

# JewishTimes

Jan. 6, 2012

## the Costume

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## *The Origins of the Non-Jewish Custom of 'Shlissel Challah' (Key Bread)*

# The Loaf of Idolatry

*Shelomo Alfassa*

### **Introduction**

Every year Jewish women, young and old, partake in an Ashkenazi[1] custom to place a key (such as a door key to a home), inside the dough of a loaf of bread that they bake.[2] This custom is known as *shlissel challah*—*shlissel* from the German language *schlüssel* (key) and *challah* or *hallah* from the Hebrew for bread.[3] While a metal key is often baked within the bread, some form the bread itself into the shape of a key or even arrange sesame seeds on top in the form of a key.[4] Often times, these women gather in celebratory groups with the common belief that baking the *shlissel challah* will bring blessing into their homes, and specifically, the blessing of increased fiscal livelihood. There is also a seemingly new 'custom' of baking *shlissel challah* in the "merit" of a sick person, as a way of helping them recover from physical disease or trauma.[5] A poll on the popular Orthodox Jewish website *imamother.com* asked participants: "How do you make your *schlissel* [sic] *challah*?"[6] The 88 respondents reported: In the shape of a key 13% [12]; With a key baked in it 61% [54]; Neither, I don't do this 17% [15]; Other 7% [7].

### **Non-Jewish Origins**

The baking of a key inside a bread is a non-Jewish custom which has its foundation in Christian, and possibly even earlier, pagan culture. At least one old Irish source tells how at times when a town was under attack, the men said, "let our women-folk be instructed in the art of baking cakes containing keys." [7]

Keys were traditionally manufactured in the form of a cross, the traditional symbol of Christianity,[8] a physical item all Christian commoners would possess in their home.[9] On Easter, the Christian holiday which celebrates the idea of Jesus 'rising' from the dead, they would bake the symbol of Jesus—the key shaped like a cross—into or onto a rising loaf.[10] This was not only a religious gesture, but the bread was a special holiday treat. Sometimes these breads were wholly formed in the shape of a cross; other times the shape of a cross was made out of dough and applied on top. In the context of historically baking a key into bread—the key itself, intrinsically, was a symbol of Christianity and by extension symbolized Jesus 'rising' in the dough.[11]

### **Connection to Passover**

The modern Jewish custom of baking the symbolic *shlissel challah*, annually takes place on the shabbat immediately following the holiday of Pessah, when tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of religiously observant Jewish women[12] practice this observance.

In Christianity, baked goods associated with keys are commonly called 'Easter breads,'[13] and in Europe they are also known as 'Paschals,'[14] as the holiday of Easter in the East is known as 'Pascha' or 'Pascua.' This is most likely the reason Christians often call Easter breads baked with keys *Paschals*. [15] Before the Romans destroyed the Beit HaMikdash (the holy Temple) in Jerusalem, the focus of the Passover holiday for the Jewish people was the *Korban Pessah* (lit. Pessah sacrifice, also known as the Paschal Lamb[16]). Within Christianity, Jesus is known as the 'Paschal Lamb.'

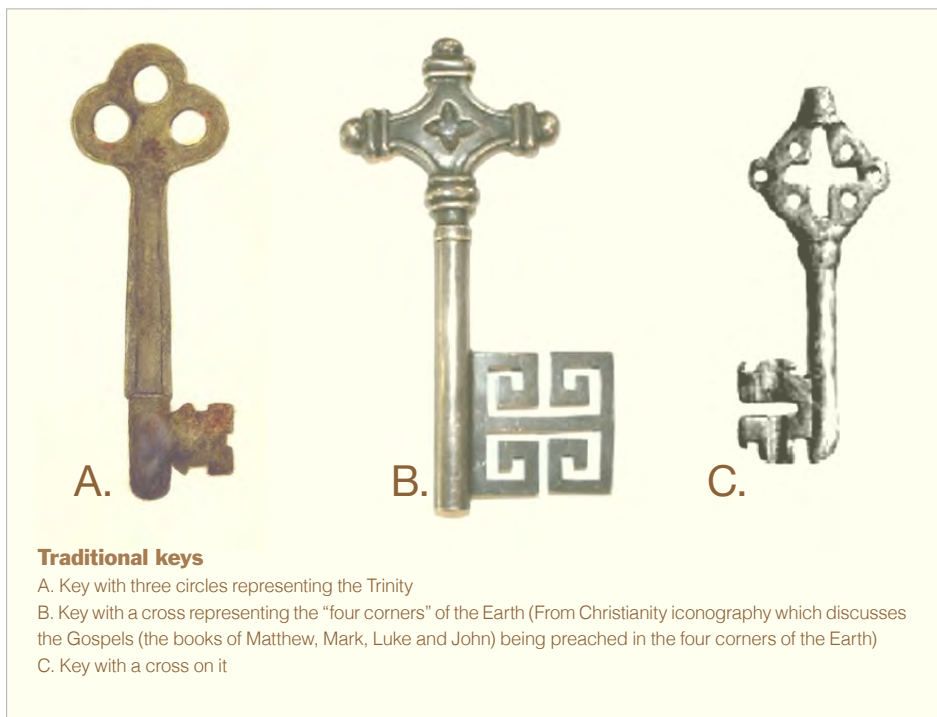
### **Geographic Origins**

Professor Marvin Herzog, a world renowned Yiddish linguist at Columbia University tells that dough twisted in the form of a key (among other shapes such as a ladder) were found to top *challah* loaves in Poland, "...the distribution of some of these things was a regional matter." [17] As an example of the regionality, Prof. Herzog created a map demonstrating where dough was shaped as a ladder and placed on *challah*, and how it was specific only to certain communities and was not universal. Inasmuch as a ladder motif was regional, it can be conjectured that the use of a key or key motif could have evolved the same way. Both a ladder and a key are symbolic as tools that could metaphysically help one attain heaven, as they both help 'gain access.'

### **Lack of Sources**

While the custom is said to be mentioned in the writings of Avraham Yehoshua Heshel (the "Apter Rav" 1748-1825) and in the *Ta'amei ha-Minhagim* (1891), there is no one clear source for *shlissel challah*. And while people will say there is a *passuk* attributed to it, there is not. And, even if there were, a *passuk* that can be linked to the practice is not the same as a source. Micha Berger, founder of the AishDas Society, [orthodox] calls this type of logic 'reverse engineering,' it's like drawing a circle around an arrow in a tree, and subsequently declaring the arrow is a bullseye.[18] The idea of baking *shlissel challah* is not from the Torah; it's not in the

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Tannaitic, Amoraic, Savoraitic, Gaonic or Rishonic literature. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner of Israel's Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim said that while baking challah with a key in it is not forbidden, "there is no meaning in doing so." [19] Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim [20] of Mesora.Org [orthodox] teaches that:

The Torah teaches that Hashem punishes the wicked, and rewards the righteous. It does not say that challah baking or any other activity will help address our needs...When the matriarchs were barren, they did not resort to segulas, but introspected and prayed...Nothing in Torah supports this concept of segula; Torah sources reject the idea of a segula...baking challas with brachos cannot help...segulas are useless, and violate the Torah prohibition of Nichush [good luck charms]. It does not matter if the charm is a rabbit's foot, a horseshoe, a challah, key or a red bendel. The practice assumes that forces exist, which do not, and it is idolatrous. [21]

Rabbi Reuven Mann, Principal of Yeshiva B'nei Torah in Far Rockaway, New York [orthodox] says one should ask themselves: "What connection is there between putting a key in the dough of a challah (schlissel challah) and the improvement of my material situation (parnasa)?" [22] He says:

The dangers of deviation are very great. For by inventing new practices not prescribed by Torah one, in fact, implicitly denies the Torah. He is in effect saying that the Torah is not perfect, for it does not work in my case, and there are other man made practices out there which will work for me. In effect this is a negation of Torah and

constitutes a form of idolatry, heaven forbid....[this] indicates that a person has lost faith in the authentic prescriptions of Torah. By performing these "unauthorized actions" one is implicitly affirming that there are other "forces" out there besides God which will respond to the needs of the performer of these ritualistic practices. This constitutes a form of "Avodah Zorah."

### Who Is Doing It?

As this is written in 2011, the concept and observance of schlissel challah continues to grow and be exploited, especially in the USA and among newly religious Jews who are being taught it is acceptable to use a loaf of bread and a machine made die-cut piece of brass as an intermediary between them and the Almighty.

The baking is conducted today across the Jewish spectrum. It is widely popular (but certainly not universally practiced) in both the Hassidic and non-Hassidic haredi communities. [23] It is also conducted by the Modern-Orthodox, among the 'Yeshivish' communities and by other American Orthodox Jews such as those with Lithuanian and German family ancestry. [24] The idea of schlissel challah is known to be taught in schools, but probably is upon the whim of the individual teacher. An informal telephone survey of 40 participants demonstrated that it has been taught in haredi educational institutions such as the Bais Yaakov and Bnos Yisroel schools in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami and other locations. It is also taught by teachers in the

Centrist / Zionistic Orthodox Jewish schools. [25]

After Pessah, schlissel challah can be found being sold in stores, a challah with a key right inside the bag! As the custom of schlissel challah continues to be passed along from mother to daughter and in social groups, it also has been popularized on Facebook, Twitter and promoted on other popular internet social media outlets. On the internet can even be found an anonymously distributed prayer, said to be specifically developed for those who make the key challah. [26]

An internet search will find dozens of articles and comments on schlissel challah:

- *Schlissel Challah is a segula, good omen, for parnassa, or livelihood. It's a very interesting custom with many sources and traditions.* [27]

- *It's really bizarre, and EVERYONE is doing it. It was all the talk among the women at the playground. Mind you, the talk was about technique for making it, not whether the practice has any merit or makes any sense.* [28]

- *My friend told me about this and we baked the key in the challah and this week we got a tax refund that we were not expecting!* [29]

- *I also shape a piece of dough in the shape of a key and place it lengthwise on the challah, from end to end, so that everyone can eat a piece of the key.* [30]

- *I had a aunt who one year put a car key and got a new car and another year put a house key and bought a house that year.* [31]

- *The economic downturn has affected virtually every community and Lakewood...For the Shabbos after Pesach, Lakewood Mayor R' Menashe Miller arranged for a key to Lakewood's Town Hall [to be used in schlissel challah]* [32]

- *This week is the week to bake schlissel challah, challah imprinted with or shaped like a key. It is a segulah for parnassah, and fun, too!* [33]

### Halakhic Acceptance

Several clever ideas have been devised which attempt to connect the non-Jewish idea of 'key bread' to the Torah, however these all fail to bring a Jewish wrapper to a wholly non-Jewish tradition. A popular one attempts to inexplicably connect the idea of a spiritual "gate" to a physical "key," during the period when Jews count the 49 days during the Omer up to the 50th day which is the holiday of Shavuot. [34] The idea of the 50th day represents the sha'ar hanun (50th gate), which according to kabbalah is known

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as the sha'ar binah (gate of understanding—and, since we are said to go {spiritually} from gate to gate,[35] this is why the focus is on a key, as a key will 'unlock' a gate.

Further, modern commentators have exploited the name of HaRambam (Maimonides), to indicate that he demonstrates an association between the idea of a key with challah.[36] Such alleged connections are baseless and are only meager attempts to legitimize the idea of shlisel challah. Nonetheless, it's well known that HaRambam himself would have been utterly against the practice of baking a key into a bread which allegedly could influence the Almighty. It is one of HaRambam's clear principles that any belief in an intermediary between man and God (including a physical object), is considered heretical to the Torah. He teaches that God is the only One we may serve and praise; that we may not act in this way toward anything beneath God, whether it be an angel, a star, or one of the elements; there are no intermediaries between us and God; that all our prayers should be directed towards God; and that nothing else should even be considered. This would certainly include baking a key inside a loaf of bread and/or shaping a bread in the form of a key, then expecting it to either change your fortune or influence your future.

## Commentary

It is up to each of us to halt legitimizing any extrahalakhic or even extraminhagic activities. The need for a quick 'spiritual fix' such as baking a bread with a key in it and hoping God rewards the baker(s), seems to have replaced the desire for pure prayer with kavanah (intrinsic intent). Increasingly, tefillot (prayer) is being trumped by what is 'cool,' 'the in thing,' or being 'with it.' The truth of the matter is, often in the observant Jewish world, people care more about 'fitting in' with their peers, then with God.

On the far end of the scale, it can be said that shlisel challah observance is a nothing less than 'the way of the Amorites.' It is precisely this type of behavior and observance which Jews are supposed to separate themselves from, so it doesn't go on to influence our thoughts and deeds. Am Yisrael was not created to lose itself in such folklore, and Judaism without disciplined study is nothing but folklore. Judaism allows and encourages the use of our minds. It's never too late to realign our path with Torah sources, not blind faith practices which are "trendy," "in," or "cool."

Educated Jews should help to promote Torah sources to our friends and neighbors, not false practices which are of non-Jewish origin and have nothing to do with Judaism. ■

## FOOTNOTES

[1] Jews with family roots in countries of Europe and Asia such as Poland, Belarus, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, etc. Note: In the once popular The Hallah Book, the author mentions that key bread originated in eighteenth century Ukraine, but did not provide a source or citation. See: Reider, Freda. The Hallah Book. New York: Ktav, 1986. 21

[2] Note: as of late, this custom is becoming increasingly common among Sephardic Jews as well due to co-mingling of communities and day-to-day social intercourse.

[3] aka shlisel khale

[4] A photograph of a shlisel challah exists in the Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972 edition, volume 6 page 1419. The loaf, with a long metal key impressed and left to bake on top, is captioned: "Hallah from Volhynia [Western Ukraine near Poland and Belarus] for the first Sabbath after Passover. The key placed on top of the loaf symbolizes the 'gate of release' which traditionally remains open for a month after the festival."

[5] [Shlisel Challah for Refuah Shlaima] (Are you or anyone you know baking challah this week? Someone is trying to put together a group of 'bakers' for a zechus for a complete refuah shelayma for Rochel Leah Bas Miriam Toba[.] If you can participate, please email: sandyn@... Either way, please have her in mind in your tefillos.

Tizku L'mitzvos! groups.yahoo.com/group/FrumSingleMoms/message/663

[6] imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=111317 Poll was in April 2010

[7] O'Brien, Flann. The Best of Myles. Normal, IL; Dalkey Archive Press, 1968. 393

[8] Small breads with the sign of the cross have been found as far back as 79 CE in the ancient Roman city of Herculaneum (see The New York Times March 31, 1912). This was when Christianity emerged in Roman Judea as a Jewish religious sect which gradually spread out of Jerusalem.

[9] This was no different than the poor Jews of the 'old world,' who often would not have holy books but would certainly have a mezuzah on their door which they considered a holy script in their own home.

[10] Another account mentions a key in a loaf: "In other parts of Esthonia [sic], again, the Christmas Boar [cake], as it is called, is baked of the first rye cut at harvest; it has a conical shape and a cross is impressed on it with a pig's bone or a key, or three dints are made in it with a buckle or a piece of charcoal. It stands with a light beside it on the table all through the festival season." See: Frazer,

James George. The Golden Bough. London: Macmillan and Co., 1920. VII. Part 5. 302 (Thanks go to Rabbi Yossie Azose who led me to this mention. Rabbi Azose said: "It's a sad commentary on the state of Jewry today that such a custom [shlisel challah] has become so widespread and accepted; moreover that there are not more contemporary Torah leaders who are not decrying this practice." Via email December 20, 2011.)

[11] Similar, there are modern non-Jewish customs, such as in Mexico, where a 'baby Jesus' figurine is baked into cupcakes; often, the child who finds it wins a prize. This is also practiced in the U.S. state of Louisiana beginning at Mardi Gras and practiced for 30 days after. There, a 'baby Jesus' toys baked into a whole cake, and whoever finds the baby in their piece has to buy the next day's cake. In Spain, there is a tradition of placing a small Jesus doll inside a cake and whoever finds it must take it to the nearest church on February 2, Candlemas Day (Día de la Candelaria), which celebrates the presentation of Jesus in Jerusalem.

[12] This includes women of all backgrounds, including Hassidic and non-Hassidic, Modern Orthodox, etc.

[13] Chandler, Richard. Travels in Asia Minor. London 1776. 158 (It's been supposed the British custom of 'cross-buns,' small rolls with a cross on them eaten on the Christian holiday of Good Friday {the Day of the Cross}, probably arose from this.)

[14] Justin Martyr, also known as just Saint Justin (103–165 CE), was an early Christian apologist. He depicted the paschal lamb as being offered in the form of a cross and he claimed that the manner in which the paschal lamb was slaughtered prefigured the crucifixion of Jesus. Some opinions indicate rabbinic evidence shows that in Jerusalem the Jewish paschal lamb was offered in a manner which resembled a crucifixion. (See: Tabor, Joseph. "From The Crucifixion of the Paschal Lamb." The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series, Vol. 86, No. 3/4 (Jan.-Apr., 1996), pp. 395-406.

[15] Paschal derives from the Latin paschalis or pashalis, which means "relating to Easter," from Latin pascha ('Passover,' i.e. the Easter Passover'), Greek Πάσχα, Aramaic pashā, in turn from the Hebrew pessah, which means "to be born on, or to be associated with, Passover day." Since the Hebrew holiday Passover coincides closely with the later Christian holiday of Easter, the Latin word came to be used for both occasions.

[16] Driscoll, James F. "Paschal Lamb." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 8.

[30] [imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=149108](http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=149108)

[36] Purportedly we learn from the “Tzvi LaTzadik” that he lists at the beginning of his Hilkhot Hamets uMatsa, that there are 8 mitsvot (3 positive and 5 negative) involved with connecting the idea of a key with challah. The alleged indication is that the key that is put in the challah alludes to the letters חמץ (key) spell חמץ זה חמץ (חמץ is bread, representing the “hamets” and מץ is for matsa-these allude to Hilkhot Hamets uMatsa, and the ח is the 8 mitsvot involved).

[www.faps.com](http://www.faps.com)



# the Costume

Rabbi Steven Pruzansky

**C**onsider the absurdity of the following statement: “I know an Orthodox Jew who works on Shabbat, eats pork regularly, never wears tefillin or prays or learns Torah, is unfaithful to his/her spouse, walks bare-headed in public, or eats on Yom Kippur.” One would rightfully ask, what is it that makes that person an Orthodox Jew?

Yet, we occasionally read these days of “Orthodox” Jews who molest, steal, rob, murder, assault, spit and curse at women and little children, set fire to businesses they disfavor for one reason or another, eschew self-support, brawl, intimidate and terrorize other Jews, or are otherwise genuinely disagreeable people. So what is it

that makes those people “Orthodox,” or, even holier in the public mind, “ultra-Orthodox”?

The costume they wear.

It is a mistake that is made not only by a hostile media but also by the Jewish public, including the religious Jewish public. To our detriment, we define people by their costumes – e.g., long black coats, white shirts, beards and sometimes peyot – and we ourselves create expectations of conduct based on the costume that is being worn, as if the costume necessarily penetrates to the core of the individual and can somehow mold his character and classify his spiritual state – as if the costume really means anything at all.

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If the events in Bet Shemesh or elsewhere in Israel rectify that mistake once and for all, some unanticipated good would have emerged from the contentiousness.

This is more than simply stating that any “Orthodox” Jew who sins is by definition not an “Orthodox Jew.” In truth, that statement is flawed and illogical, because all people sin; the truly “Orthodox” Jew might be one of the few who still actually believe in sin – stumbling before the divine mandate – and still seek to eradicate it by perfecting himself and struggling with his nature.

But the Torah Jew is defined by a core set of beliefs, principles and religious practices. One who subscribes to that core set is Orthodox notwithstanding any personal failings he has, failings which according to the Torah he must strive to reduce and diminish. No Jew – Rabbi or layman – is allowed to carve for himself exemptions from any mitzva. That is why deviations like the female rabbi, the dilution of the bans on homosexuality, the purported officiation by an “Orthodox” rabbi at a same-sex wedding, the relentless search for obscure leniencies in order to rationalize improper conduct, and other such anomalies drew such swift and heated reactions from the mainstream Orthodox world. The violent and criminal excesses in Israel have drawn similar rebukes but the thought still lingers: why do we even expect decorous and appropriate conduct from people who are perceived as thugs even within their own community, and who have literally threatened with violence some who would criticize them publicly? Because of the costume they wear.

Many of the brutes of Bet Shemesh have been widely identified as part of the sect known as Toldos Aharon (Reb Arele’s Chasidim). The thumbnail sketch by which they are known always includes the declaration that they “deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel,” which in

today’s world should be – and largely is – identical to being a member of the Flat Earth Society. They are “devoted to the study of Torah,” reputedly. Really? What is the nature of their Torah study? Are they Brisker thinkers, analytical and questioning, or are they more akin to another Chasidic sect, whose rebbe famously discouraged learning Torah b’iyun (in depth) because he claimed such distances the student from Divine service? (That rebbe preferred a superficial and speedy reading of the words of the Gemara as the ideal form of Talmud Torah. And it shows.)

But what most identifies Toldos Aharon is...their costume. This, from Wikipedia: “In Jerusalem, married men wear white and grey “Zebra” coats during the week and golden bekishes/Caftan (coats) on Shabbos. Toldos Aharon and Toldos Avrohom Yitzchok are the only groups where boys aged 13 and older (bar mitzvah) wear the golden coat and a shtreimel, as married men do; however, married men can be differentiated by their white socks, while the unmarried boys wear black socks. In other Hasidic groups, only married men wear a shtreimel. All boys and men wear a traditional Jerusalemite white yarmulke. Unmarried boys wear a regular black coat with attached belt on weekdays, unlike the married men, who wear the “Zebra” style coat.”

Does any of this sartorial splendor have the slightest connection

to Torah, to Orthodoxy, to living a complete Jewish life, to true divine service? Memo to real world: there is no such concept as authentic Jewish dress. The Gemara (Shabbat 113a) states that Rav Yochanan would call his clothing “the things that honor me” (mechabduti) – but the Gemara does not see fit to even describe his clothing in the slightest fashion. Jewish dress is dignified and distinguished, clean and neat. We are especially obligated to wear special and beautiful clothing throughout Shabbat (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 262:2-3). But beyond the tzitzit and the kippa for men, and modesty for all, there is no such thing as Jewish dress, the prevalence of contrary popular opinion notwithstanding. We are never told what Moshe, Ezra, Rabbi Akiva or the Rambam wore, and we are informed that one reason the Jews merited redemption from Egyptian because “they did not change their garb” (i.e., they did not adopt Egyptian styles) – but we are never informed what kind of clothing they did wear. Why? Because it doesn’t matter one whit.

A sect that obsesses so much on clothing that it distinguishes the married and the unmarried by the type of socks they wear, and insists that everyone wear the same two coats, is not practicing a form of Judaism, in that respect, that is either traditional or brings honor and glory to the Creator. It is a practice that is not designed to induce others to gush about what a “wise and understanding people” we are. They are rather fabricating artificial

distinctions between Jews – likely in order to foster cohesion within their small group, ward off outsiders, and better exercise mind control over their adherents. It is no wonder that such a group is not responsive to any known Rabbinic authority – not even the Edah HaChareidis – nor is it any surprise that the sect’s deviations from Judaism can be so repugnant to all Jews and all civilized people. Surely there is more to prepare for in marriage than simply the acquisition of



different color socks.

One can search in vain the Torah, the Talmud, the Rambam, the Shulchan Aruch and the classic works of our modern era for any guidelines similar to what appears above. If these hooligans wore modern garb, we would not hesitate for a moment to denounce them, to agonize over how it is they left the derech, over the failings of their parenting and education, and probably over the high cost of tuition and the toll joblessness is taking on the Jewish family. That the reaction of many to this criminal behavior is less shrill is attributable to but one cause: the costume. For some odd reason, we expect more.

We assume the costume mandates fidelity to halacha and engenders considerate and refined conduct. It doesn’t. It is unrelated. It is irrelevant to spirituality. It says nothing – nothing – about a person’s religiosity. I have dealt several times with conversion candidates who insisted on wearing Chasidic dress – who had beards, peyot, long black coats, white shirts, would never wear a tie, and wouldn’t even hold from the eruv – but they were still non-Jews. In the shuls where they davened while studying for conversion, members wondered why these frum-looking men never accepted kibbudim (honors). They didn’t, for one reason: they were not yet Jews. They just thought they were wearing the costume of Jews.

(continued next page)

All the lamenting and hand-wringing is partially warranted, and partially misplaced. Partially warranted because we have for too long tolerated discourteous, larcenous and vicious conduct among people who self-identify because of their “dress” as religious Jews – the consistent rudeness, the unseemly “bargaining” that occurs when a bill is due, and, as one extreme example, the recent arson at Manny’s. (Manny’s is a popular religious book store in Me’ah She’arim that carried a great variety of sefarim – including mine – that was targeted by similar violent groups for carrying “disapproved books.” The store was set on fire a few months ago, and the owners largely caved to the pressure.) None of that is “Orthodox” behavior in the slightest. And it is partially misplaced because we play the game by their rules when we gauge people’s spiritual potential – or even spiritual level – based on the coat, hat, yarmulke, shoes, socks, shirt, pants or belt that they wear. It not only sounds insane, but it is insane, and it should be stopped. No one is more religious because he wears black or less religious because he wears blue or brown.

We would never consider people who habitually violate Shabbat, Kashrut, etc. as Orthodox. We should never consider people who are routinely brutal and abusive, or have disdain – even hatred – for all other Jews outside their small sect – as Orthodox either. They embrace certain Mitzvot and dismiss others, as well as ignore fundamental Jewish values. Certainly – traditional disclaimer – these goons are but a miniscule, atypical, unrepresentative, extremist, outlier group unrelated to the greater Charedi community that is only now awakening to the dangers within.

Nonetheless, even the greater community would benefit if they too began to de-emphasize the “costume” as at all meaningful or indicative of anything substantive. The Sages state (see Tosafot, Shabbat 49a) that the custom to wear tefillin the entire day lapsed because of the “deceivers.” (One who wore tefillin all day was

reputed to be trustworthy, until the thieves learned that trick and used their “tefillin” to swindle others.) Those who reduce Judaism to externals necessarily exaggerate the importance of the costume, and naturally provoke those common misperceptions that cause the Ultra-Distorters to be deemed “Ultra-Orthodox.”

Would we make great progress in the maturation of the Jewish world if a blue suit occasionally appeared in the Charedi or Yeshivish wardrobe? Perhaps. But we would certainly undo the inferences that attach to certain types of dress that leave many Orthodox Jews wrongly embarrassed and ashamed of the behavior of “people like us.” They are not like us. We must love them as we would any wayward Jew, and rebuke them as we would any wayward Jew. Even wayward Jews wear costumes.

Then we can promulgate the new fashion styles – the new uniform – of the Torah Jew, where beauty, righteousness and piety are determined by what is inside – not what is on the outside – by deeds and Torah commitment and not by appearances.

May we never again hear someone say that “X looks frum.” No one can “look” frum; one can only “be” frum, which itself is not as admirable as being erliche. That lack of sophistication is atrocious, embarrassing, and corrosive to Jewish life and distorts the Torah beyond recognition. We know better than that, and we are better than that. In a free society, anyone can dress exactly like others or unlike others if he so chooses. But it says nothing about their values, only about their identification with one group or another. We should stop trusting people simply because they don black coats, black hats, and wear beards – or, for that matter, kippot serugot. All are costumes. None convey any real truths about the real person.

The true measure of every Jew – and every person – is always within. ■

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# The Suit: It Doesn't Make the Man

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Society is impressed more with man's appearance, than with his values. While Judaism includes laws of dress, they must be understood. Other than modesty, honor, cross-dressing, and dressing as idolaters (as they dress in their religious rites) God did not include a dress code as a Torah law.

## Dress & Appearances

Dressing for Sabbath and holidays is not to "make the man," but to give honor to the day. In this fashion, man develops respect for God's chosen days and focuses on God's acts which we commemorate at those times. It's all about God. In no manner is this dressing up to honor man. No one would suggest that by changing one's external garments, that he has perfected his internal ideas and values. Prohibitions on cross-dressing eliminate lewdness; prohibitions of idolatrous dress break our identification with this idolaters' practices, and modest dress removes the focus from ourselves so we focus on God. This is all reasonable. Thus, dress carries no inherent value. But within Jewish communities, this is not the case.

Today, Jews categorize their own brothers and sisters into superficial categories. "Does he wear a black jacket or hat?" "What type of yarmulke does he wear?" "Does she wear jeans skirts?" "Does he have a beard?" These questions are asked to determine the "hash-kafa" or outlook of the person. But I ask, what type of "outlook" is related in any way to one's garments? This is truly superficial. In fact, it is the flaw of insecurity that propels individuals to associate with only those who appear like them. If however, one was firm in his or her Jewish values, such a person would care nothing about what others say. They would associate with upright Jews, regardless of their dress. They would disassociate with corrupt Jews, again regardless of their dress. Further, one violates a halacha d'oraisa (positive command) of "Viahavta l'ra-acha comocha" (Lev. 19:18) – "thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself" – when one passes these judgments or prevents a shidduch (a match) if one is a convert, divorced, black, not Sephardic or Ashkenaz, and the like. This is a despicable trait, which must be removed from one's value system.

As always, when one desires to follow what is in accord with the Torah, one must look into

the sources, not to what people say, or what is popularly believed or performed.

Jacob gave a gift of a coat of striped colors (Radak, Gen. 37:3) to his son Joseph. Joseph as well didn't abstain from wearing that garment. Both Jacob and Joseph realized that wearing a colored garment is not a "religious" issue. Had Jacob known the tragic outcome of demonstrating his favoritism towards Joseph in this manner, perhaps he would not have expressed it. But this does not mean that Jacob felt that the garment per se was a problem; the reaction of the brothers was unforeseen. The priests as well are commanded to wear colored garments. We find in Exodus 12:35 the Jews following Moses' command to ask the Egyptian's for their garments. Rashi points out that the clothing was valued by the Jews more than the gold and silver vessels. It is clear: there



is no law concerning wearing types of garments, even those of other nations (as long as the garments are not of religious practice). And we are not to add to the Torah by opposing these sources and wearing specific clothing as a "sign of religiosity." In fact, clothing cannot affect our perfection.

The conscious act of wearing "specific" clothing to distinguish one's self, is a violation, and is not part of Torah. One who is truly righteous, is humble, and does not seek an audience or applause for his good deeds: "And humbly shall you walk before God (Micha 6:8)." God is his only concern, for only God determines truth and what is of value. His sense of reality is not human applause, but God's word alone. Zephania 1:8 records certain Jews who were punished by God due to their wearing of "malbish nachri" (foreign or strange garments). In his final interpretation, Radak describes the sin of those Jews:

*These men made themselves to look separate*

*and righteous, and they wore strange garments, unlike the rest of their brethren, so that they should be recognized through their clothing as distinct individuals, but their ways are evil.*

Radak states that one is evil when parading his righteousness. In Samuel I, 1:16, God tells Samuel to go to Jesse, for "He (God) has seen a king for Himself among his sons." Interestingly, God does not tell Samuel which son. Why? God desired that Samuel learn a lesson simultaneously with God's selection of the new king. Upon Samuel's arrival at the house of Jesse, Samuel admires Eliav. God tells Samuel:

*Do not look at his appearance or his height, for he is despised, for it is not as man sees. Mans sees with his eyes, but God sees what's in the heart.*

God is teaching us not to pay attention to the superficial information quickly assumed with the eyes. This is not the real person. The person, as God says, is what is in the heart.

## Lineage

Kings David and Solomon descended from Ruth the Moabite. Joshua married Rachav the harlot. Moses married Zippora – a woman whose father previously practiced every form of idolatry. Ruth partook of greatness, as she exemplified modesty to such a high degree. God therefore selected her to be the mother of our greatest kings. God never rebuked Moses or Joshua for marrying people with such backgrounds. At the time of marriage, these individuals were living the correct philosophy. That is all God is concerned with.

Imagine how much more peace there would be if we studied the Torah and kept to the teachings without distortion or projection, instead of operating out of false, destructive notions. We would have more ahava (love) towards one another. Remember why God destroyed Noah's generation, and sustained the generation of the dispersion. As Rashi stated, "great is love, and hated is argument." We must stop fabricating false categories about our own brothers and sisters. Instead of looking for reasons to degrade a Jew, look for reasons to love someone and appreciate their real worth. Certainly, we must all abandon false notions regarding dress.

God knows the perfect system for man, and included in the Torah only those commands which, if followed exactly, will yield the only perfect life. Any addition or subtraction is a defect in the system. Did the Creator of the heavens and Earth, who designed every aspect of the human personality, miss a point? Did He forget to include something in the Torah? Of course this is absurd. As there is no command to wear specific garments, it must be a destructive practice, as Radak teaches.

A person is what's inside, not outside. ■



## Book Reviews:

Rabbi Reuven Mann — *Rabbi of Young Israel of Phoenix*

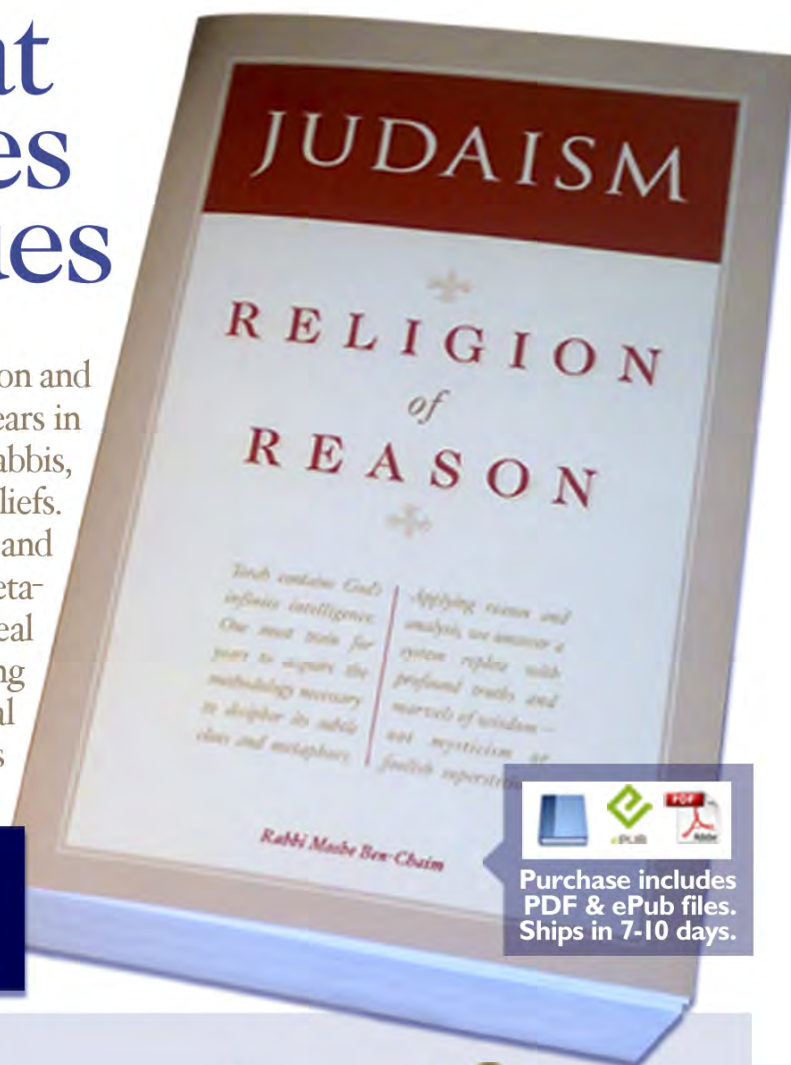
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# God's Country

Rabbi Reuven Mann



**T**his week's parsha, Vayechi, contains the final chapter in the life of Yaakov Avinu, last of the patriarchs. According to his own words as conveyed to Pharaoh he had experienced a short and difficult life. He had encountered great conflict with his brother, Eisav, his uncle Lavan, the Prince of Shechem who raped his daughter and, worst of all, the sibling rivalry that led to his lengthy separation from Yosef. Despite the many hardships and travails everything ended well. When all is said and done, Hashem rules the world, "atzat Hashem hee takum" it's the plan of God that endures. Hashem arranged things for Yosef to be in a position of dominance over his brothers. Yosef used it with great wisdom to create situations in which all of the parties would be forced to confront their sins and do Teshuva. Finally when the spiritual goals were met Yosef identified himself and in the most exalted gesture of forgiveness reunited the family and put them in a secure and comfortable position in Egypt.

It would seem that the last seventeen years of Yaakov's life were spent in tranquility surrounded by his family and his beloved Yosef, secure in the knowledge that the goal of establishing the "tribes of Hashem" had been achieved.

When he felt his death to be approaching he summoned Yosef and committed him by oath to a sacred mission, burying him in the Cave of Machpelah. The Torah devotes a great deal of space to the burial of Yaakov. Indeed, seemingly taking a cue from his father, Yosef, later on solicited an oath from his brothers to have him buried in the Holy Land. The brothers, of course, were in no position to grant that request as Pharaoh would not allow Yosef's body to be removed from Egypt.

Yosef meant that they should pass on the oath to the next generation and they to the following generation until the time for the Exodus would arrive. In describing the departure of the Jews from Egypt the parsha states, "And Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him for he had foresworn the children of Israel, saying when Hashem will extricate you from here bring up my bones with you". According to the Rabbis all of the brothers imposed that oath on their children and were eventually interred in the land of Israel.

The question arises, what is so important about where one is buried? According to Judaism a person is judged upon death and if he merits it receives his reward in Olam Habah (World To Come). The manner in which he lives his life is the most crucial factor. It would not seem to matter where his corpse is "laid to rest." Yet we see from our parsha that, to the contrary, it is of great importance. Why should this be so?

Yaakov's request contained three elements that he not be buried in Egypt, that he be buried in the land of Canaan and specifically in the grave of his forebears. Egypt was a society which was steeped in primitive idolatry and sexual immorality. It represented a false philosophy of life and a corrupt culture. Yaakov was forced by circumstances to sojourn there. He wanted all future generations to know that he did not voluntarily choose to live in an immoral country. Thus we learn how important it is to choose with great care the society we decide to become a part of. He wanted to be buried in the Machpelah with the other patriarchs to establish for all future generations a testimony that the land of Israel was associated with the "G-dly" way of life as exemplified by Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and the Matriarchs. According to Rambam if one chooses to be buried in Israel his sins are forgiven. It goes without saying that residing there while alive is of infinitely greater merit. It is better, he says, to live in Israel, in a place where the majority are idol worshippers, than outside the land in a place where the majority serves Hashem. At first glance, this proposition is difficult to comprehend. What is so important about the land of Israel that overrides such weighty considerations? The answer is that coming to Israel is an affirmation of G-d's relationship to man as evidenced in the lives of our forefathers and the nation of Israel they gave rise to. He who lives in Israel puts his faith in the protection of Hashem and chooses a dwelling in which he is always "bifnei Hashem" (in the presence of G-d). One who cannot manage to live there but chooses to be buried there also acknowledges the special relationship that exists between G-d, the Jewish people and Eretz Yisrael. May we merit to experience the wonderful blessings of Israel in our lifetime. Shabbat Shalom. ■

# Vayeche

## Yaakov's Expressions of Deference towards Yosef

*And it was after these events that Yosef was told, "Your father is ill." He took his two sons – Menashe and Efraim – with him. Yaakov was told, "Your son Yosef comes to you." And he strengthened himself and sat on the couch. (Sefer Beresheit 38:1-2)*

### 1. Yaakov rises for Yosef the ruler

Parshat VaYeche describes the final episodes of Yaakov's life and the events immediately thereafter. The passages above introduce the last recorded conversation between Yaakov and Yosef. Yosef is told that his father is ill. He gathers his sons Menashe and Efraim and proceeds to his father's home. His father is told that Yosef is coming and he rises from his sick bed and assumes a sitting position to greet his son. The commentators discuss Yaakov's reason for rising to greet Yosef. Rashi and others comment that in rising before Yosef, Yaakov was demonstrating respect for the authority of the ruler. In other words, Yosef was Yaakov's son and was required to demonstrate respect for his father. However, Yosef was also Paroh's Prime Minister. He was virtual ruler over the country. Because of Yosef's position Yaakov felt that it was proper to rise to greet his son.

Rashi's comments here are consistent with his interpretation of another incident. Sefer Shemot describes the rescue of Bnai Yisrael from Egypt. Toward the end of the account, Moshe comes to Paroh and warns him that if he continues to refuse to release Bnai Yisrael, Hashem will bring upon the Egyptians the terrible Plague of the Firstborn. Moshe knows that Paroh himself will come to him and beg him to lead Bnai Yisrael from Egypt. However, in his warning to Paroh, Moshe tells him that when this plague is brought upon them Paroh's servants will petition Moshe. Why did Moshe not reveal to Paroh the extent to which he would be humiliated by this last plague? Rashi explains that Moshe was demonstrating respect for Paroh as ruler of Egypt. In other words, although Paroh was a wicked ruler who has enforced a policy of brutal oppression and was the leader of a kingdom that had engaged in genocide

against Bnai Yisrael, Moshe continued to demonstrate some degree of respect toward him.

### 2. Respect of the ruler is directed to his position not his person

In both of these instances, Rashi is presenting a thesis that is counter-intuitive. It seems strange that Yaakov would rise before Yosef his son. Yosef was the virtual ruler of Egypt but Yaakov was his elderly father. Would not Yosef's duty to respect his father take precedence over Yaakov's obligation to demonstrate deference to a ruler? The image of the aged Yaakov rising to greet his son Yosef seems bizarre and is unsettling. That Moshe should show any respect for the evil Paroh is even more disturbing. How can Rashi assert that the vicious persecutor of Bnai Yisrael deserved some degree of respect?



Apparently, according to Rashi, the requirement to respect a ruler is not to be interpreted as an obligation to respect the particular person who holds the position of ruler. Rather it is to be understood as an obligation to demonstrate respect for the position of ruler. The specific person who holds the position of ruler may be despicable and in his own right deserving disdain. Nonetheless, his position and office must be respected. Similarly, Yaakov's respect was not directed to Yosef his son. It was a response to the office that Yosef represented. Yaakov rose in response to Yosef's position and office. Our Sages require that we recognize the importance of governmental authority within society. This concept is succinctly expressed in a teaching of our Sages. The Talmud instructs us to pray regularly for the welfare of the government. The Sages explain that without government, people would cruelly destroy one another. A

specific ruler may be evil and abuse his or her power. However, the institution of governmental authority is essential to the survival of society.

*And the time of Yaakov's death approached and he called to his son Yosef and he said to him, "If I have pleased you, place your hand under my thigh and perform with me (an act) of kindness and truth. Do not now bury me in Egypt. When I will lie with my fathers, carry me from Egypt and bury me in their gravesite." And he said, "I will do as you have said." And he said, "Swear to me." And he swore to him. And Yisrael bowed at the head of the bed. (Sefer Beresheit 47:29-31)*

### 3. Bow to the fox in its moment

The above passages describe an earlier incident. Yaakov realizes that his death is approaching. He summons Yosef and asks him to take an oath that he will not bury him in Egypt. Instead, he should take his father's body back to the Land of Canaan and bury him the burial-site of his fathers. Yosef agrees and swears to fulfill his father's wishes. Yaakov responds by bowing toward his son. Rashi makes an odd comment regarding Yaakov's bow towards Yosef. He comments, "One should bow to a fox in its moment." Mizrahi explains Rashi's comments. Yosef was Yaakov's son and not of his father's stature. He is compared to a fox – a humble, unimpressive creature. Nonetheless, at this moment Yaakov needed Yosef's assistance. Only Yosef could assure that his wish to be buried in Canaan would be fulfilled. Therefore, when Yosef agreed to his father's request, it was appropriate for Yaakov to bow before Yosef. His bow was an expression of gratitude and appreciation.

The commentators note that Rashi provides different explanations for these two instances in which Yaakov demonstrated deference towards Yosef. In the first instance cited above, Rashi explains that Yaakov was showing respect for Yosef as ruler. In the second instance cited, Yaakov was acting with civility and grace. However, Rashi does not explain Yaakov's deference as a demonstration of respect for his authority.

There are a number of factors that support Rashi's interpretations. First, in the second instance cited, Yaakov only demonstrated deference after Yosef agreed to his request. He did not rise to greet Yosef when he entered. This suggests that Yaakov's bow was not one of respect but rather an expression of gratitude. Second, Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l points out that in the first

(continued next page)

instance cited above, the passage states that Yaakov strengthened himself to rise and greet his son. In other words, although Yaakov was weak and near death, he willed himself to rise. This behavior accords with a mandatory expression of respect for a ruler. Civility and grace would not have required a dying, weak father to rise for his son.

However, this raises a new and important question. Why, in the first instance cited, did Yaakov feel that it was necessary to demonstrate respect to Yosef as ruler but in the instance cited second he did not rise to greet him as ruler? Instead, only after Yosef acceded to his request did he bow in gratitude.

#### 4. Yaakov asked his son for an act of kindness and truth

The answer seems to lie in the contexts of the two incidents. In the incident cited second, Yaakov was not addressing Yosef as ruler. He asked for Yosef to fulfill a request that a father naturally makes of his son. He addressed Yosef as his son and he responded to him accordingly. He did not rise to greet his son Yosef. When his son agreed to his request, he bowed in appreciation.

Chizkuni supports this interpretation of the incident. Yaakov describes his request by asking that Yosef swear to perform a service that is both kindness and truth. This is a strange description. If the act is an act of truth

— an act of justice, then it is not an act of kindness. Justice requires that Yosef fulfill his father's wishes. If the act is an act of kindness, then it is not demanded by justice. Chizkuni responds that Yaakov described his request as one for kindness and truth because it included two components. Yaakov was asking that Yosef bury him. Every father has the right to make this demand of his son. This is an act of justice. However, his request to transport him back to Canaan and to bury him with his fathers was more than a demand for justice. It was a petition for kindness. These comments clearly indicate that Yaakov was speaking to Yosef as his son. He was asking him to fulfill his duties and to show kindness to his father. He was speaking to Yosef in the context of their father-son relationship.

However, the first cited incident is more difficult to understand. In this instance, Yaakov did rise to greet Yosef as ruler. Why did Yaakov regard this incident as an encounter between himself and a ruler?

*And now your two sons that were born to you in the Land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt are mine. Efraim and Menashe will be to me like Reuven and Shimon. (Sefer Beresheit 48:5)*

#### 5. Yosef used his authority as ruler to save his people

In the incident first cited, Yaakov addresses Yosef and tells him that Yosef's sons — Efraim and Menashe — will each be the patriarch of one of the tribes of Bnai Yisrael. The other patriarchs were Yaakov's children. From among his grandchildren, only Yosef's sons — Efraim and Menashe — were awarded this status. Chizkuni suggests that they received this special treatment as a reward to their father Yosef. Yosef had rescued his brothers and father from famine. He had created a home for them in Egypt and he had cared for them. He had acted as his family's patron and protector. As his reward, he was provided with this blessing. Both of his sons would be patriarchs of tribes. Yosef was able to do this because he was ruler of Egypt. In other words, Yaakov bestowed this blessing upon his son as a reward for his behavior as ruler over Egypt. He was acknowledging that Yosef had used his power and authority to protect and sustain his family and further their destiny. He was addressing Yosef not only as his son but also as ruler.

This explains Yaakov's rising to greet his approaching son. He was preparing to bestow upon Yosef the blessing that his sons would be patriarchs. This blessing was a reward for Yosef's conduct in his capacity as ruler. In greeting the ruler, Yaakov rose. ■

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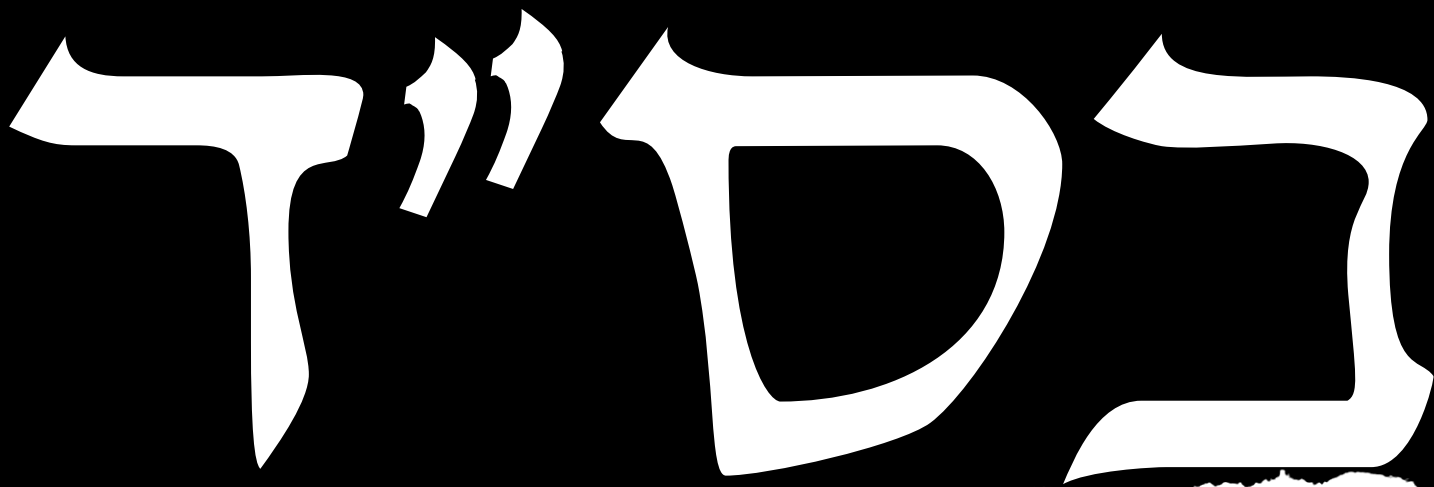
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# Popular but Problematic?

*Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg*

The letters are so commonplace, appearing on anything from letters to newspapers to internet sites. It can be found on magnetic business cards for plumbers and the plastic sleeves used by dry cleaners (although it probably won't be found on the top right of this publication). The letters Bet-Samech-Daled have become ubiquitous on today's written materials. What is astonishing about this development is that among the major poskim, there is no source whatsoever for this practice. No Shulchan Aruch, no Mishneh Berura...and yet it is considered a norm in many circles. Is there a basis for this custom?

Contemporary responsa point to the fairly recent rise of this practice, yet the starting point comes from the Talmud (Rosh Hashana 18b):

*"On the third of Tishri the mention [of God] in bonds was abolished: for the Grecian Government had forbidden the mention of God's name by the Israelites, and when the Government of the Hasmoneans became strong and defeated them, they ordained that they should mention the name of God even on bonds, and they used to write thus: 'In the year So-and-so of Johanan, High Priest to the Most High God', and when the Sages heard of it they said, 'To-morrow this man will pay his debt and the bond will be thrown on a dunghill', and they stopped them, and they made that day a feast day."*

To clarify this just a bit, the Greeks, among their many different decrees, banned the mention of the name of God. So the Chashmonaim, after their victory, decided to go to the other extreme; they decreed that some

*(continued next page)*

mention of the name of God should exist on every document, regardless if the content had any Torah relevance. The chachamin expressed a seemingly obvious concern regarding this practice, specifically that people would write the Name of God on, for example, a contract of purchase. Once the purchase would be complete, and there would no longer be a need for the document, it would be thrown away. Therefore, they put a stop to it. Why the need for a "feast day"? Rashi explains that this custom took hold relatively quickly among the people and there was concern as to whether they would be able to uproot such a custom. In a sense, it was somewhat miraculous they were able to do so with the people's consent. As such, a quasi-yom tov was created.

Putting aside the question of this conclusion being miraculous or not, the overall assumption by the Chashmonaim and subsequent rejection by the chachamin each require some further analysis. Is it not such a far-fetched conclusion to think that people would end up throwing these papers away? Did this problem just escape the thinking of the Chashmonaim? Furthermore, how do we understand the reaction of the Chashmonaim?

It is interesting that the Greeks included this decree among their many evil edicts against the Jewish people. What did they hope to accomplish by forbidding any mention of the name of God? In just about every religion, the deity worshipped and the religion itself are intrinsically tied to one another. The deity exists for the religion, and the religion, along with its adherents, exists to serve the will of the deity. The Greeks objective was to break this tie, to "kill off" the Deity of the Jews, by limiting any mention of Him. By stifling the mere utterance of His name, the break between the two would be complete, furthering their objective of destroying Judaism.

The Chashmonaim, after securing their victory, decided to demonstrate a significant flaw in the thinking of the Greeks, and most other nations. In other religions, the deity is, in a sense, limited by the religion itself. However, Hashem is qualitatively distinct in this regard. He exists outside of the religion, as the Creator of the universe. Whether or not the Jewish people ever existed has no effect on Hashem – He is omniscient. This idea is demonstrated in the Name of God being included in areas outside of Torah. Every document would now contain a reference to Hashem, showing that He was not to be viewed as intrinsically tied to the Jewish people, transcending not just the religion, but the universe.

While this idea was philosophically valid and appropriate, it also was dangerous, as indicated by the decision of Chazal to stop this minhag. The issue was not the practical likelihood of people throwing away the document as a consequence of being forgetful or no longer having a need for the document – that is too obvious of a reason. Instead, it would seem the concern was the changing perception of the different names/descriptions of God, and how they would end up being minimized in their importance – eventually leading to this discarding of the document. When referring to Hashem as "kel elyon", the "Most High God", we are not simply offering praise. Contained within this description is an idea about Hashem, a greater insight into Him. The same could be said of all other type of descriptions. Each serves as a vehicle to a specific idea, all tied to yediyas Hashem. To have the name of God on every document would produce one effect – the name of God becoming mundane.

After a certain point, it would no longer function as this gateway to further knowledge. Instead, it would be ordinary. And once this takes place, the person will end up throwing it away. He won't distinguish between the importance of the name of God and the un-importance of this document. Therefore, it was imperative that this minhag be stopped.

If we ended here, one would assume that any mention of God on a secular document, whether a plastic sleeve or a business card, should be avoided. The above approach clearly precludes any concept of mentioning Hashem on any secular document. Nonetheless, we do see the minhag today as being a derivation of the original attempt, a method to "get around the problem" of actually mentioning the name of God on a document. At first, there was the shift to Bet and Heh, B"H, signifying Baruch Hashem. There is a considerable debate as to when this minhag started, and who adhered of it. For example, it would seem R Chaim Soloveitchik and the Chasham Sofer did not write B"H or anything else on the top right of their documents (see examples at <http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2005/12/blog-post.html>). On the other hand, the Sfas Emes and Chidushei HaRim both wrote B"H on the top of their documents (shu"t Btzel Chachma 4:105). The debate about who did and who did not should not be construed as a competition, but rather as an indication of how this custom was, and still is not, universally accepted.

What is even more interesting is that this custom gave birth to another very questionable stringency. In the above teshuva of the Btzel Chachma, he discusses the potential "problem" with the "H" in B"H. The Radbaz explains that if one writes a letter of God's name with the intent of writing the entire name of God, it is forbidden to erase it. For example, writing the Aleph in "elokim" and then stopping would still mean one cannot erase this letter. For this reason, a question was raised as to whether there would be a problem writing the "H". The flaw in this question is that the "H" is referencing "Hashem", not one of the Names of God. Therefore, there seems to be no reason why this would be a problem (which is the general conclusion of the poskim). In this particular teshuva, one is considered praised if he chooses to use BS"D instead (it is unclear why if indeed there is no problem using B"H).

Rav Ovadia Yosef (3:78) also discusses the issue at length, tracing its history through different poskim. He notes the problem of writing God's name on a secular document, as introduced in the Talmud; therefore, he says there is nothing forbidden with writing B"H. He ends his teshuva saying it is permitted to write B"H, and goes as far as to say it is a good practice to follow. It is difficult to understand why he supports the position, as he offers no clear rationale for writing B"H.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe YD 2:138) also takes up this issue. He notes the minhag among many to write B"H on every document, and questions the rationale for the practice. He even expresses a sense of wonder that one would consider associating anything to do with God with a secular document that contains nonsense or something forbidden, such as lashon hara. He also is emphatic in saying there is no reason to be concerned with writing B"H, but if one would be, there certainly is no issue with writing BS"D. Clearly, though, Rav Moshe is not indicating any real support for this custom. ■

# The age of the Universe

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

**A**fter quoting a Rabbi who taught through scientific proof that the universe must truly be billions of years old, I received the following letter:

"While I do not necessarily disagree with your hypothesis on the age of the universe, I do not believe the proof you attributed to the other Rabbi to be bullet proof. You said, 'For light to reach Earth from a star 10,000,000 light years away, the universe must have existed that long, in order that the light traveled this distance.' Who said the light in fact traveled that distance? Perhaps God created the star together with a '10,000,000 light year long light stream' thereby allowing it to be immediately visible; despite the fact that nowhere nearly enough time had elapsed to allow the light to travel that distance on its own. I do not posit this as to what actually happened, only to suggest that this particular proof is not 'irrefutable'."

My response: You posit that God could have created the light stream "already in travel and reaching Earth." According to you, even the wisest of men like Einstein viewing this star's light and using reasoning will miscalculate its

distance, and thus its age. God is really fooling us about the age of the universe, according to you. Your theory imputes a deception to God. That's problem number one. But as we know, fabrication is of human origin, and cannot be ascribed to a perfect Creator, whose Torah says "From a falsehood, distance yourself (Exod. 23:7)."

Furthermore, you contradict yourself. On the one hand, you accept that the star is in fact 10,000,000 miles away, since you say its beam reaches us only by way of God's unnatural manipulation. Thus, you trust your senses regarding the star's location, but not for its "age," a calculation based on your accepted location would date it at 10,000,000 years old.

Following the verse that God despises fallacy, we accept that He is not fooling us: the stars we see prove that the universe is billions of years old. And this does not mean Adam didn't live 5771 years ago. We mean to date the beginning of the universe, not Adam, thereby following the theory that the first 5.x "days" refer not to 24-hour periods, but an epoch of billions of years. However, once Adam was created on day 6, until today, we count 5771 years. ■

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