“It will be when you enter the Land that the Lord, your God, gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in form your Land that the Lord, your God, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord, your God, will choose, to make His Name rest there” (Devarim 26:1-2).
1st Aliya (Kohen) – Devarim 26:1-11
Once the nation has come into the Land of Israel, there is a mitzvah for a produce-grower to take the first fruits of the new harvest and place them in a basket, before bringing them to a Kohen in the Temple (bikkurim). After the Kohen takes the basket, the person who has brought the fruit reads out a text which recalls the initial descent to Egypt, the servitude and the redemption, and concludes with an expression of gratitude to God for the bounty from the Land.

2nd Aliya (Levi) – 26:12-15
At the end of every third and sixth year of the seven year shemitah cycle, one has to make sure that all the tithes from the produce of the Land over the previous years have been given to their respective recipients. Once that has been organised, a text known as viduy ma’aserot is said, which declares one’s care for the laws of tithing and a prayer to God to bless the Land.

3rd Aliya (Shlishi) – 26:16-19
Moshe encourages the people to keep the mitzvot and to see them every day as fresh and new (Rashi). This will elevate the nation to the status of being holy and distinguished.

4th Aliya (Revi’i) – 27:1-10
Moshe tells the people that on the day they cross the Jordan, they should take stones, coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them the words of the Torah. They should erect these stones on Mount Eival, where they shall also build an altar and bring peace-offerings.

5th Aliya (Chamishi) – 27:11-28:5
After the nation enters the Land, they will come to Mount Gerizim and to Mount Eival (see p.3 article). Six of the tribes are to stand on one mountain, six on the other. The Levi’im will stand in between the mountains to call out the blessings and the curses, to which the people should respond “Amen” (Rashi).

Question: which tribes stood on Mount Gerizim and which tribes on Mount Eival? Answer on bottom of page 6.

6th Aliya (Shishi) – 28:6-69
This aliyah opens with further blessings if we are to follow God’s will – our enemies will flee from us and the other nations will be in awe of us. However, the sidrah continues with the tochacha, the passage of retribution. If we do not listen to God’s commandments and do not observe the mitzvot, the consequences will be grave. Verse after verse warn of petrifying suffering, including illness, plague, blindness, children taken captive, being at the mercy of other nations, parents eating their own children and the nation becoming scattered over the Earth.

Point to Consider: why does the Torah add this passage of tochacha, given that there was already a lengthy one in parashat Bechukotai (Bemidbar chapter 26)?

7th Aliya (Shevi’i) – 29:1-8
Moshe reminds the people of their wondrous Exodus from Egypt, their miraculous survival in the desert for 40 years and their victories over the mighty kings Sichon and Og.

Haftarah
Taken from the book of Yeshaya, this is the sixth of the seven ‘haftarot of consolation’ read after Tisha B’Av. The prophet relates a vision of the nations of the world coming to Zion and recognising God. Violence and pain will become memories of the past – “never again shall your sun set, not shall your moon will be withdrawn; for God will be an eternal light”.

United Synagogue Daf Hashavua
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There is a notion that we are free to do as we wish, as long as we are not found out. This is commonly known as “the Eleventh Commandment”. In other words, we can behave anyway we like in private, as long as we put on a public display of conforming to social norms of behaviour. However, today there is little privacy; it is becoming increasingly clear that there is nowhere to hide. Therefore, no matter how discreet we may try to be, we are likely to be found out. Especially with the advent of modern technology, social media platforms and CCTV networks, privacy has eroded and it may seem like ‘big brother’ is always watching.

Added to this notion is the Jewish belief that actually there is always a reckoning for our actions, as the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) tells us: “in the end of the matter, everything is heard” (12:13). Therefore, there can be no distinction between private and public behaviour, and outward appearances should reflect our private persona. We are urged to be wary of transgressing in secret just as in public.

In this week’s sidrah, the Torah highlights this; the Israelites were commanded by Moshe to commit themselves to the Torah and the covenant of God once they had crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The Levites were to bless the people and utter curses: “you shall put the blessing upon Mount Gerizim, and the curse upon Mount Eval” (Devarim 11.29).

The Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir d. 1158, a grandson of Rashi) points out that these curses also refer to transgressions which are committed in private, as inferred by the mention of the word “secret” in the curses. For example, the first curse states: “Cursed be the man who makes any engraved or molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret” (Devarim 27:15). This emphasises that transgressions committed in private are just as bad as if they had been committed in public.

In fact, we can never hide from God or, for that matter, from ourselves. Taking this lesson to heart can prevent us from transgressing, as can be learnt from Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s statement in Pirkei Avot: “Apply your mind to three things and you will not come into the hands of sin. Know what there is above you – an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book” (Ethics of our Fathers 2:1 – see green siddur, p. 530).

The Sages of the Talmud also tell us that we should avoid anything that even appears to be forbidden. This is what is called marit ha’ayin. Again, this does not only apply in public, but even in the privacy of our own homes: “Rav Yehudah said in Rav’s name: Wherever the Sages prohibited something because of marit ha’ayin, it is forbidden even in one’s innermost chambers” (Talmud Shabbat 64b).

Thus, from our perspective, the ‘eleventh commandment’ is untenable. As the late Rabbi Levi Meier (chaplain of the Cedar-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, d. 2008) once said: “we should serve God with all our hearts and with all our minds, whether in private or in public”.

In memory of Harav Yitzchak Yoel ben Shlomo Halevi
In our last two articles, we discussed the origin of the mitzvah of visiting the sick (bikur cholim) and we noted the three components of the mitzvah: showing the patient that you care about them, praying for their wellbeing and ensuring that they have their practical needs met.

We ended last week with two questions. Firstly, why is there no blessing recited before the mitzvah of bikur cholim? The Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet d. 1310) answers this question. He writes that any mitzvah which requires another person’s participation or agreement for its performance has no blessing before it; for one cannot be sure that the mitzvah will be completed. There is therefore no blessing recited before giving charity because one cannot guarantee that the potential recipient will accept the donation. Similarly, there is no blessing for visiting the sick, for one cannot be sure that the patient will want to accept visitors.

The second question posed was whether one fulfils the mitzvah of bikur cholim with a phone call. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d. 1986) penned a fascinating discussion about this topic. He writes that whilst it could be possible to fulfil one of the criteria of the mitzvah on the phone – enquiring as to the patient’s wellbeing and practical needs – the other two criteria of the mitzvah – showing you care and assessing their situation so you can pray for them – can only be fully performed in the patient’s presence. Thus, Rabbi Feinstein writes that if you have no way to travel to the patient, you may ‘visit’ them with a phone call, but this would mean that you have not fulfilled the mitzvah completely.

The Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law, written 1563) rules that one must not embarrass the patient – not all patients want to be visited.

Perhaps the Shulchan Aruch’s ruling could be adhered to by asking the doctors or relatives before entering the ward.

When praying for the patient’s recovery, if this is done in their presence, then any language may be used. In contrast, when praying for somewhere else, Hebrew (and their Hebrew name and their mother's Hebrew name) is preferable, if possible.

The national sensitivity we have to this mitzvah is very inspiring. Some years ago, soon after my family moved into a Jerusalem apartment, we noticed after Shabbat at around midnight, that our neighbours had all gathered in the shul (which was also the building’s bomb shelter). We were told that someone in the building had been admitted to hospital and they were all praying for her recovery together. Jews the world over pray for the recovery of others and there are bikur cholim societies for visiting people in hospital, such as the wonderful services provided in London by Jewish Visiting (part of US Chesed) through its hospital chaplains and volunteer visitors. www.jvisit.org.uk

Bikur cholim is a true expression of the qualities of kindness and compassion that are so central to our faith.
The last four articles have focused on the concept of consciousness in science, philosophy and Judaism. This final article on consciousness turns our attention to dreaming, one of the most mysterious of human experiences. Most neuroscientists, psychologists and psychotherapists accept that the content of our dreams is significant, whether it has been influenced by our psyche, our experiences during waking hours, from medication or from the food we eat.

The famous neurologist and forefather of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (d. 1939) viewed the content of his patients’ dreams as a window into their primitive, unconscious desires. Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung (d. 1961), who collaborated with Freud, felt that Freud’s analysis of dreams was too limited. Jung viewed dreams as a communication from the unconscious, as part of the self-regulation of the psyche. While contemporary opinions still differ, modern studies support the theory that dream content is primarily related to the experiences a person has while awake.

From a Jewish perspective, the Torah itself describes how God communicates with people through dreams. Having dreams and interpreting their meaning is, for example, one of the prominent threads that runs through the story of Yosef (see Bereishit chapters 37, 40 and 41). The Talmud indicates that while some dreams are insignificant and meaningless (Horayot 13b), others have the potential to contain messages about the future (Berachot 57b). While Yosef’s dreams were clearly prophetic, could our own dreams contain elements of prophecy or portent?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (known as the Ramchal, d. 1746) concurs with the scientific approach that dream content is affected by the thoughts and emotions one experiences, as well as through food that we have eaten. Yet he also adopts the Talmud’s assertion and writes that our modern day dreams can have prophetic significance or relate to spiritual experiences. This is because when we sleep our souls can sometimes interact with external spiritual forces which enter our subconscious awareness and affect the content of our dreams.

One might think this sounds a little far-fetched. Yet in a recent article, psychologist Dr. Patrick McNamara noted that a wide range of unexplained dream phenomena, such as shared dreams and precognitive dreams containing exquisite, incontrovertible detail are widely reported (Psychology Today, June 2016). He admits that science has “no good explanations” for such astonishing phenomena for “science has no place to put them within its current worldview – but this is all the more reason to investigate them”.

In conclusion, consciousness is difficult to study scientifically. Scientists wedded to the idea that there is nothing other than the physical world will inevitably conclude that consciousness, defined as our sense of self and inner thoughts, is merely an elaborate illusion. While science cannot provide concrete evidence to the existence of the supernatural, for those with a conviction that reality is more than just atoms and molecules, the footprints of the spiritual world can be found in many areas of the human experience.
The Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, (written by Rabbi Moshe ben Ya’akov of Coucy d. 750 CE) refers to Megillat Chashmona’im (The Megillah of the Hasmoneans), which is also referred to in other books as Megillat Antiochus. What is this Megillah? The author of the Sefer Mitzvot Gadol suggests that Megillat Antiochus may be the original source of the miracle of the lights on Chanukah and that it was written by the students of Hillel and Shammai (two of the great Sages of the Mishnah). Yet he adds that this Megillah is lost to us and perhaps will only re-emerge in the messianic future.

Yet Rabbi Saadya Gaon (d. 942), writing in Babylon some 150 years later, seems to be in possession of this elusive Megillah. He even goes as far as to quote from it. He asserts that this Megillah was written by the five sons of Mattityahu – Yehuda, Shimon, Yochanan, Yonatan and Elazar – who wrote down their story and the story of Judea under the Seleucid kingdom.

It is possible that the author of the Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, living in France, was unaware of the existence of Megillat Antiochus in Babylon at the time of his writing, or that between his time and the 10th century, the Megillah was discovered among old handwritten manuscripts.

Some commentators point out that during Rabbi Saadya Gaon’s time, it was particularly relevant to publicise the story of Chanukah. The 9th century was a strong period for the Karaite community who denied the existence of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, as well as the miracles of Chanukah. They claimed that the whole episode was created by the Rabbis. This Megillah helped to refute their assertions.

The opening line of the Megillah is very similar to that of Megillat Esther: “And so it was in the days of Antiochus...”; just as Megillat Esther starts “And so it was in the days of Achashverosh...”.

It is also clear that, like Rabbi Saadya Gaon, other early commentators had this Megillah, and cited quotations and language which can only be found in Megillat Antiochus, including Rashi (d. 1105) and the Rambam (Maimonides d. 1204).

The Megillah consists of eight chapters, one for each day of Chanukah. It has almost certainly remained in its original language – Aramaic, with a Hebrew translation side by side. This attests to its authenticity, as Aramaic was the lingua franca. Where at times we struggle to reconcile what we know regarding Chanukah from the Talmud and our Sages with the characters and timelines from the Book of Maccabees and the Book of Judith, the characters and language of Megillat Antiochus line up perfectly with the Talmud’s version.

If this is an authentic source for the Chanukah story and its associated miracles, one wonders why it remains relatively unknown. In truth, while it does remain unknown to many Jews of Ashkenazi origins, the Jews of Yemen actually had a tradition to read Megillat Antiochus on Shabbat Chanukah, after the haftarah was read.

You can still find Megillat Antiochus today in the back of some old Chumashim, after the other five Megillot, although it does not appear in the editions which are popular in our communities.
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This week's Parasha describes the exciting Mitzvah of Bikkurim - First Fruits.

It sounds so special - I wish I could have seen it. Let's fly back in time and watch what would happen.

All year Farmer Avraham prayed for rain. He looked after his fields and waited for the fruit to grow.

Every day he would check to see if the fruit was ripe.

We do our best to make the Bikkurim Basket beautiful.

Look! I've been waiting for this. It's the very first bud in whole orchard. This will be the fruit for Bikkurim. I'll tie a red string around it so we'll still know this was the first, even when the tree is full of fruit.

Finally, the pomegranates are ripe - we can pick our Bikkurim fruit and take them to the Beit Hamikdash in Jerusalem.

Come children, let's all help decorate the basket that your mum has woven. Some people even use gold or silver for such a special Mitzvah!

Our Bikkurim are ready! Now we can take them to Jerusalem.

We'll all come with put on your best clothes children and bring your instruments to make music on the way.

Can I make the wreath for the OK?

We are taking our Bikkurim to Jerusalem - come and join us!

Bringing Bikkurim reminds us that although we have worked hard to produce our fruit, it was God who sent the rain and made them grow. We have brought our very first fruits to God - to the Beit Hamikdash to say thank you.

I did you know that Bikkurim can only be brought from the Shivat Haminim - the seven species that are special to the Land of Israel. Do you know what they are?

Jerusalem

Tribe is the Young People's Department of the United Synagogue: Creating a future for our community through engaging, educating and inspiring the next generation.