closed. All of them, that is, except one. The Gate Of Tears. When someone prays to G-d with eyes of tears, those prayers fly straight through the Gate Of Tears. The Gate of Tears is never closed.

If so, why does it need a gate?

Take a walk around an orphanage at night. You won't hear a sound. In spite of the many young children there, no one cries. We only cry when we know someone will answer us. In an orphanage, no one is there to answer the tears.

Yom Kippur is a day when we should cry. We should cry because we know there is Someone there to answer us. That we have a Father, a King who will deal with us with charity and kindness if we throw ourselves on His mercy.

There's another kind of tears though. A crying of hopelessness. A crying which doesn't implore G-d's help. It's a crying which says that we don't believe G-d can really help us, or worse, that there is no One there to hear our tears.

That's why the Gate of Tears has a gate. For the tears of hopelessness.

Sources:

Original Paint-work - heard from Rabbi Chaim Salenger in the name of Rabbi Binyamin Jakobowitz

Weather Report, A Mir Yom Kippur - heard from Rabbi Mordechai Perlman
The Gate of Tears - The Kotzker Rebbe

being, the whole and not the parts.

When a person truly regrets his past, he is stating that those actions do not embody him. When being judged for what he represents, those sins that he regrets — or those *mitzvot* — are not factors in judgment, since they do not represent him anymore.

This understanding is apparent in the following statement of the Rambam: "When a person's sins and merits are weighed, the first sin that he sinned is not counted, nor the second. But the third and on [are counted]. If it is found that his sins — from the third and on — are greater than his merits, then the [first] two sins are included and he is punished for them all." (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:5)

Why should Hashem "ignore" the first two sins? Bearing in mind our explanation of *teshuvah*, the reason is quite clear: It is a principle of Jewish law that for an action

to establish a status quo (*chazakah*), it must occur three times. Thus, the first two times a person sins he had not indicated that he is a person who embodies that particular transgression. He simply gave in to his evil inclination. Only when he transgresses three times can one say that he represents the sin itself, and can thus be judged for his embodiment of the evil, not for one particular sin.

Among the ways to repentance, the Rambam mentions changing one's name, "as if to say: I am another, and am not the same person who did those deeds." (*Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:4)

How can one change his name and claim to be someone else? According to our explanation, this is exactly the point of *teshuvah*. One must resolve that those moments spent in sin do not represent him. He is a different person, represented by *mitzvot*.

Adapted from an essay by Rabbi Dr. Dovid Gottlieb

STRATEGIC TESHUVA

We all have some bad character traits and bad habits. Traits and habits generally have "triggers." For example, certain people provoke an angry, aggressive response. Or driving in heavy traffic may trigger "road rage."

The same is true for temptations. Laziness, for example, comes naturally when surrounded by computer games, beaches and...other lazy people. Illicit pleasures

attract most strongly when they are readily available.

When the triggers of the bad habits occur, it is extremely difficult to stop. A useful strategy for change, then, is to change the circumstances in which we generally fail. Avoid the triggers! Change the environment. Move. Try to be around people who act the way you want to. True, our ultimate goal is to become immune to wrong temptations. But as a first step, try "Strategic *Teshuva*."

BLAST IT!

Esther S. from Miami, Florida
<healingmed@aol.com> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
What did Sisera have to do with the Jews and the concept of 100 shofar blasts? What is the correlation between Sisera and the shofar blasts?*

Dear Esther S.,

Sisera, the Assyrian general who fought the Jews, was killed by Yael as he fled the battlefield. The midrash tells us that Sisera's wicked mother cried one hundred and one tears when she heard the news of her son's death. We sound one hundred shofar blasts to counteract these tears which she shed in anger and pain at her son's defeat at the hand of the Jews. The one tear that cannot be erased is the tear shed out of pure love of a mother for her son.

According to the Sephardic tradition, 101 blasts are sounded. This is one more than the numerical value of the letters "samech" and "mem," which spell the name of the most harmful angel. Adding one gives us the numerical equivalent of "Michael," the name of the most "righteous" angel.

The Yemenite tradition is to sound only 41 blasts.

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

Noreen from Darwin, Australia <theblueheron@hotmail.com> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
I am not Jewish and my boss is Jewish. I would like to wish him a "happy new year" but want to do it respectfully. How do I do this? Thanks.*

Dear Noreen,

The classic greeting for the Jewish New Year is "Have a good and sweet New Year." By the way, the Jewish custom is to eat honey at the New Year to underline this idea!

NATIONAL HOLIDAY

Shannon Prissel from River Falls, Wisconsin
<barb.kuss@stpaul.com> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
Do you think Rosh Hashanah should be a national holiday in the United States? Why?*

Dear Shannon Prissel,

I don't think Rosh Hashanah should be a national holiday in the United States. When the Jewish kids get out of school

on Rosh Hashanah, while all their friends are in school, it makes the Jewish kids realize that they are special. The same can be said for Jews in a non-Jewish work environment; observing Rosh Hashanah distinguishes them as Jews. In our age of rampant assimilation and intermarriage, making Rosh Hashanah a national holiday might further weaken Jewish identity, removing what for many is the only practice that sets them apart as Jews.

HOLY DAY IN SOURBAY

Irene <irene@gilat.com> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
What is the nearest synagogue inside or outside Indonesia for my colleague who is a religious person on a business trip which straddles Yom Kippur in Indonesia?*

Dear Irene,

I'm sending you two addresses, both from Sourbay Indonesia. They are taken from Jeff Seidel's Jewish Student Traveler's Guide.

- Synagogue Kajoon, 4-6 Djalan Kajoon.
Phone: 31-545-2815
- Elias Nissim, 43 Gemanok. Phone: 31-577-770

BETTER NOT RED

David Mercer from St. Johns, Newfoundland
<dmercer@nfld.com> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
We are a small shul without a rabbi. Last Shabbos the question was asked "Why does one not wear the colour red on Rosh Hashana?" Can you tell us? Todah.*

Dear David Mercer,

Red symbolizes blood and Divine judgment (which may, G-d forbid, end with death). White symbolizes milk, goodness, sustenance and mercy. Therefore, on Rosh Hashana it is customary to avoid wearing red and to prefer white, in order that we be judged with mercy and merit a happy and prosperous year. This is not a law, but rather a custom.

ISRAEL PROPHETS

Philip Shapiro from Johannesburg, South Africa
<philipjs@milkyway.co.za> wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
A question about Jonah. Jonah was commanded to prophesy to the Assyrians. The Malbim explains that all prophecy is for the benefit of Israel, and that Jonah's prophecy to the Assyrians was in fact for the benefit of Israel — that*

since the Assyrians were destined to be the “rod of chastisement” for Israel, they had to be rebuked to repent before they could chastise Israel.

How does one answer the following question? The Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans did not receive Jewish prophets to rebuke them to repentance before they afflicted Israel. And it is said that Titus was a totally wicked man. Why did he not have to repent before destroying the Second Temple?

Dear Philip Shapiro,

According to the Malbim, the reason the Assyrians had to repent is that otherwise they would have been completely destroyed due to their sins, and then they could not have been the instrument to punish the Jewish people. (This, says the Malbim, explains Yonah’s reluctance to rebuke them; since by doing so, he enabled them to survive and become the “rod of punishment” against the Jews.) Even though Titus himself and the nations you mentioned were evil, they were apparently not yet deserving of total destruction.

By the way, the Egyptians did indeed receive rebuke from Jewish prophets: Moshe and Aharon repeatedly warned Pharaoh of the impending plagues. Furthermore, Greece and Rome subjugated the Jews after the period of prophecy had already ended.

YIDDLE RIDDLE

The Talmud says that you say a blessing when you see a friend whom you haven’t seen in a long time. As the Shulchan Aruch states: “One who sees his friend after 30 days says ‘Shehechyanu’ (the happiness blessing); and after (not having seen him for) 12 months he blesses ‘Mechayeh Hametim’ (Blessed are You...who revives the dead).”

What is different about not seeing a friend for a year that it requires a different blessing, the blessing of the revival of the dead?

ANSWER:

Every year on Rosh Hashana we are judged regarding whether we will live or die. So if a person hasn’t seen his friend during any normal 12 month period, his friend has undergone a life or death judgment and been thus far saved from it.

Source:

- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:1
- Mishna Berura, Ibid. 4

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Jewish Roots in Poland:

I live in a city where there is no Jewish community. I’m very happy though that I found the Ohr Somayach Interactive website, a place where I can learn more about my Jewish roots. Thank you.

- Karol Brejna, Koszalin, Poland <kazelot@thenut.eti.pg.gda.pl>

Teshuva — Something from Nothing:

Regarding your mention of teshuva (repentance) in

connection with creation, there is another, more profound connection. *Teshuva* could not work if it had not been created from the beginning. Why? Just as creation was “*yesh me’ayin* — something from nothing” —which could happen only in the first six days — so is *Teshuva* “*ayin me’yesh* — nothing from something.” That is, something that exists disappears totally. This power also could only be created during the first six days.

- Zvi Freund, New York NY <miltonf@villagenet.com>

“And inscribe all the children of Your covenant for a good life.”

• Rosh Hashanah prayers

THE OHR SOMAYACH FAMILY
wishes you a *Ktiva V’chatima Tova*

TORAH Overview • Insights

PARSHAT HA'AZINU - SHABBAT SHUVA

Overview

Most of Parshat *Ha'azinu* is a song, written in the Torah in two parallel columns. Moshe summons heaven and earth to stand as eternal witness to what will happen if the Jewish People sin. He reminds the people to examine world history and note how the Jewish People are rescued from obliteration in each generation — that Hashem “pulls the strings” of world events so that *Bnei Yisrael* can fulfill their destiny as Hashem’s messengers. Hashem’s kindness is such that Israel should be eternally grateful, not just for sustaining them in the wilderness, but for bringing them to a land of amazing abundance, and for defeating their enemies. But, this physical bounty leads the people to become self-satisfied and over-indulged. Physical pleasures corrupt their morals. They worship empty idols and indulge in depravity. Hashem will then let nations with no moral worth subjugate Israel and scatter them across the world. However, the purpose of these nations is as a rod to chastise the Jewish People. When these nations think that it is through their own power that they have dominated Israel, Hashem will remind them that they are no more than a tool to do His will. The Jewish People’s purpose is to make mankind aware of the Creator. Neither exile nor suffering can sever the bond between Hashem and His people, and in the final redemption this closeness will be restored. Hashem will then turn His anger against the enemies of Israel. Hashem then gives His last commandment to Moshe: That he ascend Mount Nevo and be gathered there to his people.

I MAY BE MESHUGA, BUT I’M NO IDIOT

**“You ignored the Rock Who gave birth to you,
and forgot G-d Who brought you forth.” (32:18)**

It’s amazing how you see a whole different side to people when you lend them money. Some people surprise you at how punctilious they are. Others you would have thought beyond reproach prove less than trustworthy.

There was once a man who had borrowed a large sum of money. When the time came to repay it he had no way of returning the sum. He was beside himself with anxiety and approached an old friend with his problem. Said the friend, “You know what you do? When the creditor comes for your money, look at him as though you never saw him before. Let your mouth loll open and your tongue droop out. Roll your eyes around a bit and twitch from time to time. Look straight through him as though he wasn’t there. In other words, pretend to be *meshuga!*”

“That’s a great idea!”

Several weeks later the two friends met again. “How did it go with your creditor?” “I did just like you said. When the creditor came for his money, I looked at him as though I never saw him before. I let my mouth loll open and my tongue droop out. I rolled my eyes around a bit and twitched from time to time. I looked straight through him as though he wasn’t there. He thought I’d gone *meshuga!* It worked like a dream! That was such a great idea! I can’t thank you enough. By the way, do you think you could lend me a thousand dollars for six months?”

“Sure. No problem.”

Six months later, the friend arrived at the door for his money. He knocked on the door. There was a dull animal scratching sound coming from inside. The door creaked open a little and inside he could see his friend, the debtor. His mouth was lolling open and his tongue had drooped out. His eyes

were rolling and he twitched now and then. His eyes were vacant, looking beyond him as though he wasn’t there.

“You really are *meshuga*. It’s me, you idiot!”

Most of us think of forgetfulness as a curse. As the years draw by, memory tends to become less and less efficient. In old age, it’s common to remember what happened in youth as though it were yesterday, but what happened yesterday — that’s another matter.

But forgetfulness is not a curse. If not for forgetfulness, we would never be able to survive life’s disappointments, much less a tragedy. G-d gave us forgetfulness as a gift. Through the blessing of forgetfulness we are able to pick ourselves up and carry on with the business of living.

Of all his sons, Yaakov loved Yosef the most. Yaakov’s favoritism provoked the brothers’ jealousy. Eventually this jealousy led to selling Yosef into slavery. The brothers took Yosef’s coat and dipped it in blood and brought it back to their father Yaakov. Yaakov supposed that Yosef had been devoured by a wild animal. He rent his clothes and mourned for his son, and despite all that his family could do, Yaakov was literally inconsolable. He said that he would go down to the grave mourning his son.

G-d decreed that there is consolation only over those who have passed from this world. No such decree exists for those who are still alive. This is why Yaakov was inconsolable. Consolation is only for the bereft, and Yosef was still alive and well and living in Egypt.

In this week’s parsha it says: “You ignored the Rock Who gave birth to you, and forgot G-d Who brought you forth.”

Forgetfulness is a blessing that G-d gives us so that we can pick up our lives and go on living even after a tragedy. If we could never forget, we could not go on living. If time didn’t soften our pain, life would be unbearable.

G-d gave us forgetfulness as a gift. When we take that gift and pretend not to recognize Him, then we are really *meshuga*.

Sources:

• *The Dubner Maggid as heard from Rabbi Mordechai Pitom*

PARSHA Q & A

PARSHAT HA'AZINU - SHABBAT SHUVA

1. Why were heaven and earth specifically chosen as witnesses?
2. How is the Torah like rain?
3. How is Hashem "faithful without injustice"?
4. Why is Hashem called "tzaddik"?
5. How many major floods did Hashem bring upon the world?
6. What group of people does the Torah call "fathers"? Cite an example.
7. Why did Hashem separate the world's nations into exactly 70?
8. Why is the merit of the Jewish People's ancestry called a "rope"?
9. How is Hashem's behavior toward the Jewish People like an eagle's behavior toward its offspring?
10. Regarding the Jewish People's punishment, Hashem says "I will spend my arrows on them." What is the positive aspect of this phrase?
11. How does the idea of "chillul Hashem" prevent the nations from destroying the Jewish People?
12. What will happen to the nations that conquer the Jewish People?
13. When Hashem overturns a nation that persecutes the Jewish People, His attribute of Mercy is "replaced" by which attribute?
14. When Hashem punishes the heathen nations, for whose sins does He exact punishment?
15. How will Hashem's punishment change the way the nations view the Jewish People?
16. On what day was *Ha'azinu* taught to the Jewish People?
17. Verse 32:44 calls Yehoshua "Hoshea." Why?
18. In verse 32:47, what does "it is not empty from you" mean?
19. Why did Hashem tell Moshe that he would die a similar death to that of Aharon?
20. If Moshe had spoken to the rock rather than striking it, what would the Jewish People have learned?

Answers - All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary

1. 32:1 - They endure forever.
2. 32:2 - The Torah gives life and promotes growth like rain.
3. 32:4 - He is "faithful" by rewarding the righteous, and "without injustice" by rewarding even the wicked for any good deeds.
4. 32:4 - All will agree that His judgments are righteous.
5. 32:7 - Two. One in the time of Adam's grandson Enosh and one in the time of Noach.
6. 32:7 - The Prophets. Elisha called the Prophet Eliyahu "My Father." (*Melachim II 2:12*).
7. 32:8 - To correspond to the 70 *Bnei Yisrael* who entered Egypt.
8. 32:9 - Their merit is "woven from" the merits of the *Avot*.
9. 32:12 - He mercifully wakes them gently, hovering over them, and carrying them on His "wings."
10. 32:23 - "The arrows will be spent" implies that the afflictions will cease but the Jewish People will not.
11. 32:27 - The nations would attribute their success to their might and the might of their gods. Hashem would not let His name be desecrated like this.
12. 32:35 - They will eventually be punished.
13. 32:41 - His attribute of Justice.
14. 32:42 - For their sins and the sins of their ancestors.
15. 32:43 - They will view the Jewish People as praiseworthy for cleaving to Hashem.
16. 32:44 - The Shabbat upon which Moshe died.
17. 32:44 - To indicate that although he was the Jewish People's leader, he still maintained a humble bearing.
18. 32:47 - That you will receive reward for studying Torah and that there is nothing meaningless in the Torah.
19. 32:50 - Because Moshe wanted this.
20. 32:51 - The Jewish People would have reasoned as follows: If a rock, which receives neither reward nor punishment, obeys Hashem's commands, all the more so should they.

KASHA! (*Kasha Means Question*)

Brent Worth from Waukeegan wrote:

I was surprised to read the verse that talks about the Jewish people consuming "milk from sheep with the fat of rams..." (*Devarim 32: 14*). How could they do that? Isn't it forbidden to eat meat and milk together?

Dear Brent Worth,

Nice question. The verse you quote is part of what the Torah calls "*shira*" — poetic song, and thus can be explained figuratively. But even if taken literally, remember that the Torah only forbade milk and meat that are cooked together; whereas cold milk and meat are forbidden only by Rabbinic decree. Thus, the Torah could describe the consumption of cold milk and meat occurring *before* the Sages decreed against it.

• see *Ibn Ezra*

DAY OF THE BROKEN AX

“There were no happier days for Israel than Yom Kippur and the Fifteenth of Av,” says the *mishna*. Yom Kippur, comments the *gemara*, is understandably a very special day because it was on that day that Hashem forgave the Jews for the sin of the golden calf, establishing it forever as a Day of Atonement, and the day when the Second Tablets of the Ten Commandments were given to our people. But what is so special about the Fifteenth of Av?

The last of the half-dozen explanations offered is that of the Sage Rabbah and Rabbi Yosef:

On this day each year, the work of cutting wood for use on the altar in the *Beit Hamikdash* came to a halt. The heat of the sun after this day was no longer intense enough to dry the wood, whose dampness not only caused excessive smoke when burned but led to worminess which disqualified the wood for use. For this reason, the day was nicknamed “the day of the broken ax.”

The commentaries offer two perspectives as to why the end of the woodcutting season was a cause for celebration.

Nimukei Yosef sees this as an expression of the custom to rejoice in the completion of a mitzvah and to celebrate with a feast and a holiday. This observation is cited by Rema (*Yoreh Deah 246:26*) as a source for the feast in celebration of the completion of a tractate of the Talmud.

Rabbeinu Gershom takes a different view of this mitzvah of cutting wood for the altar. No matter how important it was, it came at the expense of Torah study. Once the season for such efforts was completed, the ones involved could resume full-time Torah study. This was indeed a cause for celebration.

• *Ta'anit 31a*

REMEMBERING THE LAND

Purim is not celebrated on the same day everywhere. In walled cities, we are told in Megillat Esther, the celebration is on the 15th of Adar, while in cities without walls it is on the 14th.

The reason for this is that in the unwalled cities, the Jews overcame their enemies on the 13th of Adar and celebrated on the 14th, while in the walled capital of Shushan the battle still raged on the 14th, and the Jews there could not celebrate their victory until the 15th. Therefore, all

walled cities celebrate Purim on the 15th because of their similarity to Shushan.

The designation “walled city” does not depend on a city’s present situation, but rather on whether it had a wall at the time Joshua led the Jewish nation in the conquest of *Eretz Yisrael*. But why is Joshua’s time the criterion for the designation “walled city?” Wouldn’t it have been more logical to make this determination based on the time of the Purim miracle?

The answer is found in the Jerusalem Talmud where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi declares that this was done in order to accord honor to *Eretz Yisrael* which lay desolate at the time of the Persian miracle.

Rabbi Nissan ben Reuven (Ran) explains this as follows: At the time of the Purim miracle there were hardly any cities in *Eretz Yisrael* with their walls still intact. Had the determination of “walled city” been made according to the situation at that time, almost all cities in *Eretz Yisrael* would have the status of unwalled cities. To avoid this disgrace, it was decided to base the status “walled city” on the situation of the city at the time of Joshua. This made many more cities in *Eretz Yisrael* eligible for this distinction.

Rabbi Yosef Karo (*Beis Yosef*) has a different approach. Our Sages wanted some memory of *Eretz Yisrael* in the celebration of this miracle which took place in a foreign land. In the spirit of “*zecher lemikdash*” — those laws and customs we follow to recall the *Beit Hamikdash* — the Sages linked the determination of “walled city” to *Eretz Yisrael* so that the Jews living abroad would not forget their holy land.

• *Megillah 2a*

SECRET OF THE STATUE

“What did the Jews do to deserve the threat of annihilation at the hand of Haman?” In response to this question posed by his disciples, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai pointed out that it was retribution for bowing to the statue which the Babylonian King Nevuchadnetzar had set up in the Valley of Dura many years before (*Daniel 7:1-6*). But since they did not do this bowing as a willful act of idol worship, only superficially pretending in order to avoid being cast into the fiery furnace, Hashem reciprocated by only staging a threat of genocide.

Bowing to an idol is one of the cardinal sins which a Jew must avoid even at the cost of his life. How then could an entire nation — except for Chananyah, Mishael and

Azaryah, who were miraculously untouched by the flames of the furnace into which they were cast for refusing to bow — have been guilty of a forbidden show of idol worship? Why didn't more of them choose martyrdom as required by the Torah?

This question is one of the proofs cited by the great Tosefist, Rabbeinu Tam, for his thesis that the statue of Nevuchadnetzar was not an idol, but merely a means of paying homage to the king. Many people at that time, however, assumed that it was an idol; thus it would have been a sanctification of Hashem's Name for all the Jews to refuse to bow, and their failure to do so brought upon them the trouble with Haman.

An interesting support for this approach is found in the defiant statement of those three Jewish exiles who had achieved important positions in the Babylonian kingdom: "The king should know," said these proud Jews whom the king had renamed Shadrach, Meishach and Avad Nego, "that we shall not worship your gods nor bow to your golden statue." (*Daniel 3:18*) This expresses a clear delimitation between idol worship and the bowing to the statue.

The *gemara* elsewhere (*Pesachim 53b*) states that these heroes took their cue from the frogs in Egypt who entered the ovens at Hashem's command in the second plague, even though they were not bound by law to do so.

• *Megillah 12a*

WHO IS A JEW

“Who is a Jew?” may be a halachic issue of our times. But “Who deserves to be called a *Yehudi*?” is a question which goes back to Megillat Esther and Mesechta Megillah.

Mordechai is introduced in the Megillah as a “*Yehudi*,” and when his genealogy is traced he is identified as a “Benjamite.” Which tribe is he descended from, asks the *gemara*, Yehuda or Binyamin?

He was from the tribe of Binyamin, explains Rabbi Yochanan, but he is called a *Yehudi* because he denied and defied idol worship. For the name Yehuda is not merely the name of a tribe of Israel. It is the title which was given to Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah when they were reported to Nevuchadnetzar for defying his order to bow to the statue, even though it meant being cast into a fiery furnace. Mordechai earned the title as well for risking his life to defy the royal order to bow to Haman, who had declared himself a deity.

A different resolution is offered by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. Mordechai's father was descended from Binyamin and his mother from Yehuda. He thus inherited the talents required for overcoming the threat of Haman.

Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshitz, in his “*Yaarot Devash*,” notes that while Haman's father was an Amalekite, his mother was from another nation. This genealogy provided him with a dual capacity to harm Jewry and he had to be challenged by someone whose own ancestral roots provided the power to overcome these forces.

Mordechai's father was from the tribe of Binyamin, and just as Rachel's progeny was destined to destroy Esav's, the descendants of Binyamin were designated to vanquish the descendant of Amalek. But it is Yehuda who was blessed by his father with the power to overcome all the other enemies of Israel. It was that power, inherited through his mother, which enabled Mordechai to succeed against the power which Haman had on his mother's side.

• *Megillah 13a*

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

“*Ha Lashem Tigmalu Zot?*” (32:6)

The above verse starts with an unusual letter “*hey*.” It is unusual in two ways: It is larger than normal, and it is written far away from the word that it goes with. The Midrash sees this as a hint to Moshe's name, as follows: Start from the beginning of the parsha and take the first letter of each verse. Do this up to and including the above verse. Now take the numerical value of those letters and you get 345, which equals the numerical value of “*Moshe*.” Thus, Moshe “signed” his name in this song at the end of the Torah. (Taking after Moshe's example, Jewish poets through the ages have encoded their names into their works.)

• *Based on Midrash Tanchuma*