



## Does God's TORAH LAW view Gentiles as SUBHUMAN?

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# JewishTimes

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### Weekly Parsha

## Behar

**RABBI BERNIE FOX**

*"When you make a sell to your friend or make a purchase from your friend, one person should not aggrieve his brother."*  
(VaYikra 25:14)

*"And a person should not aggrieve his friend. And you*

*(continued on next page)*

### Blessings



## THE BLESSING

on

## Lifting the Hands



**RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG**

In the Ashkenazic world outside of Eretz Yisrael, Birkas Kohanim is essentially a fleeting experience, a practice exclusive to Yom Tov. And yet, while it is not a common recurrence, it is, nonetheless, an area of great halacha and hashkafa import, as it is the last vestige of avodas hamikdash. One interesting area of analysis involves the bracha the kohanim recite prior to this mitzvah.

This Talmud (Sotah 39a) introduces the bracha:

"What benediction did he (referring to the kohen) utter? — R. Zera said in the name of R. Hisda: '[Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe] Who hast sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and hast commanded us to bless Thy people Israel in love'."

The phrase that jumps out is the

*(continued on page 4)*

### Fundamentals



# Judaism is Racism?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

A reader asked that the JewishTimes address the Torah's "unfair" Torah treatment of non-Jews. Our reader cited numerous excerpts from the Talmud, Maimonides and other sources...some of which were clear distortions. In her opinion, these sources seemingly portrayed gentiles as subhuman to Jews.

Responding to the literally dozens of quotes would be quite lengthy. For sake of brevity, if we can present a difference between two individuals, where one has less rights due to his violation of God's will, this alone will explain why he will deserve different treatment, than another, who obeys God. In such a case, certain Torah laws will not favor that violator, as much as the Torah favors the follower of God's word. The rights of the violator will be compromised, as it is God who bestows rights on all people.

The Torah reveals God's value of various individuals, be it a man, woman, slave, child, unborn, or idolator. Values vary, based on many considerations:

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(Behar cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

## JewishTimes

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*should fear your G-d. I and Hashem your G-d." (VaYikra 25:17)*

The first passage above commands us against ona'ah – overcharging or underpaying in a commercial exchange. A seller is entitled to a reasonable price for his product and a buyer is entitled to bargain for a reasonable sale price. However, it is not permitted to charge an unreasonable price that takes advantage of the buyer's situation or ignorance. Neither is it permitted for the purchaser to take advantage of the ignorance of the seller or the situation in which the seller may find himself.

A few passages later the Torah returns to this theme. It tells us that we are prohibited from aggrrieving one another. This behavior is also referred to as ona'ah. Our Sages were concerned with the meaning of this second passage. The first passage already indicates that ona'ah is prohibited in trade. This second passage cannot be a repetition of the same prohibition against inappropriate commercial dealings. What is the new message in the second passage?

The Sages were troubled by a second issue. The second passage warns us that we should fear Hashem. Of course it is important to fear Hashem! Why does the Torah suddenly admonish us to fear Hashem? The Sages concluded that this admonishment must in some way be related to the first portion of the passage that commands us to not aggrrieve our neighbor. What is this connection?

The Sages explained that this second passage is not referring to ona'ah of one's neighbor in commercial dealings. Instead, it is a prohibition against ona'at devarim – aggrrieving another person with words. In other words, we are prohibited from verbally abusing a person.

The Sages explained that this interpretation of the passage accounts for the inclusion of the admonition to fear Hashem. Ona'at devarim – verbal abuse – can often be justified or rationalized. Sometimes the abuse is subtle and not overt. We can tell ourselves that we really meant no harm. Also, sometimes we

can rationalize the manner in which we speak with others by claiming to ourselves that our intention was only to correct the other person and not to embarrass or harass him. Therefore, only the one who delivers the abuse and Hashem know the true intent of the statement. The passage tells us that we may be able to fool others regarding our intent. But we cannot deceive Hashem.[1] Perhaps, the Torah is telling us that we often keep our behaviors within the boundaries of civility because we do not want to loose the respect of our peers. In instances of ona'at devarim, we can sometimes explain away our behavior and retain the respect of our peers. This removes one of the fundamental motivators that regulate civil interaction – our desire to be perceived by others in a positive light. The Torah forewarns us that in order to motivate ourselves in the observance of this command, we must recognize that although we can delude our peers regarding our intention, we cannot mislead Hashem.

Maimonides' treatment of the prohibition against ona'at devarim is somewhat odd. In his code of law – the Mishne Torah – Maimonides places his discussion of this prohibition in the laws regulating commerce. Specifically, after his discussion of the laws regarding overcharging or underpaying in commerce – ona'at mammon – Maimonides discusses the laws of ona'at devarim. This is not the

location in which we would expect to find this discussion. Instead, we would expect that Maimonides would place his discussion of ona'at devarim in Hilchot Dayot. Hilchot Dayot discusses healthy behaviors and personality disorders. Included in this discussion are the prohibitions against improper speech. For example, in Hilchot Dayot, Maimonides discusses the prohibition against defamation and gossip. We would expect Maimonides to include the prohibition against ona'at devarim in this discussion. Why does Maimonides instead place the prohibition against ona'at devarim in the laws regulating commerce?

It is helpful to consider Maimonides' examples of ona'at devarim. Not all forms of

(continued on next page)



verbal abuse are included in this prohibition. Maimonides provides four basic examples. First, it is prohibited to embarrass a person regarding his past or family history. For example, one may not remind a convert that his ancestors were not Jewish. Neither is it appropriate to remind a person who has repented from various wrong-doings of his former errors. Second, it is prohibited to say to a person who is suffering from misfortune that his misfortune is due to some failing in his righteousness. Third, it is prohibited to provide someone with false directions. For example, if a person asks for directions to the bank, one may not provide the person with directions to a different location. Fourth, ona'at devarim prohibits asking a person a question that one knows he cannot answer, simply to embarrass the person.[2] What is the common factor in these examples?

It seems that according to Maimonides, ona'at devarim always involves hurting a person through taking advantage of a weakness in the person or in his background. Simply insulting a person is not included in the prohibition. In each example given by Maimonides, the victim has some weakness or some area of sensitivity in his life or background. The person who violates the prohibition of ona'at devarim has used this weakness of area of sensitivity as a basis for hurting the victim. Essentially, the prohibition of ona'at devarim sanctions against taking advantage of a person's weaknesses.

This provides some insight into Maimonides' placement of this prohibition in the laws governing commerce. These laws are designed to assure fair, reasonable, and honest trade among the members of society. The laws are needed because the Torah recognizes that without regulation it is not likely that fair, reasonable, and honest trade will be assured. Commerce takes place among trading partners that are not necessarily equals in power and influence. Without regulation, the rights of all parties in a commercial endeavor would not be established or protected.

The prohibition against ona'at devarim expresses this objective. The prohibition is designed to prevent a buyer or seller from taking advantage of the ignorance or weaker bargaining position of the opposite party in the negotiation in order to secure an unreasonable price. Essentially, it prohibits taking unfair advantage of a person in business dealings. In short, all of these laws that govern commerce are designed to foster and nurture healthy, ethical relationships within a society.

We can now begin to appreciate Maimonides placement of the prohibition against ona'at devarim among the laws of commerce and not among the laws regulating inappropriate speech. As explained above, Hilchot Dayot discusses the elements of a healthy personality and the proper behaviors that are associated with a healthy personality. Apparently, Maimonides feels that the Torah's primary objection to gossip and tale-bearing is that these behaviors are expressions of personality flaws. It is true that these behaviors hurt others. But the Torah's prohibition focuses on the damage done to the person involved in these self-destructive behaviors. Therefore, the prohibitions against these forms of improper speech are placed in Hilchot Dayot.

However, Maimonides understands ona'at devarim as a prohibition against verbally taking advantage of a person's weaknesses and sensitivities. Ona'at devarim is prohibited because it is divisive and destructive to society. Therefore, Maimonides places this prohibition among the laws of commerce. The prohibition against ona'at devarim and the laws of commerce share the common theme of fostering healthy, constructive relations among the members of society.

Maimonides' treatment of ona'at devarim is reflected in the comments of Sefer HaChinuch. In describing the objective of the prohibition against ona'at devarim, Sefer HaChinuch comments that the law is designed to foster peace and discourage discord among the members of society.[3] These comments seem to clearly reflect Maimonides' understanding of the prohibition.

Finally, it is worth noting that Maimonides' understanding of the prohibition against ona'at devarim is reflected in our parasha's treatment of the law. The prohibition against ona'at devarim is juxtaposed to the prohibition against ona'at mammon. This implies that both prohibitions share a common theme. Maimonides suggests that this theme is the importance of creating and nurturing social cohesion and cooperation. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 25:17.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Mechirah 14:13-14.

[3] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 341.



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(Lifting cont. from page 1)

## Blessings

change from “Who has sanctified us and commanded us”, the text of every other birchas mitzvah, to “Who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aharon”. Why this change? Furthermore, why the reference to the kedushah of Aharon, rather than the general kedushah of all kohanim? On one level, one could explain that this differentiation reflects the fact that the obligation applies only to kohanim. Yet, there are other instances in halacha where the obligation for the action falls on a particular individual at a particular time. What makes this so unique?

One can see a universal format in the construct of all other brachos—first, we identify how we are sanctified, and then relate that idea to the specific mitzvah to be performed. In essentially every situation, our kedushah emerges from the system of mitzvos we are commanded to follow. The flip side of the coin is, naturally, that if we did not have the system of mitzvos, this unique identity would never exist. Therefore, when reciting a bracha, there is a focus on the mechanism of how we became sanctified as a nation. This could be the reason why the text of the bracha recited by the kohanim is different. The state of kedushah in the kohen is of a dissimilar type, emerging from a different source than the system of mitzvos applicable to the nation as a whole. As the bracha relates, it is from the kedushah of Aharon that the kohen’s kedushah comes forth. The sanctity given to Aharon, and to be passed down through the generations, was not a kedushah from an external source, like the system of mitzvos. It is tied to the very identity of the kohen, a feature he is “born with”, so to speak. Clearly, this is a completely different mechanism than the “normal” kedushah, and must be identified by the kohen prior to this mitzvah.

One other issue regarding the bracha involves the point when the kohanim begin facing the tzibur. The Rambam (Hilchos Tefilah 14:12) writes that the kohanim would recite the bracha while facing the aron hakodesh, and upon completion would turn around and begin reciting birchas kohanim. The Tur (OC 138, as well as the Shulchan Aruch) indicates that the kohanim should turn around and face the tzibur, and then recite the bracha. How do we understand this debate? When looking at Birchas Kohanim, we see that it has two components to it. There is the physical performance, referred to as nesiyas kapayim, and there is the recitation of the brachos themselves, the birkas kohanim. These two components reflect a deeper idea as to the construct of this mitzvah. On the one hand, this activity was the culmination of the avodah service (see Rambam ibid 9). Since all of the avodah involved some type of physical action,

the recitation of birchas kohanim should be no different – thus, the nesiyas kapayim. On the other hand, the actual recitation of the brachos takes on the form of tefilah, as seen in the “request” form of the text (ie - May God bless...). The debate between the Rambam and Tur would then revolve around which component of the activity is the focus of the bracha. According to the Rambam, the bracha is directed towards the physical action of lifting up the hands, as this action was part of the avodah. As a result, the bracha must precede the physical action, like any other birchas mitzvah. On the other hand, the Tur maintains that bracha is directed towards the enunciation of birchas kohanim, with this recitation being a type of tefilah. This being the case, the bracha needs to be recited immediately prior to the actual dibur. Therefore, the kohanim have to be facing the congregation, with their hands raised, before the bracha is recited.

In many congregations, the common practice is for the kohanim to begin reciting the bracha while facing the aron until the words “vetzivanu”, and then turn around and face the tzibur while reciting the end of the bracha. Clearly, this is an attempt at a compromise between the two opinions. The Aruch Hashulchan (OC 128:20) did not buy it, questioning the validity of such a compromise. In a sense, to follow this logic would by definition mean you are not satisfying either opinion. However, the Mishnah Berurah (OC 128:40) does come out in support of it. A possible justification (as related by a friend) is found in the Tikun Tefilah, a commentary on prayer found in Otzar Tefilos. He explains that the bracha itself is really broken into two parts, based on the fact that nesiyas kapayim and birchas kohanim are actually two different mitzvos. The second part, which addresses the actual bracha, would definitely reflect this idea. However, how does the first part bring to light the nesiyas kapayim? He points out that Aharon himself raised his hands prior to the first time he gave the bracha to the nation. When referencing the kedushah of Aharon, the kohen is in fact alluding to this unique and novel activity performed by Aharon. Therefore, the first part relates to the actual raising of the hands. One could take this concept and apply it to the practice of turning halfway through the bracha. The rationale for this action is to demonstrate clearly the differentiation between these two separate mitzvos; without this, one would not be aware of this separation. Therefore, when the kohen turns, he should have in mind this distinction. However, this resolution is primarily based on the assumption that there indeed really are two separate mitzvos, a notion not supported by the Rambam or Tur. ■

## Weekly Parsha



## THE CHALLENGE of Shmita

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 AVRAHAM PUTNEY
 

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*“G-d spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, when you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a shabbat to G-d. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a shabbat of solemn rest for the land, a shabbat to G-d, you shall not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.” (Vayikra 25:1-4)*

This opening to Parshat Behar contains some interesting phrasing. One phrase that causes some discussion among the commentators is “a shabbat for G-d”. Rashi explains this unusual phrase by explaining it to mean “a shabbat in the name of G-d.” There are a few explanations of what Rashi means through this comment. It could be taken to mean that shmita is not simply that we should take a vacation from working the land but rather we

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should use it as an opportunity to reflect on G-d. It could also be seen as a reminder that although the phrase says that it is a shabbat for G-d, the mitzvot were given for solely for our benefit and we do them to bring ourselves closer to G-d. G-d himself derives no benefit from our performance of the mitvos.

The Ramban may agree with these ideas but for the interpretation of the pasuk he notes that the relevant midrashim go in a different direction, focusing on the hidden nature of the world's existence. In his discussion, the Ramban highlights the importance of the mitzvah of shmita. One source he quotes to emphasize this point is Pirkei Avos (5:9) which states that exile can come from four causes: (1) idolatry, (2) sexual violations, (3) murder and (4) not following shmita.

This listing begs the question of what is so unique about shmita such that it is included in this group. The other three aveiros here are very severe. In fact, they are the three for which a person must accept death rather than violate. While shmita is important, why would it result in the same punishment as these three?

The first step in understanding shmita is the difficulty that the mitzvah presents. There are two main reasons that shmita is especially difficult for a person to keep.

The first reason is general to a person's general financial security. We are no longer primarily engaged in agriculture as a business, so it can be hard to identify the test which a Jewish farmer in Israel endured when shmita was approaching. It may be easier for us to understand this challenge if we consider how we would react if this mitzvah was applied in a parallel manner to our jobs. What if there was a mitzvah which required us to take a year off from our jobs every seven years, or required that we close down our businesses with that frequency? Would we find it easy to close up shop for a year? We may understand the promise that G-d will cause us to succeed in other years to the extent this will not harm us, but abandoning our livelihoods for a year is still not an easy action.

The second reason is specific to the activity of farming. Much talk can be found about the relationship between a farmer and his land. Farming creates a bond between a person and a particular piece of earth. He puts his work and toil into the land and the land yields crops which sustain him. While other professions may have tools or places of business which provide them with sustenance, they do not develop the same level of bond with these things as someone who lives and works a particular plot of land for many years.

Therefore, a farmer, as shmita approaches, has two concerns, one is a challenge regarding his ability to accept G-d's promise that he will be able to live without working for that year. The other is a challenge of surrendering the personal relationship with the land and the sense of entitlement to use the land as one wills.

The idea behind shmita, suggested through the Torah's language and through chazal, is that just as the weekly shabbat reminds us of the original shabbat when G-d ceased creating, the shabbat of shmita also reminds of the creation. The particular vehicle of shmita reminds us that through his creation of the universe, G-d is the true owner of the world and everything in it.

A person who truly recognizes that G-d is the cause of his personal existence and the cause of the world will also recognize that his livelihood is comes from his creator. Since that creator states that he will sustain us person even when we do not engage in our usual work, we can trust that he has the ability to sustain us. If G-d can maintain the entire universe, he can maintain us as well. The law of shmita forces a person to evaluate his beliefs and to see whether he truly accepts that his existence depends on his creator or whether he has fallen

into the error of believing that he can exist independently of G-d's will.

Similarly, although the farmer may be naturally inclined to view the land as an extension of him, he must be willing to accept that ultimately the land is not really his. It belongs to the one who created it. It is only through following G-d's laws that he has the right to make use of the land.

Using this approach, we can explain why shmita is listed among the sins which result in exile. Eretz Yisrael was given to us for a reason. We are expected to use it to live in accordance with G-d's will. Idolatry, sexual violations and murder all go against the Torah's minimum expectations of how a society should function, therefore when these are violated, that society no longer deserves to exist. When this happens, we no longer have the right to possess the land, since G-d gave the land to use in according to a proper lifestyle, but it is being used in the opposite way. Similarly, shmita is a primary distortion in the relationship with the land, G-d gave the land subject to conditions regarding its use and the shmita-violator has rejected them. In each case, we no longer merit the land we were given to use. ■

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the independent sustainment of life (not found in unborns), one's criminal activity, religious deviation, and more.

Let's take the violator – be he Jewish or gentile. He forfeits the degree that God shows him preference, as compared to a righteous person. When a person violates idolatry, for example, and deserves death, we mean to say that he no longer retains rights to existence. He has disregarded his purpose, as willed by God. Now, as a result, once this most essential feature – his existence – is no longer a value to God, it is reasonable that he has certainly forfeited all that is secondary to existence, such as societal fabrications of "ownership", and the like.

Halachikly speaking, if one were to kill a person already sentenced to death, he is not punished with death. This is because Jewish law has now defined the sentenced person as "lacking life". He may be standing before us, breathing and talking, but if I were to kill the sentenced person – whether Jew or gentile – I would not receive the death penalty, since his definition is not a full-fledged "living" status, according to the Torah's definitions. Similarly, if a glass vase was falling from a roof, and before it shattered on the cement, someone broke it while it was plummeting downward, he is not liable. For the Torah defines that object as already "lacking value", due to its inevitable destruction. However, if one is not sentenced to death, stealing is prohibited, be he Jew or gentile.

When assessing the value of human life, we must return to God's acts and laws. He alone determines who retains his or her right to existence, since He alone created life. It is vital that we do not prefer our subjective moral feelings, but that we defer to God's principles. This is the primary error for people accusing Torah as favoring the Jew.

We must note the Ir Haniddachas, a Jewish city that worshipped idols, and is sentenced as a whole to destruction. Jewish Sabbath violators are also killed, even for the simplest act, like gathering wood. (Numbers 15:35) There is no preference to the Jew. In fact, a Jewish heretic and Apikores are worse off than an idolator. (Maimonides, Hil. Eydus 11:10)

"One Torah for the Jew and convert" is mentioned numerous times in our most primary book, the Torah. This means that one's value is based on his choices, not his lineage. Therefore, any gentile can attain perfection, and anyone born to Jewish parents can become despicable. Kings David and Solomon were descendants of Ruth the convert, and the evil Korach was a Jew. David and Solomon attained perfection and the afterlife, while Korach was killed.

Excepting this human equality, there are additional concerns that violators be not strength-



ened, for the good of the world. At times, the law will not require our return of lost objects, or monetary oversights to those who reject God, for this would strengthen their evil ways, and hurt others. However, it must be stressed that to steal, mislead or cause "any" human to err, is prohibited.

### Gentile vs. Jew: Why so severe?

A gentile is killed if he steals a penny, while a Jew is not. Is this a case of favoritism, or superiority of the Jew? No. However we must appreciate the distinction...

The 7 Noahide laws are a minimal threshold for one to retain his or her right to life. This is not a system of "perfection", as a wise Rabbi taught. If a gentile cannot abide by these few laws, he has fallen below the level, where God tolerates his continued existence. So it matters none whether he killed, or stole a penny. In either case, he has not maintained the minimal level earning continued existence. He must be killed. But since the Jew adheres to a "system of perfection", the 613 laws, his infraction of stealing a penny is not indicative of his falling below a threshold. He is performing many other laws, and they compensate. The gentile is not.

### Equality

A gentile who converts and accepts all 613 laws is treated identical to a Jew. God is completely just. He created all men and women equally. It is unfortunate that we hear nonsensical teachings that Jews possess a "superior soul". God created one human race, and never re-created a second, "more advanced mankind". We all descend from Adam and Eve. Therefore, we must all share the identical design...physically and spiritually.

At Creation, there was no such thing as Jew and gentile. Rather, God created "man and woman" and gave a few laws to them. As time progressed,

additional laws were necessary, until the Torah was finally given; a large part of it now countering idolatrous practices that arose. But the most perfected people – Adam, Noah, Shem, Ever, the patriarchs and matriarchs, Moses, Aaron and Miriam – were not Jews. They were as gentile as any other member of the human race. Their elevated status was not a "birthright", but of their own doing. They chose to live lives based on reason, and profound truths, reached through diligent study and the care for truth. This is truly man's merit: his acts. Being "born superior" is false.

Abraham too was a perfected person, and also, as gentile as all other men. He arrived at truths, abandoned idolatry, and sought to help others realize their errors. God selected him as the forerunner of a new nation, to which, He eventually gave a Torah. These people were called "Jews", or Hebrews, from the root "eber", which means "other", as in leading a life "other" than idolatry. But there was nothing magically added to this group, once they were called Hebrews. These Hebrews were never granted some new soul, as many Jews today accept blindly with baseless pride. In fact, it was Abraham "the gentile" who deserves the merit for arriving at such a perfected state, that God commenced communication with him. Abraham "the gentile" received God's communication. Not one Jew today can make this claim, and conclusively puts to rest the "Jewish superior soul" notion.

There is no merit being born to a Jewish parent. Merit is "earned" by one's perfection over decades, not granted unconditionally to feeble newborns. If a Jew violates idolatry, he is not absolved from his crime due to his lineage. God does not absolve anyone from murder, if his grandfather was born in Spain. Similarly, God does not absolve the idolater, if his father was a Jew. "A man in his own sin will be killed". (Deut. 24:16) Merit is earned. So is sin. This must be clear.

The system of Divine "Reward and Punishment" for our actions, is one of our primary tenets. Maimonides says that the 13 Principles are so vital, that to earn an afterlife, we must accept them all, including Reward and Punishment. Therefore, if someone feels his "being a Jew" alone earns him reward, despite his actions, he denounces this fundamental, and forfeits his afterlife. No matter is more severe.

In summary, the position that God favors the Jew is both; baseless, unreasonable, and historically false.

God does not favor someone based on his lineage.

Who does God favor? The person who follows His word. ■

## Weekly Parsha

*Lessons on the*  
**PARASHA**



**A**

**SABBATICAL**

*Unto*

*Hashem*



**RABBI REUVEN MANN**



This week's parsha, Behar, begins with the mitzvah of Shmitta. The number seven has great significance in Judaism. We are commanded to work for six days and rest on the seventh day, Shabbat. The same is true with regard to years. We are to work our fields and harvest their produce for six years and leave them fallow on the seventh year, Shmitta. The Sanhedrin must count seven cycles of Shmitta which comes to forty nine years and declare the fiftieth year to be Yoveil, in which the fields remain fallow and "freedom" is proclaimed throughout the land. In this year all indentured servants are released and all ancestral fields are returned to their original owners. We must seek to understand the rationale behind these laws.

The number seven signifies creation. It recalls for us that Hashem created the world in six days and "rested" on the seventh. We emulate the ways of our Creator and perform our labors for six days. We desist on the seventh day to proclaim our belief that Hashem created the world "ex nihilo" (from nothing). The day of Shabbat provides rest from the physical and mental toils of the "struggle for existence." However, the goal is not merely the relaxing of the body. The day should also rejuvenate our neshama through meaningful prayer, Torah study and joyous meals and get togethers.

It is easy to understand and appreciate the purpose of Shabbat. The entire world bases its calendar on the seven day week and recognizes the need of people to have a "day off." In advanced societies like America we have a five day work week with two days off. However, it is not so easy to see the purpose of Shmitta. This means that the farmer is idle for an entire year. It is true that in refraining from planting and sowing he is relinquishing his rights of ownership and proclaiming that the entire land belongs to Hashem and we are not true owners but merely temporary tenants. From a religious

standpoint the idea makes perfect sense. However, we need to understand the benefits from the human standpoint. The Rabbis declare "Beneficial is Talmud Torah which is combined with an occupation." In many places the Torah decries idleness and laziness. In the famous composition of King Solomon the Eishet Chayil (woman of valor) is praised for her energetic enterprising skillfulness which does not allow her to "eat the bread of idleness." Having a sabbatical every six years may sound enticing, but, the question is; what is a person supposed to do in that year?

The pasuk says, "And the land shall observe a Sabbath unto the L—d." Rashi comments: "to the name of Hashem as it says by the weekly Shabbat....and the seventh day shall be a Shabbat unto the L—d." This means that just as on Shabbat abstaining from labor is not an end in itself but a means to allow the person to become immersed in spiritual pursuits, the same is true for Shmitta. Hashem grants us a vacation from our physical labors, so that we can dedicate an entire year to spiritual elevation through study, mitzvot and perfection of the soul. It is only through this that the year can be rendered into a Sabbath unto Hashem. We can learn a lot from the mitzva of Shmitta. We must relinquish our false sense of ownership and permanence and acknowledge that we are just temporary sojourners in the world which was created by Hashem. We should not squander the time and resources that Hashem has granted us for the purpose of recognizing Him and perfecting ourselves. We should not become consumed by our physical labors. Hashem promises that if we pursue "parnasa" for the right reason he will make our burdens easier so that we will have more time to devote to studying His Torah and emulating His Ways of Righteousness. May we have the wisdom to discern what is of true importance and be worthy of His Kindness and abundant blessings. Shabbat Shalom. ■



## Letters



## Letters

from our

## READERS



**Meira:** A woman was trying to answer the question of why Kohanim can't marry widows or divorcees. She said that the Talmud says that since Kohanim were allowed to go into the Kodosh Hakodashim and ask for anything using Hashem's name, it could jeopardize the stability of women that the Kohanim wanted to marry. For example, they could ask for the death or divorce of a women of their affection.

**Rabbi:** I heard of this, but it doesn't make sense to me. Why weren't prophets similarly prohibited from marrying widows or divorcees? Aren't they of higher status, and can pray for such matters?

**Meira:** Agreed; and that also doesn't explain he convert which is put in the same category in the verse. Do you know where to find an alternative explanation?

**Rabbi:** First of all, the Kohanim are leaders; not those whom we should impute such corrupt intentions, as if to wish for the death of innocent men simply to fill their desires. Additionally, God does not kill innocent men,

nor does God satisfy every desire of the Kohanim. Finally, the Kohanim's Temple service is not for his personal wishes, but for the nation. We see, there are many problems with this explanation you heard.

I believe the restriction on marrying widows/divorcees is not because of any inherent flaw in these women. But due to his public role as spiritual leader, the Kohen must have an untarnished reputation. No "flaw" (even according to incorrect assessments) like marriage to a widow or divorcee is acceptable. Some people view divorce as a rejection of a woman, and a widow as perhaps carrying some connection with sin, for why did her husband die? We can easily appreciate the negative associations some people attribute to divorce and death. And as God wishes the objective of Torah education via the Kohanim, He created laws that preserve a pristine identity for all Kohanim. In this fashion, there exists no negative psychological or social associations that might prevent the nation from full respect for our spiritual leaders. Thereby, Torah flourishes at an optimum. ■

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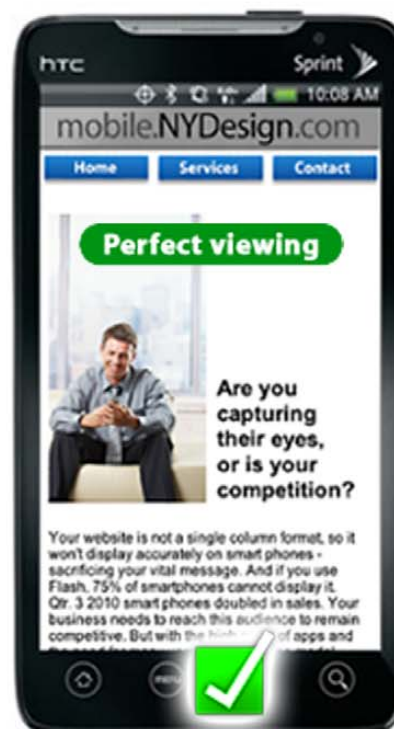
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