

Biblical Commentators

Rashi - Time for Shema

by Rabbi Nissan Wilson, Clayhall Synagogue

After more than twenty years apart, Jacob and Joseph finally meet. At this seminal moment, each of them responds in his own way:

Verse: And Joseph harnessed his chariots and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. And Joseph presented himself to him and he (Joseph) fell upon his neck and wept on his neck continuously. (Bereishit 46:29)

Rashi: When he saw his father, Joseph wept excessively. Jacob, though, did not fall upon Joseph's neck, nor did he kiss him at that moment. Our Sages taught that Jacob was saying the *Shema*.

There are a number of questions that have been asked on the above explanation. Here are two of the more obvious ones: If the meeting coincidentally took place as the time for saying the *Shema* arrived, why did Joseph not also say the *Shema*? If we are suggesting that Jacob did not cry or kiss Joseph because he was preoccupied with some prayer, what is there to suggest that he was reciting the *Shema* rather than the



Amidah or any other prayer?

Maharal: Understanding the true meaning and significance of the *Shema* would give us a clear insight into Jacob's reason for saying the *Shema* at that moment.

When Jacob saw that his lost son Joseph was now a king, his heart was filled with awe and love for the Almighty who guides and protects and ultimately rewards those who serve him.

The *Shema* is in essence an expression of awe and love for G-d and an affirmation of one's belief that everything that happens in the world is a part of His providence.

Jacob had suffered for so many years with the disappearance of Joseph, and his joy at finally seeing his son would have undoubtedly surpassed even Joseph's joy at finally seeing his father. Although overcome with emotion, Jacob was able to carefully choose the formula that would best express his infinite gratitude for this joyous moment.

The Deeper Meaning of Jacob's Vision

by Rabbi Geoffrey L Shisler
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The laws relating to the writing of a Sefer Torah are very exacting, and every scribe has to be exceedingly careful not to change the tiniest jot or tittle from the way it was communicated to us by Moses. If a word is spelled in an unusual way, or if there is a strangely-shaped letter, it is not an error, it is just that we do not necessarily know why G-d wanted Moses to write it this way. Many of these unexpected letters and forms are discussed by the Rabbis, and suggestions put forward for their occurrence.

One of the laws concerning the writing is that certain letters must have three spikes sticking out at the top. They are the letters **צ ז ט נ ש**, and they must be written on the **נ** and the **צ** even when they appear as a final form at the end of a word (ie **ך** and **ף**). Some of the other letters of the Alphabet, such as the **ב** and the **ק** must also have these spikes; some must have one, and others two. They are known as *Tagin* and they are like crowns, and their purpose is to beautify the writing. They are added every time one of these letters is written, and they rarely provoke any comments. However, in today's Torah reading, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, who is also called the *Baal Haturim* (after the title of his major Halachic work the *Tur*), does comment on their appearance on one particular word.

Jacob, on learning that Joseph is still alive, sets out, with great anticipation, and in considerable fear, to go down to Egypt to see his son. On the journey, the Torah tells us: 'The Lord said to Israel in a vision of the

night, 'Jacob, Jacob,' and Jacob replied, 'I am here.'

In his comments on this verse, the *Ba'al Haturim* says that there are seven *Tagin* on the letter *Sin* in the word Yisrael, and they allude to the verse in Proverbs (24:16): 'The righteous one will fall seven times, and rise (again each time)!' He says that this recalls how Jacob faced seven major trials in his lifetime and was saved from each: Esau, Laban, the angel, Dinah, Joseph, Simon and Benjamin.

However, there is a problem here, and that is, there are not seven *Tagin* on the letter *Sin*!

In his commentary on the Torah, Rabbeinu Bechaye suggests that the number seven does not always have to be taken literally, but sometimes it implies 'many'. (See Rabbeinu Bechaye to Vayikra 26:26). So perhaps here the *Baal Haturim* is simply saying that there are lots of *Tagin* in this verse.

Rabbi Jacob Reineitz, in his commentary on the *Baal Haturim* suggests that the idea of seven '*Tagin*' refers to each of the three patriarchs and four matriarchs since the initial letter of each of their names can be found in the word Yisrael; *Yud*=Yitzchak and Jacob, *Sin*=Sarah, *Resh*=Rivkah and Rachel, *Aleph*=Avraham and *Lamed*=Leah. When G-d told Jacob not to be afraid, by calling him Yisrael rather than Jacob, He was implying that all his ancestors would protect him on his journey.



The Wonder of Water

by Rabbi Julian Shindler MSc, PhD

This past summer, NASA's Phoenix lander excavated soil samples from the surface of Mars and its on-board laboratory confirmed the presence of ice. This finding has excited scientists who suppose that Mars – at least at some time in the past – may have supported life.

The Torah itself, paradoxically, describes the water used for the ritual purification of a person defiled by contact with a corpse, as מים חיים – 'living' water. The generalised, primordial state of matter in the Universe at the Creation is called מים – water. The Torah itself is compared to water. Just as carbon-based life, and hence our existence, is dependent on water, so meaningful life, for a Jew, is dependent on Torah. We pray daily for water and, in times of drought, there is provision in Jewish law to proclaim communal fast days.

Water is actually something of an enigma and it has been suggested that the etymological roots of water in a number of languages, reflect this. So, for example, we have:

Hebrew: Mah (what) → Mayim (whats – ie plural form)

English: What → water;

Latin: qua → aqua;

German: was → Wasser

Despite our familiarity with this generally plentiful substance, which covers most of the Earth's surface, water's special physico-chemical properties are quite unique. They make it tailor-made for life. Here are a few observations to bear in mind:

The polarity of water makes it a versatile

solvent in which the biochemical activities of cells (carbon-based life) are possible.

The anomalous expansion of water near to its freezing point (ice floats) ensures that the world's water supply is not bound up in vast beds of submarine ice. This property also permits the continued survival of marine life in the sub-glacial water of those seas and lakes that freeze over in winter..



The high latent heat of fusion and of evaporation of water and its high specific heat make it suitable to maintain the thermal stability of the planet, and of life forms.

Water catalyses many reactions but is not as reactive as acids and alkalis. The reactivity of

water is ideally suited for both its biological and geological role.

Water's almost unique ability to channel protons (proton conductance) is a key element in the biological energy transfer processes which occur in photosynthesis and oxidative phosphorylation.

Water's low viscosity makes it suitable for animal circulatory systems. Water's high surface tension draws up water through the soil within the reach of the roots of plants. It is also a contributing factor to the formation of organised biological membranes.

The special properties of water are a particular example of a striking idea, originally proposed by the British cosmologist, Brandon Carter, in which he speculated that the laws of the Universe seem to be finely tuned for life. This idea, known as the anthropic principle, will be considered further, next week.

Jethro – The Leadership Mentor

by Amanda Bradley, LSJS Susi Bradfield Graduate

Jethro is mostly famous for being the father-in-law of Moses, but actually he deserves an article in his own right.



Jethro's shining moment came when he taught Moses the right way to be a leader. He saw Moses teaching and judging the people alone and immediately declared 'this matter is not good'. Not only that, he told Moses that he would only be successful if he followed his advice. This seems somewhat presumptuous, especially to the man chosen by G-d to lead the people! Yet our Sages tell us that G-d Himself endorsed his *chutzpadik* advice; had Jethro's model of a hierarchy of judges not been accepted, Judaism could not have continued past Moses' death.

What were Jethro's qualifications as 'leadership mentor'? Midrashic sources tell us that Jethro had had considerable leadership experience. He was a trusted

advisor to Pharaoh, who took his advice even when he didn't like it. He joined every known religion, leaving each when he discovered its fallacies. Despite this record as a serial convert, he became influential in each successive religion, finally rising to become the high priest of Midian. Jethro, it seems, was a natural leader.

But there is more to it than that. Jethro was no power-hungry demagogue; *he was a seeker after truth*. He had to flee Egypt after telling Pharaoh truths that he didn't want to hear. Before he left paganism, had wielded great influence. Jethro could have ignored his doubts, gone through the motions, and kept his glory & prestige. Instead, he followed the truth and was reviled by his whole neighbourhood as a deserter. This is what made Jethro a natural leader; his dedication to truth overrode his ego and that was his real leadership qualification.

Riddle of the Week

Last week's riddle, by Dr Malcolm Mandel, Raanana, Israel: Why is Egypt called 'Mitzrayim'?
Answer: 'Tzar' in Hebrew means narrow, and the '...ayim' end of the word is the paired form (e.g. *Oznayim* are ears – a paired organ). Therefore '*Mitzrayim*' is the paired narrow place, the Upper Nile and the Lower Nile. Although Egypt is a massive country, only a very narrow strip either side of the Nile is habitable and fertile, the rest is just desert.

This week's riddle, by Rev Michael Plaskow MBE, Emeritus Minister: Woodside Park Synagogue: How is it possible that Hebron, Rechovot and Beersheba are so close to each other?

Would you like to set a riddle? If so please email rabbidavis@unitedsynagogue.org.uk



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