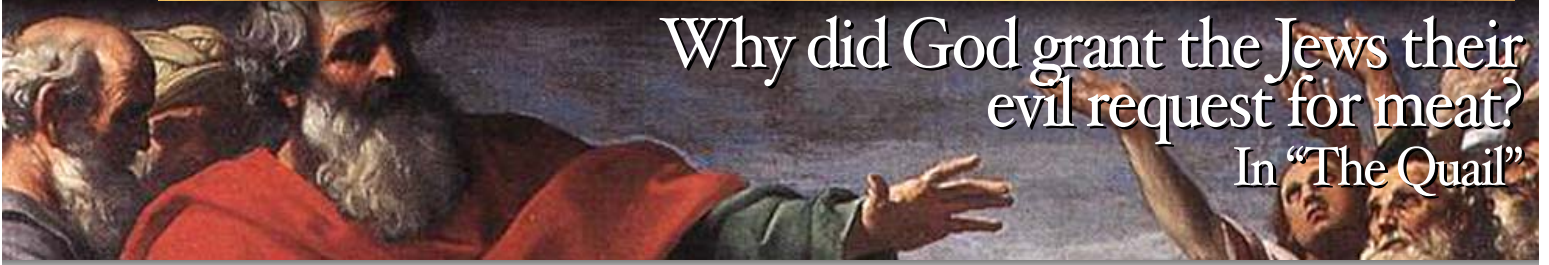


In memory of Irving Posner A"H: whose daughter Rivka conceived the JewishTimes



Why did God grant the Jews their evil request for meat? In "The Quail"

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# JewishTimes

Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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Chicago	8:00	New York	8:02
Cleveland	8:35	Paris	9:26
Detroit	8:43	Philadelphia	8:04
Houston	7:59	Phoenix	7:14
Jerusalem	7:20	Pittsburgh	8:25
Johannesburg	5:06	Seattle	8:40
Los Angeles	7:40	Sydney	4:39
London	8:48	Tokyo	6:32
Miami	7:49	Toronto	8:33
Montreal	8:16	Washington DC	8:08

## Weekly Parsha

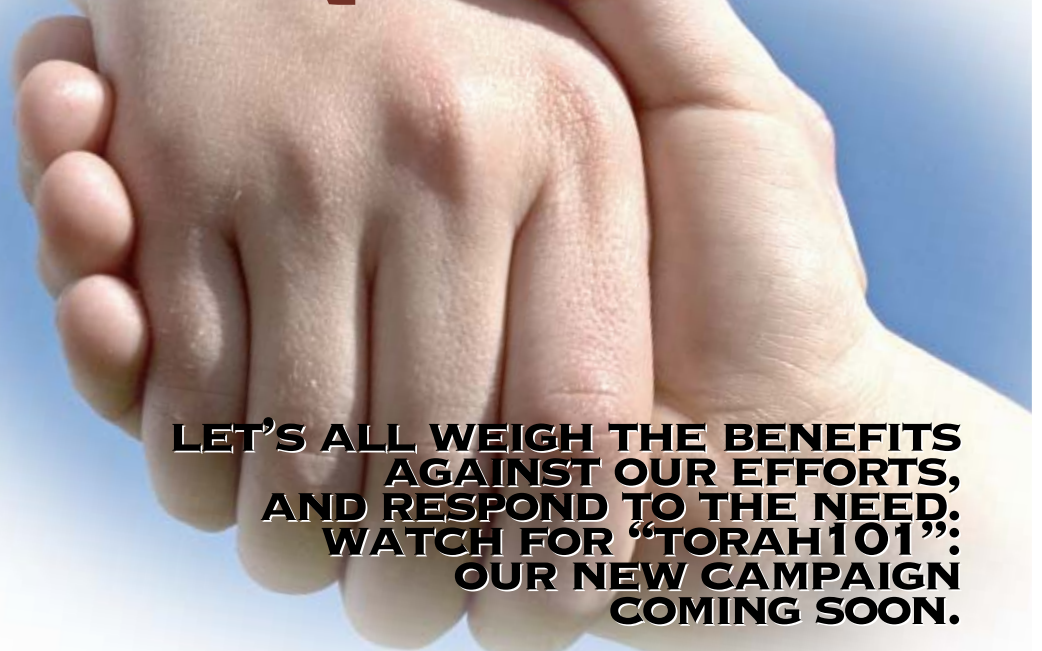
# BeHalotecha

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: “Speak to Aharon, and say to him, “When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light towards the front of the menorah.”” And Aharon did so. He lit the lamps of it so as to give light towards the

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# OUT REACH



**LET'S ALL WEIGH THE BENEFITS AGAINST OUR EFFORTS, AND RESPOND TO THE NEED. WATCH FOR "TORAH101": OUR NEW CAMPAIGN COMING SOON.**

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(BeHalotecha cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

# JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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front of the menorah, as Hashem commanded Moshe. And this was the design of the candlestick: a beaten work of gold; including its base, and including its flowers thereof, it was beaten work; according unto the pattern which Hashem had shown Moshe, so he made the menorah.” (BeMidbar 8:1-4)

Parshat Bahalotecha begins with instructions for the lighting of the menorah. The menorah is the candelabra located in the Mishcan – the Tabernacle. The menorah is composed of a central candlestick. From the central candlestick extend six branches. Three branches extend from each side. The above translation corresponds with Rashi's understanding of these instructions. Aharon is told that the candles located on the six branches are to shed their light towards the central candlestick.[1]

There are two obvious difficulties with this section. First, the commentaries are troubled by the placement of these instructions at this location in Sefer BeMidbar. Up to this point, the sefer has primarily dealt with the organization of the encampment in the wilderness. In the immediately preceding chapters, the sefer described the sacrifices offered to initiate the Mishcan. Immediately following this section, the Torah will describe the initiation of the Leveyim – the Levites – into their roles in assisting the Kohanim – the Priests and transporting the Mishcan. What is the connection between the instructions for the lighting of the menorah and the preceding of coming material?

Second, after providing instructions for the lighting of the menorah, the Torah provides a description of the design of the menorah. This description was presented in even more detail in Sefer Shemot. Why does the Torah repeat this description?

Rashi provides a well-known response to the first question. He explains that Aharon was the leader of Shevet Leyve – the tribe of Leyve. The leaders of the other shevatim – tribes – had joined together to offer an elaborate set of sacrifices for the dedication of the Mishcan. Each prince offered an identical set of sacrifices and each was assigned his own day on which to present his offering. But Aharon – as leader of Shevet Leyve – did not participate in these offerings. Shevet Leyve was not assigned its own day. Aharon did not offer a set of sacrifices on behalf of Shevet Leyve. Aharon was disturbed with his exclusion from the dedication process. As a consolation, Hashem provided Aharon with the instructions for the lighting of the menorah. Hashem told Aharon that his shevet would have the

honor of lighting the menorah each day.[2]

Nachmanides asks a number of questions on Rashi's response. We will focus on one of these questions. According to Rashi, Aharon received the instructions for the lighting of the menorah as a consolation for not participating in the offerings of the princes. Why was this specific service selected by Hashem to serve as a consolation? He points out that Aharon was entrusted with a variety of responsibilities in the Mishcan. He was the only one who was permitted to execute the responsibilities. For example, only Aharon or a future Kohen Gadol – the High Priest – can perform the service of Yom HaKippur. Why were these special responsibilities not adequate consolation?[3]

In order to answer Nachmanides' question, we must consider two sets of passages from last week's parasha.



“And the princes brought the dedication-offering of the altar on the day that it was anointed. The princes brought their offering before the altar. And Hashem said to Moshe: They shall present their offering, each prince on his day, for the dedication of the altar”. (BeMidbar 7:10-11)

“This was the dedication-offering of the altar, on the day when it was anointed, at the hands of the princes of Israel: twelve silver dishes, twelve silver basins, twelve golden pans. Each silver dish weighing a hundred and thirty shekels, and each basin seventy; all

the silver of the vessels two thousand and four hundred shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary.” (BeMidbar 7:84-85)

The first set of passages introduces the section of the Torah that describes the offerings of the princes. Each prince is assigned his own day on which he will bring his offerings to the Mishcan. It seems that the sacrifices and vessels offered by each prince constitute a discrete set of offerings. In other words, over the twelve days that the offerings were brought, twelve separate sets of offerings were presented. However, a careful analysis of these passages communicates a different message. The passages refer to the twelve sets of offerings as “their offering.” The implication is obvious. All of the various sacrifices and vessels presented over the twelve days are regarded as a single offering. In other words, the process of bringing this single offering extends over a twelve-day period. All of the various sacrifices and vessels brought over this period merge into a single offering.

This idea is reflected in the second set of passages.

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After the Torah describes the sacrifices and vessels presented by each prince on his respective day, the Torah provides a summary. In this summary, the Torah totals all of the sacrifices and vessels by types. For example, in the passages above, the Torah tells us that a total of twelve silver basins were brought. Why is this summary needed? This summary emphasizes the relationship between the various components of the offering. The Torah is communicating that all of the individual offerings provided on each day are parts of an entirety. All of the individual sacrifices and vessels are parts of a single offering.

Why is it necessary for the Torah to communicate this information? What difference is there as to whether we view each prince's sacrifices and vessels as an individual offering from that specific shevet or as a part of a larger offering?

We can appreciate the importance of this distinction through reviewing the order in which the princes present their offerings. The first prince to provide sacrifices and vessels is the Prince of Shevet Yehudah. He is followed on the next day by the Prince of Yisachar. Once these two princes present their offerings an order is established that guides the remainder of the princes. What is this order?

During their sojourn in the wilderness, Bnai Yisrael's encampment was organized surrounding the Mishcan. Each shevet was assigned a specific location. When the nation traveled, this order was preserved. The nation traveled as a procession of shevatim. The place of each shevet in this procession was based upon and reflected its location relative to the Mishcan where the nation was encamped. As a result, the nation camped and traveled as a system of shevatim. In other words, the camp of Bnai Yisrael was designed as a system of shevatim – with the shevatim functioning as component units within the nation of Bnai Yisrael.

The order in which the princes presented their offerings reflected and was based upon this order – the order in which the various shevatim camped in and traveled through the wilderness. Shevet Yehudah led the procession of shevatim in the wilderness. Accordingly, the first set of offerings was presented by this shevet. Shevet Yisachar followed Shevet Yehudah in the procession through the wilderness. As a result, the second set of offerings was presented by Shevet Yisachar. All of the remaining shevatim presented their offerings in the order in which they traveled through the wilderness.

The order in which the offerings were presented reflected the relationship between the offerings of the various shevatim. In their travels and in the wilderness encampment, the shevatim each functioned as a unit within the overall nation. They were components of a greater entirety – the nation. The offerings were presented in this framework.



Each shevet separately, and on its own day, presented its offerings. But each shevet presented its offerings as a component unit within the entirety of the nation of Bnai Yisrael. In other words, the offerings were not presented by the shevet as an independent social-political entity. Instead, the offerings were presented by the shevet as a component unit within the entirety of the greater unit of the nation.

This answers our earlier question. Why does the Torah emphasize that all of the offerings presented by the individual shevatim were parts of an overall offering? The Torah is teaching us that although the offerings were presented by the individual shevatim, the offerings merged into a single offering of the nation of Bnai Yisrael.

We can now reconsider Aharon's concern. Rashi is not suggesting that Aharon was disappointed that his shevet did not participate in the presentation of offerings. His concern was based upon an understanding of the nature of this offering. In this offering the component shevatim of Bnai Yisrael presented an offering on behalf of the entire nation. Shevet Leyve did not participate. This implicitly excluded the shevet from functioning as a unit within the nation.

Rashi explains that Aharon received instructions for the lighting of the menorah as a consolation for his shevet's exclusion from the presentation of offerings. How did these instructions provide consolation?

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno's comments regarding these instructions will help us answer this question. Sforno deals with two issues. First, why is it necessary for the branches to spread their light towards the central candlestick? Sforno explains that this requirement is intended to symbolize an important idea. The nation of Bnai Yisrael is made up of a multitude of individuals. The various members of the nation have different talents and abilities. But in order to enjoy the blessings of Hashem, we must join together in a single mission – service to Hashem. All the candles – from the candle on the extreme right to the candle on the extreme left – must all join together in creating one central illumination. (This is not intended as a trite political statement.) So too, the members of the nation cannot allow the disparity of their talents and dispositions to compromise their commitment to the shared mission of serving Hashem.[4]

Second, Sforno explains the significance of the Torah's review of the menorah's construction. The passages above describe the menorah's design. It is beaten from a single ingot of gold. The menorah is not composed of individual components that are welded together. The menorah's design is intended to reiterate and reinforce the message communicated by the lighting instructions. Like the menorah, the nation must function as a single entity. It must be unified in its devotion to Hashem.[5]

Now we can understand how Rashi would respond to Nachmanides' criticism. Why was Aharon consoled by the instructions for the lighting of the menorah? The menorah does not only represent the unity of Bnai Yisrael. It explains the basis for the unity. We are not unified merely by a shared history or culture. We are unified by a shared mission. We must all join in the mission of creating light – serving Hashem. The service in the Mishcan was performed by the Kohanim and Shevet Leyve. The efforts of the nation towards the fulfillment of its mission achieved expression through this service. In other words, the most important aspirations of Bnai Yisrael were reflected in the service performed by Shevet Leyve. These services were the actualization of the mission of the nation. They were the element that unified Bnai Yisrael. Shevet Leyve did not participate in the presentation of offerings. But its service represented the element that unified the various shevatim into a single nation. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 8:2.

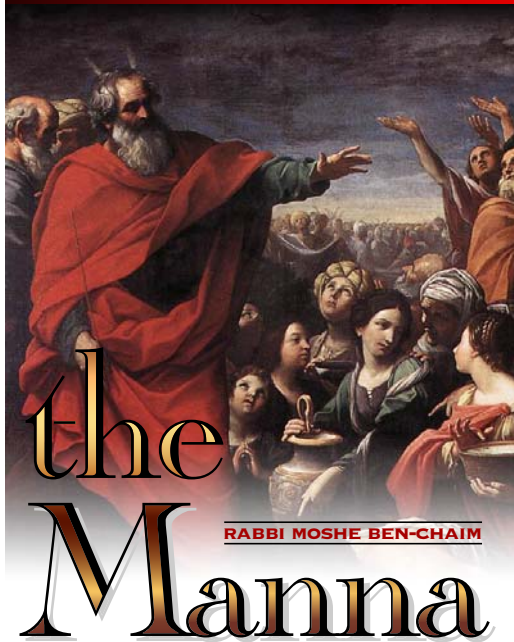
[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 8:2.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 8:2.

[4] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, 8:2.

[5] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, 8:4.

## Weekly Parsha



In order to understand the concepts in the manna, we must understand the events immediately preceding its appearance: The Jews traveled to Israel, and were promised its inheritance by God. No doubts were presented to them regarding their ability to conquer the land. While treading Israel's borders, the people desired to send spies to evaluate the land. This was not commanded by God or Moses. Moses consented to this, for he desired that they see there is nothing to hide. Moses hoped the Jews would abandon their wish to spy the land upon seeing Moses' own conviction that all their requests were complied with forthright (Rashi). However, the Jews insisted and spied the land. After their return forty days later, ten of the twelve spies incited a riot. They terrified the people with the spread of a defeatist position - they felt the current inhabitants were invincible, thereby denying God's word. Along with their heretic opinions and projections, they decided not to take on the land.

Due to the Jew's own fears instigated by the spies, they rebelled against God. This rebellion clearly demonstrated their disbelief in God's age old promise to Abraham that they would receive the land. The Jews were then sentenced to roam the desert for forty years until the last of the rebellious people perished.

Question: If the Jews simply did not deserve Israel, why didn't God allow them to reach another land until the sinners died out? What was the reason God desired the Jews to roam the desert for forty years?

I believe the answer is that the crime the of the Jews was a basic one. Their conviction of how reality operates was based on trust in their own

abilities, and nothing else. What is amazing is that after witnessing tremendous miracles in Egypt and at the Red Sea, the Jews still harbored disbelief in God. They felt God wanted to "kill them in the desert". This confirms Maimonides' words that the miracles leave doubt in one's heart. The Jews didn't believe Moses due to miracles. The reason being, miracles lose their significance with heir increased frequency. God desired to address the Jews' disbelief. The method utilized by God shows the level of intricacy and depth in God's system of justice.

God forced the Jews into a situation where they were solely dependent upon Him for their very existence in the desert. He desired to train them in the ways of believing His word. God chose to raise the Jews above a simplistic existence. He wished to address their problem by raising them from a reality of self sufficiency (where God plays little or no role), to the true reality where God's existence is primary in all equations - a reality where God's word is 'more real' than the physical reality the Jews currently banked on exclusively. God accomplished this in a number of ways:

1) God sustained the appearance of the miraculous manna.

The aspect of a miraculous food removed 'understanding' from the Jews regarding the manna's properties. Had He fed them vegetation or animal products, there would be a feeling of familiarity and reliance on the natural procurement of these foods. This would afford security and detract from God's goal of forcing them to rely on Him alone. God therefore created a "miracle food" which by its very name "manna" (which means "what is it") the Jews could not find any security. It is also something "their fathers were unfamiliar with". (Deut. 8:3) This alien feeling about the manna contributed to their feelings of insecurity in themselves, a prerequisite for redirecting their need for security towards God. We learn from the words in Deuteronomy that people are comfortable with that which their forefathers spoke of. The manna did not carry this sense.

2) God limited the manna's "shelf life" to one day and it would rot if left for the next day:

This was done to remove any security in the manna itself. Therefore, the essence of the manna must include temporary shelf life. No emotional security could be attached to it.

3) God caused it to melt each day as the sun warmed it.

Seeing the manna lying on the ground would provoke the feeling of security; "it is here all the

time." This is another area in which the Jews would have sought security. Security in the physical was their weakness, which until this point, caused them to sin. Their need for physical security would have to be redirected to security in God alone.

4) God caused the manna to double in size once it was in their homes Friday evening.

On Friday, the Jews were commanded to gather enough for that day. Although the manna did not fall on Shabbos, they would have sustenance through the Shabbos. When they did as they were commanded they found that the manna miraculously doubled in size, to sustain them (Exod. 16:5 -Rashi). Their complete confidence would be in God's word. The manna fell each of the 6 weekdays with just enough for each day, as God promised. Left over manna would become wormy and rot, again, to combat self sufficiency. Not so on Shabbos. Manna leftover from Friday through Shabbos remained fresh. The purpose of this was again, to force the Jews to believe more in God's word than in physical reality and their own securities. All the miracles of the manna described above were to engender faith in the word of God. This integral concept of faith in God's word applies today. We demonstrate this idea by our abstinence in all work on the Shabbos. By doing so, we demonstrate conviction that abstention from work on one day does not threaten our existence and livelihood. God will take care of us, however He does so, even though we may not understand how.

In Deuteronomy 8:3, we read: "He (God) afflicted you and hungered you and fed you the manna, which you didn't know and your fathers didn't know, to show you that not on bread alone does man live, but by all that comes from God's mouth does man live."

The word "alone" teaches us that man should live primarily in accordance with natural law. The purpose of the manna was to show that man's reality - the way for "man to live" - is in the reality of God's word, "but by all that comes from God's mouth does man live." It is clear from this verse that man's existence in the wilderness for forty years was meant to direct his dependency on God alone. The Rashbam also states this when he says, "...you had no "bread in your basket" but your lives were dependent upon Heaven each day".

We see that God's multifaceted manna-plan was required to first strip the Jews of their securities placed in the physical and in their own might, and secondly, to permeate the Jews with belief in God. The manna was used to address those areas where

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## Weekly Parsha

he seeks security. Living in the desert for forty years gave the Jews an opportunity to abandon their flawed emotion of self trust. This was a great blessing. Their need to follow only that which was intelligible was replaced with trust in God, His word, and His system of divine providence. ■



# the Quail

In Numbers, 11:4, we read that the mixed multitude who attached themselves to the Jewish Exodus, committed a sin when they lusted. They cried out, "who will feed us meat?" Even the Jews joined them. They cried, "we remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free", and they recalled other delicacies. In passage 6 they state, "And now our souls are dried, all we see is the manna." (Interesting is the following, detailed, positive qualities of the manna. Rashi states this description is God's, contrasting the previous complaint of the people.) The account continues with a description of Moshe hearing the people "crying by the household". Rashi states they were crying for the matters of "households", referring to the newly received (Torah) sexual prohibitions of family members. There are many facets to this story. I will focus on how God addresses their cry for meat.

In passage 11:13, Moshe says:

"Where shall I get meat to give to this entire people that cry upon me, saying, give us meat that we may eat?"

God says:

(18) "Ready yourselves tomorrow, and you will eat meat, because you cry in the ears of God saying, 'who will feed us meat, because it was better for us in Egypt', God will give you meat and you will eat. (19) Not one day will you eat, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days. (20) Until thirty days, until it comes out of your noses, and it be a vile thing, on account that you despised God Who was in your midst and you cried before Him saying 'why have we come out of Egypt.'" (21) Moshe responds:"600,000 by foot

that I am amidst, and You say 'I will give meat to them and they will eat 30 days?'. (22) If the sheep and cattle be slaughtered, would there be found sufficient? If all the fish of the sea be gathered, would there be sufficient?"

What an amazing response Moshe uttered! God says, "God will give you meat and you will eat"... "Until thirty days", and Moshe questions this! Didn't Moshe see God's miracles first hand? In light of God's abilities displayed via the Ten Plagues, what can possibly be questionable to Moshe regarding God's promise to provide meat for thirty days? God's response to Moshe emphasizes this point, "Is God's hand short? You will see if this occurs." This rare type of response requires understanding.

Let us list the questions:

- 1)What is meant by "Who" will feed us meat?
- 2)What was the Jews' complaint? Why mock the manna if in reality it was good?
- 3)Why respond to their request and feed them quail as they seem to be in the wrong?
- 4)What is meant that they ate fish "free"? Rashi says (11:5) "even straw was not given to them free, how then fish?"
- 5)What is the purpose of "Until the quail exits your noses"? Who is making it come out of their nostrils?
- 6)Rashi (11:10) on "crying by the household" states "they cried on the sexual prohibitions on family members." How does this relate to our story?
- 7)On "K'misson'nim" Rashi (11:2) states "they were seeking a pretense to escape from following God." The question is why did they need to escape, and why at this time?
- 8)What is Moshe's argument about the cattle and fish being insufficient?
- 9)What is God's response to Moshe, "Hayad Hashem tiksar", "Is God's hand short"?

As a first step to answering these questions, I will note that many times we remain ignorant of truths due to our own, incorrect assumptions. We must be sensitive, not to overlook, assume, or project. We must focus on the Torah's words which are an exact science. The Torah's content and words lead us to the questions, and it answers those very issues. This very idea is derived from these verses stated by King Solomon:

"If you dig for it like silver, and search it out like a buried treasure, then you will understand the fear of G-d, and the knowledge of G-d will you find. Because God gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Proverbs, 2:4-6).

What is meant by the two statements in this passage, "Because God gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding"? It teaches a fine point - two reasons Torah will yield great insights into truths: 1) "God gives wisdom", meaning, the Source of our studies is God - an infinitely wise Creator. This is one reason why we must dig for knowledge with such vigor. Our outlook must be, "there is tremendous knowledge to behold". A sense of adventure must overcome us as we part from daily affairs and step into the endless sea of enlightening thought and ideas. This sense must present itself when each day, we embark upon new studies. 2) The second idea derived from this passage; Not only is the Source of wisdom remarkable, but the actual structure of each passage is a great study in itself. This is what is meant by "from His mouth...", meaning, God's articulated words and verses are of the utmost precision. Only a refined sensitivity will drive a Torah student to examine the Torah with such exactitude, thereby uncovering deeper ideas. Let us return to the topic.

What did the Jews say? "Who" will feed us meat. Why was this joined with a ridicule of the manna? The first idea we notice is the Jews' degradation of God. They saw all the miracles, and yet said, "Who will give us meat?" Another later passage alerts us that they addressed God with this statement of "Who". Passage 11:20 reads, "(God said)...on account that you despised God Who was in your midst and you cried before Him saying 'why have we come out of Egypt.'" Here, God identifies their crime as an act of degrading God. But why were they despising Him now? They recalled the "free" fish eaten in Egypt, which Rashi denies was factual. Rashi is teaching us that they meant free in another sense, that is, free from Mitzvos. A picture starts to emerge. We begin to witness not only an attack on God, but on the Torah system.

The core issue borne out is the Jews' aversion to the Torah - a new, binding, and prohibitive demand on their formerly "free" lifestyle, albeit as slaves. They remembered (imagined) the fish they ate "free", yes, "free" of commandments. The Jews rebelled against the Giver of this Torah, but they could not do so directly, as they only said, "Who" will give us meat. Therefore God clearly identifies for the Jews, that it was God Who they despised.

Why did they attack the manna? The answer is "displacement". When someone cannot vent his emotion on the real object, he directs his emotion towards a replacement. Such was the case with the ridicule of the manna. The Jews really disliked the

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## Weekly Parsha

Torah system, but their eyes saw the event at Sinai, and they could not deny reality - the Torah is true, God is real. Therefore, they selected that which represented God's system, the manna, which He provided miraculously. They vented themselves towards it, instead of towards the divine commands. They said "we want meat", meaning, we don't want this manna. In truth, they had no problem with the manna. The passages teach us how great it was. (Perhaps this is why the Torah interrupts the story with verses 11:7-9 describing how good the manna really was.) What the Jews meant to say is "we don't want the Torah". This is what Rashi again alludes to when he explains "crying by the household". Rashi stated they were "crying about the matters of the household", they wished to once again have relations with those now prohibited by Torah law. Rashi (11:2) states "they were seeking a pretense to escape from following God."

Let's also be mindful of a strange statement. Moshe said, if all the sheep, cattle, and fish were supplied to the Jews, they wouldn't be sufficient. This is impossible! There were only 2-3 million Jews, and the entire oceanic population most assuredly would feed them forever! How can Moshe say this? Examine God's resolve: God says He will comply with the Jews' request, and provide quail for 30 days, until it exits their nostrils. Why comply? The Jews' were in error. God said so, "you despised God Who was in your midst." I ask you, the reader, to now stop, and think about this following question: What reason can there be for compliance with an ill request? Imagine you are faced with such a scenario, and you comply. What grounds would there be for compliance? (Keep in mind, compliance means you prefer another recourse.) Don't read further, think for a moment.

What are the possibilities? Either there are, or there aren't alternatives. If there are none, one may comply because he has no other alternative, or cannot think of one right now. However, these explanations cannot apply to God. If there are alternatives, compliance is not needed. But there is one reason compliance may be engaged,...not so much to give the person his request, but perhaps for an ulterior motive.

God in no way intended that the quail satisfy the Jews' desire for meat as an end in itself. Moshe too understood that the issue was not a problem with food. In his wisdom, Moshe knew they were rebelling against God. This is what

caused Moshe to respond to God's promise of quail as he did. Moshe was not doubting that God could provide any amount of food. What Moshe meant was, "food is not the answer". Moshe knew the oceans contained enough - enough that is, if food is the issue. But the oceans cannot be sufficient if the problem is a rebellion against God. Moshe was asking of God, "food is not the issue, so why give them quail?"

What God in fact was doing, was complying for an ulterior purpose. That is, that the Jews should see for themselves that their complaint for meat is a misdirected attack on God. The only way for them to realize this, is looking past their lust for meat. Only after they realize their attachment to meat is an unnatural one, will they be able to stop, reflect, and recognize their problem is really with God, and the Torah they wish to abandon. This is why God says the quail will exit their nostrils. Not that God is the cause of this, but that their own unnatural desire for meat would propel them into an eating frenzy. As they would feed, their real, underlying emotion would not be satisfied, that being the removal of their new, Torah obligations. They would then keep eating under the false impression that meat is the issue. This was God's plan. To move them past their blinding emotion that meat is their problem. Sforno actually says the same thing: (11:23) "Is God's hand incapable of finding a method for them to despise all foods?"

"They will eat the meat with their own free will, even after the enjoyment is gone, until it exists their nostrils, and they will despise it without any control on their free will at all, and thereby they will repent with a repentance of love..." God saw that the only way to show the Jews their true mistake, was to first show them that their assumed complaint was baseless.

Moshe said to God, "600,000 by foot that I am amidst, and You say 'I will give meat to them and they will eat 30 days?' If the sheep and cattle be slaughtered, would there be found sufficient? If all the fish of the sea be gathered, would there be sufficient?" God responds, "Is the hand of God short?" What was Moshe's mistake which demanded this response? It would seem that Moshe was not of the opinion that the method of addressing the Jews' error was to satisfy the displaced emotion. Moshe felt that the method must be to address the true, underlying emotion - their wish to abandon the commandments. Why didn't God choose this approach? We may suggest that an open attack on the true emotion would end in the Jews' further denial.

I tread in deep waters here, I may err, but yet I wonder, what was Moshe's equation? Did he not see this point, that there are times when a direct assault on an emotion will not be fruitful? Did Moshe feel this case was different than all others? That an open attack on the very emotion to abandon God would be fatal? This point requires further study. ■



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# ג'ימטריא? God Forbid!

MATT SCHNEEWEISS

Gematria (Hebrew numerology) is a popular form of *dvar Torah*, used by pulpit rabbis and laymen alike. Despite its prevalence, it would be a mistake to assume that gematria is unanimously recognized as a legitimate form of Torah interpretation. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, one of the great Rishonim (medieval commentators), repudiates gematria-based exegesis in two places in his commentary.

The verse states: "And when Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he armed his initiates who had been born in his house - three hundred and eighteen - and pursued them as far as Dan" (Bereishis 14:14). Rashi explains: "Our Rabbis said: it was Eliezer alone, for 318 is the numerical value of his name." On that note, Ibn Ezra writes: "The calculation of the letters in Eliezer's name was only stated in the manner of *drash* (homily), since the Torah does not speak in gematria, for anyone who desires can use gematria to interpret any name for good and for evil."

The second expression of Ibn Ezra's position can be found on Shemos (1:7): "God forbid that the prophet should speak in gematria or encoded messages!"

Let us analyze Ibn Ezra's position. His first comment is clear: gematria lends itself to arbitrary interpretations. *Chochmah* (wisdom) is objective. Any method which enables people to project their own interpretations onto the

text, without any objective standard of correctness, is not a method of *chochmah*. One can come up with dozens of gematria-based interpretations for a single word without any way of determining which are true and which are false.

But why does Ibn Ezra go so far as to say "God forbid" that the Torah should speak in gematria? I believe the answer can be found elsewhere in Ibn Ezra's commentary.

One of the classic problems in the Chumash is the variant wording in the two accounts of the Ten Commandments: Hashem's presentation in Parshas Yisro and Moshe's reiteration in Vaeschanan. The commentators struggle to reconcile these differences.

Ibn Ezra has a simple answer: "Know that words are like bodies and ideas are like souls, and the body to the soul is like a vessel. Therefore, the guiding principle of all *chachamim* (wise individuals) in any language is to preserve the ideas without regard to a change of words, provided that their meanings are the same" (Ibn Ezra on Shemos 20:1). When Moshe reiterated the Ten Commandments, he wasn't concerned with preserving Hashem's exact wording. Rather, his sole concern was conveying the ideas - ideas which could be conveyed in different words.

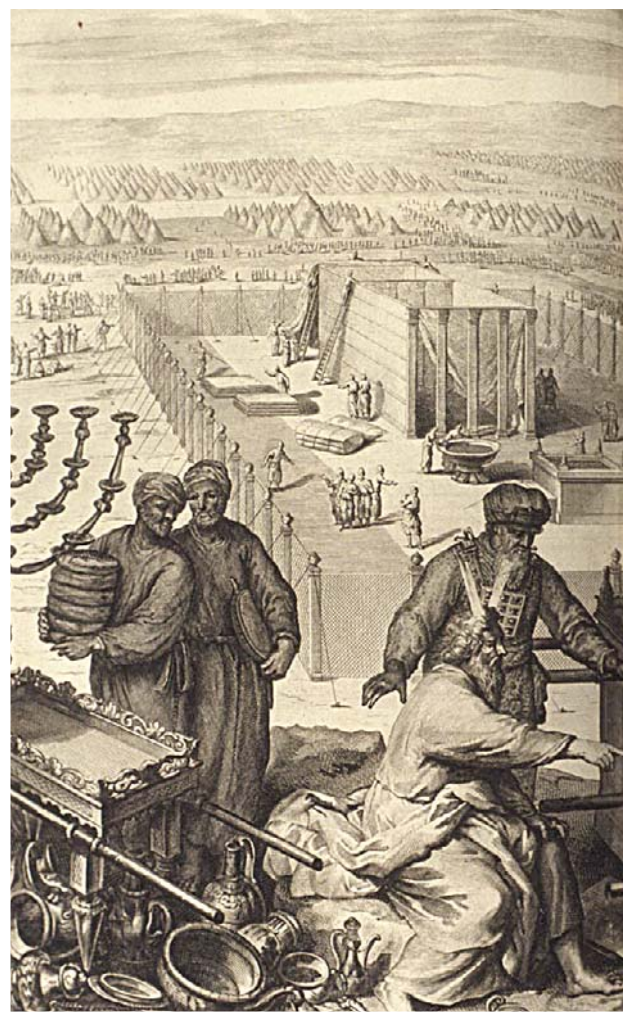
A clear principle emerges from Ibn Ezra's comments: *chachamim* preoccupy themselves

with the ideas behind the words (the souls), not with the words per se (the bodies). Gematria, on the other hand, endows the very letters of the words with an inordinate degree of significance, and makes them the essence. As such, reasons Ibn Ezra, gematria cannot be a legitimate method of interpreting the Word of God. If Moshe Rabbeinu himself did not treat the letters as sacrosanct, then neither should we in our interpretive methods.

[It is a fundamental principle of Judaism that every word and every letter in the Torah was given to Moshe Rabbeinu at Sinai. The Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the variant wording of the Ten Commandments does not contradict this.]

Is gematria ever appropriate? Yes. Ibn Ezra's point is that what appears to be a derivation of an idea through gematria should not be construed as such. The idea came first, whether it is a *peirush* (interpretation) of the verse or a *drash* (homily) which was merely attached to the verse. Gematria was only employed by the Sages to present the idea. ■

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# MESORA

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