

### Biblical Commentators

### Chizkuni

by Rabbi Meir Salasnik, Bushey Synagogue

The sidra of Shoftim describes several levels of authority in Jewish society, including the judicial system.

*"If there arise a matter too hard for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, even matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise, and get you up unto the place which the Lord your G-d shall choose. And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge that shall be in those days, and you shall inquire and they shall declare to you the sentence of judgment"* (Devarim 17:8-9).

These verses are directed to the second person singular, possibly suggesting that an individual Jew with a difficult case, which cannot be decided by the local court, should go to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, "the place the Lord chooses".

The Chizkuni is among the commentators who understood that the verse is not

directed to the individual claimant to take the matter further, but to the Beth Din or the individual Dayan to seek guidance from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

The Chizkuni found in these verses a proof for Rabbinic Judaism. *"This is a response to Jewish heretics who treat irreverently the words of the Sages. If the Torah was given as written and in no other way, why is it necessary to go to Jerusalem?" If the Torah is solely the written word, then neither individual nor local court would require a higher court, as all would be accessible to them. Therefore, these verses prove that the written Torah relies on an Oral Law."*

Of which heretics did he speak? Presumably the Karaites, the one contemporary Jewish group that denied the Oral Law. There were few, if any, Karaites in Chizkuni's area, Provence, in the 13th century. Nevertheless, their views would have been known and it was important for him to prove their claim untenable.



# “I have started so I will finish” ... Magnus Magnusson

by Rabbi Barry Lerer  
Barnet Synagogue

Our sidra deals with several aspects of the conduct of the Children of Israel when they go to war.

With regard to the selection of the soldiers, we are told that any man who has built a new house but not lived in it, or planted a new vineyard and not redeemed it, or has become engaged to be married should go home and not fight. Why? In case they get killed in action in the upcoming war and are therefore unable to bring these beginnings to fruition.

The Torah is emphasising a very important lesson: beginning, or even intending to see beginnings through, is not good enough. We must realise that until we reach our individual goals, those grand beginnings are of little value.

One would think that the mitzvah of conquering the Land of Israel takes precedence over our personal vineyard or our private home. Surely the security of *Am Yisrael* is of more significance and importance than any individual marriage? Yet the Torah instructs us to go home and finish that which we started.

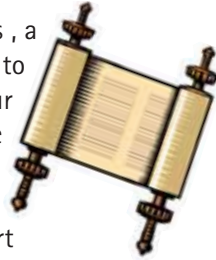
All of us have paved quite a few roads with good intentions. There's the path leading to a good diet and regular exercise. There's a whole stretch of road going towards

attending education classes, a dual carriageway leading to spending time with our children, and an eight-lane motorway staring us in the face each time we see our to-do list. We all start projects with the intention of finishing them, but the path to fruition is fraught with obstacles: self doubt, fear of commitment, fear of lost opportunity, fear of putting in hard work that might not pay off, fear of failure and even fear of

success! G-d gives us the miracle of inspiration at the beginning of an endeavour, but then it's up to us to recreate that miracle as soon as that initial burst of motivation starts to fade.

The Torah is teaching us a huge lesson in our sidra.

Laying a foundation to a house is great, but seeing that same home lit with Shabbat candles on Friday night is completion. Meeting a couple who just got engaged, or dancing at their wedding and feeling their incredible joy, is a beautiful thing, but that is nothing compared to seeing a mature couple look at each other with love and devotion. The Torah is commanding us to resist getting involved with new, apparently more important, projects and to go home and finish what we started.



# Wearing a Kippah

by Rabbi Yaakov Grunewald, Pinner Synagogue

In ancient times it was not a religious duty for men to cover their heads. The Torah makes no reference to such a practice and the Talmud does not prohibit men from walking bare-headed. When and why did this custom assume the great importance that it has today?



The Talmud tells us that some Rabbis were careful not to walk bare-headed. Rav Huna, son of Rav Yehoshua, never walked four cubits bare-headed as a mark of respect for the divine presence which hovered above his head. (Kiddushin 31a)

Another Talmudic story tells of a Rabbi who stole as a child. His mother instructed him to cover his head so that he would fear G-d. Once, the wind blew off his head-covering and he stole again. We see that the custom was already making a significant impact on ordinary people.

Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote in the Mishneh Torah that rabbis covered their heads as a mark of great modesty. In his **Guide for the Perplexed** he explained that the divine presence offers them Heavenly protection. Later, Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, (the *Levush*) who lived in the 16th century, commented that covering the head during prayers is a sign of submission to the Almighty. These explanations encouraged people to observe this custom and it became increasingly widespread.

By the 16th century there emerged a disagreement as to the nature of this practice. Some held that it was merely a pious custom whilst others contended that walking without a head-covering was a violation of a specific

prohibition. Even those rabbis who held that it was merely a custom warned not to treat it lightly.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who lived in the second half of the 18th century, explained that not covering one's head became a transgression against our religion in countries where gentiles walked bare-headed. In this way, the head covering became a symbol of identity. Some commentators have written that the blessing, *Oter Israel Betif'arah, Who crowns Israel with beauty*, which is recited in the morning, refers to the *kippah*. In the same period, Rav Moshe Sofer, known as the Chatam Sofer, born in 1763 in Frankfurt, ruled that walking bare-headed is a violation of the Torah prohibition which demands: "*You shall not follow the religious customs of gentiles*". Since the Christians remove their hats when they enter their places of worship, we have a duty to do the opposite.

His influence on Orthodoxy was decisive. The custom received another powerful boost. It became totally unacceptable to pray or recite any blessing without a head covering. Since a religious Jew prays or recites blessing many times a day, it became virtually mandatory to cover one's head at all times.

In a recent responsum, Rabbi Yonah Metzger, Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, writes that, since religious Jews cover their head as a mark of their religious affiliation, it is no longer a custom, but a *din*. Thus we see an example of how an ancient custom was transformed into a law. It exemplifies well the famous Rabbinic saying: *Minhag Yisrael; din hu*. A Jewish custom is Law.

## Turning Points: The death of Terach and the beginning of Jewish History

By Rabbi Harvey Belovski, LSJS Teaching Fellow and  
Rav of Golders Green United Synagogue

The close of Bereishit 11 marks the end of the Torah's account of the pre-historic world and, more specifically, the beginning of Jewish history.

The Creation story, the Garden of Eden, *Kayin* and *Hevel* and the flood narrative introduce G-d as creator and master of all, and reveal profound insights into the complex existential tensions that govern the relationship between Man and G-d. Yet, fundamental as they are, these episodes belong in the category of pre-history - to a world with which we find it hard to identify, one radically different from our own. The record of the death of Avraham's father, Terach, which heralds the start of Avraham's mission, marks the transition to a more readily familiar world.

Yet a careful reading of Bereishit 11, which ends with a description of Avram and his family, reveals another, perhaps more important, turning point.



We learn that Avram has two brothers, one of whom dies mysteriously; that Avram is married to Sarai, but they have no children; that Avram begins a journey to Canaan. Then, most interestingly, we read that Terach dies at the age of 205, although, as Rashi points out, Terach actually

lived for 60 years after Avram left his family home to begin his Divine mission. The Maharal of Prague claims that this teaches that Avram's monotheistic aspirations would only succeed if he could chart an entirely new course, one utterly divorced from his idolatrous past.

While of course the text cannot eliminate the biological link between Avram and his forebears, it totally revokes any spiritual relationship between them by writing Terach out of the story 60 years before he actually dies. From that point on, the achievements of Avram are the focus of the story and Terach is never mentioned again.

### Riddle of the Week

**Last week's riddle**, by Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis In Temple times, there was a town on the Euphrates where the first day of Pesach was always one day, while at the beginning of Succot, they sometimes kept one day of Yomtov and sometimes two days. Why?

**Answer:** It took 13 days to walk from Jerusalem to this town. The messengers would walk every day, except Shabbat. Between Rosh Chodesh Nissan and Pesach there would be two Shabbatot and so the messengers would always arrive before Pesach. Therefore, first day Pesach would always be one day. During Tishri, the messengers would also stop for Yom Kippur, which when it fell on a weekday, would delay the messengers arrival beyond the commencement of Succot, which was then celebrated on 2 days, out of doubt. When Yom Kippur fell on a Shabbat, however, the messengers would arrive in time to enable the residents to celebrate one day only. (Ben Ish Chai)

**This week's riddle**, set by Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis. In Ekev, we read, "Remember and do not forget how you angered the Lord in the wilderness" (Devarim 9:7). Can you find two other places in the Torah in which remembering and not forgetting are mentioned in the same passage?

*Would you like to set a riddle? If so please email [rabbidavis@unitedsynagogue.org.uk](mailto:rabbidavis@unitedsynagogue.org.uk)*

