



Moor Lane More Torah

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The Ohr Hachaim And The Downfall of the Afrika Korps

Next Tuesday 15th Tamuz [7th July] is the day on which the great 18th century Moroccan scholar and kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Ben Attar passed away. There is a fascinating story connected with this day and with the second of this week's parshiyot, Balak.

Rabbi Yechezkel Besser, a much beloved Rabbi from New York, started his married life in Palestine in a dark period. The summer of 1942 saw Rommel's forces victorious in Egypt and almost at the gates of the Holy Land. No one had any illusions as to what this would mean for the 'Yishuv' of Jews there. In this dire situation Berel Ludmir had to make a decision whether to go ahead with the wedding of his daughter Liba to her groom Yechezkel. Here is how it is told in 'The Rabbi of 84th Street: The Extraordinary Life of Haskel Besser':

And that Tuesday was the yahrtzeit of one of the greatest rabbis in history, Chaim ben Atar, also known as the Ohr Hachaim. Ben Atar lived during the eighteenth century and was renowned for perhaps the most brilliant commentary on the Bible - one that is studied to this day. He is buried in Har Hazeitim, the Mount of Olives, the famous cemetery in Jerusalem.

So, with Rommel poised at Palestine's doorstep and no conceivable protection for the population, thousands of religious Jews turned to the only power they knew. They turned to G-d and fervent prayer - one that seemed to come from their souls. A fast day on the yahrtzeit was declared by the Rebbes. Upwards of twenty thousand people went to pray at this man's grave.

Berel Ludmir accompanied the Husiatiner Rebbe¹ to the grave, and while the Rebbe prayed, Berel noticed that he seemed to fix his eyes on the words chiseled on the gravestone. After a long while, the Rebbe turned to Berel and said simply, "It will be good. Make the wedding." [Berel had until then been unwilling to book a hall for his daughter's wedding because of the uncertainty and terror about the future.] No one understood why the Rebbe said this. But afterwards Berel went directly to the hotel and signed the contract for the celebration.

Much later, Rabbi Besser went to the grave to try to figure out how the Rebbe came to this conclusion. "I saw nothing special," the rabbi recalls. But the Rebbe told Berel that he had seen the Hebrew name of G-d written in gold letters, floating in the air, above the gravestone. And he saw it written in the correct way - with all four letters in a row. "For him, this was the sign."

The yahrtzeit in 1942 began an amazing confluence of events that would change more than just Haskel and Liba's lives. The Rebbe had not based his decision solely on what he saw over the grave. He had seen something else. While studying the week's Torah parsha, the Rebbe interpreted a commentary written hundreds of years before that he claimed (correctly, it turns out) freed the Jews from their death sentence.

The commentary was written by the Ohr Hachaim in the eighteenth century on the Torah parsha, Numbers 24:17. He interpreted the following story: In the Bible

Jacob is called by two names, Jacob and Israel. When he is referred to as Jacob, things do not work very well for the people of Israel. But after he wrestles with the angel and becomes known by the new name, Israel, the nation prospers.

In his commentary, the Or Hachaim writes that if he is called Jacob, he will be killed by Rommel. The name Rommel was actually spelled out in Hebrew - almost two hundred years before the war. The commentary goes on to say that if Jacob is called Israel, Rommel will not destroy him and the nation will prevail. It is more probable that the reference is to Romulus, one of the founders of Rome. But seeing the name Rommel spelled out phonetically, along with the lettering over the grave, was enough a sign for the Rebbe to declare that the Jews of Palestine would not be harmed.

At that moment, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had advanced to the point that there were practically no British defenses in front of him. Had he continued, there would be nothing to stop him from capturing Palestine and then possibly Syria, Iraq, and Iran. With the capture of Iran, the entire underbelly of the Soviet Union would have been open to attack and the Russians would have had to divert troops to protect the border. But that week, a huge sandstorm blew up out of the desert. It was impossible to go forward in those conditions. Rommel planned a tactical redeployment to a point where his tanks would be protected by hills. But Hitler had given his commanders strict orders that no German soldier could retreat without his personal approval.

Rommel sent Hitler a cable explaining his situation. Hitler cabled back saying absolutely not, no retreat. Rommel sent another telegram trying to explain that this was not retreat, merely a temporary redeployment because of conditions. But Hitler would not okay it. Angry and frustrated, Rommel actually got on an airplane and flew back to Germany to see Hitler and explain the situation in person. Of course, it was not an easy trip. Rommel had to fly first to Tripoli, then to Sicily, and then on to Germany. The trip took close to twenty-four hours.

When Hitler finally saw Rommel, he asked why he had come. Again, Rommel explained his request for the redeployment of his troops. One more time, Hitler, now agitated, said there would be no retreats. One more time Rommel tried to make his point that this was not a retreat but a redeployment to service the tanks and give them new tracks, which were badly needed. Finally, Hitler understood and he gave Rommel the green light.

But the trip wasted three days and proved to be the undoing of the Germans' African campaign. When the Germans were ready for their next attack, they lost that month's full moon (attacks in the desert were made at night). So, Rommel was forced to wait for the next full moon. The following month the weather did not cooperate. July is normally clear, but that year it rained and the skies were cloudy. So, the attack was put off for another month. By this time, Churchill had placed a new commander in charge, Montgomery. It was Montgomery who stopped Rommel and his Afrika Korps in its tracks. The Germans never came any closer to Palestine.

After the war, Field Marshal Keitel, the commander of the German Army, wrote that June 30, 1942, was the moment that Germany reached its zenith. After that point it was all downhill. From that day forward, the Germans continuously gave up ground until Berlin was conquered and the Third Reich lay in ruins.

June 30, 1942, was the same day that Berel Ludmir stood with the Husiatiner Rebbe when he saw the name of G-d over the Ohr Hachaim's headstone. The Jewish population settled down, life slowly went back to normal, and the Besser and Ludmir families planned their celebration.

1. Rabbi Yisroel Friedman, (1858-1949) 2nd Rebbe of Husiatyn

חֵקֶת RIDDLES AND QUESTIONS:

- What is the connection between the national flag of Lebanon and the פרשה?
- Which two פסוקים have nearly 38 years between them?
- 'She died like them but it was not כבוד to say it.' What is this referring to?
- Find a Greek word in the פרשה.
- Find a place in the פרשה which gets its name from the event which happened there.
- Which six-word phrase occurs with almost the same words as a very similar phrase from another פרשה which we say every day near the end of דמורה?
- Which three fruits are mentioned in the פרשה and also in שלח לך?
- Who was dressed by his uncle?
- The snakes in the פרשה are called שרפים. What comes next in this series? Fox, scorpion, snake, ____? [Clue: פרקי אבות]
- משה made it. חזקיהו destroyed it. What is it?
- Two weeks ago, we had the episode of the spies. Where do we have spies in the פרשה of חקת?
- A place which occurs at the very end of the פרשה and in a recent הפטרה [but spelled slightly differently].
- Last week's הפטרה makes reference to the הפטרה of חקת. Where?
- Who made a 'rash vow' and what was the vow? [In the הפטרה of חקת, which is not read this week, as it is a double פרשה.]



Please Can We Go Back To Precedented Times Now?

We are hoping for that - we've all had enough of 'these unprecedented times' - but is that right? For sure we want the health, the economy, the security, the freedom of movement we had before Covid 19. We also should be hoping that some things will be different

Many of us say a special thank you every morning: You are so wonderfully kind to let me in here!

Where do we say that? ואני ברב חסדך אבא ביתך which paraphrases into 'G-d you are so amazingly kind that you have let me come to Your house'.

I don't know about you, but I have taken going to shul for granted, but now - after months of front room or garden prayer - it feels special. Those words resonate, and so does another phrase [from this week's parasha]: How good your tents are! Or in other words: You are kind to let me be here, and it is a good place to be.

And that's where the wish to 'go back toprecedented times' should be put on hold. Hang on the out-of-the-ordinary feeling: that new-found enthusiasm; that respect for the Bet Hakeset and for the prayers in it; that feeling of gratitude to be among the people who have seen through the virus, once again to 'enter Your house'.

Inspiration translated into action is productive inspiration. People have come up with wonderful suggestions, such as: once a month making an effort to come early and leave late; learning the halachot of respect of the Beit Hakeset; something practical to enhance the kavod of the Bet Hakeset, whether the physical appearance or the spiritual; taking a particular part of the tefilla and study its meaning and say it slowly.

Each one of us can come up with our own ideas, and then the 'precedented' times we will please G-d go back to will be a level up from before.

חקת ANSWERS:

- Both have ארז [cedar] in them: the פרשה as part of the process of the אדומה; the Lebanese flag has a cedar tree on it.
- The last one of the section about אדומה and first one of section about the death of מרים.
- מרים died with a 'kiss' from G-d in the same way as Moshe and Aharon were to die, but the Torah only hints to it.
- Moshe addresses the people as המורים, which Rashi says is Greek for fools [as in the English word 'moron' which comes from the same Greek word.]
- חרמה 21.3
- אז ישיר וישאל את השירה הזאת 21.17, which is very similar to the introduction to the שירה.
- Figs, grapes and pomegranates. When the well stopped, the thirsty people complained of being in a land with none of these fruits.
- כהן גדול was dressed in the clothes of the משה רבינו by his uncle אלעזר.
- Coals of fire. In Avot 2.15 the words of the חכמים are compared to the bite of a fox, a scorpion, a snake, and then to coals of fire.
- The נחש נחשת, the copper snake, was destroyed by the king חזקיהו.
- Moshe sent spies to spy out יעזר in the land of אמורי.
- Jericho, [here spelt ירחו] and in the הפטרה of יריחו [spelt שלח לך].
- In last week's הפטרה we find שמואל speaking about יפתח who is the central character of the חקת הפטרה.
- יפתח, to bring up the 1st thing which would come out of his house.

בלק RIDDLES AND QUESTIONS:

- What do the people Balak, Noah and Yitro have in common?
- Find two connections to the personality לבן [Laban], one in Rashi and one in the Targum Yonatan on this week's פרשה.
- Who was like a hornet?
- What are hidden from mankind but visible to animals?
- Why was the awesome מלאך with a sword in its hand called 'מלאך' [a name of mercy] rather than מלאך אלקים [a name of judgement]?
- Which פסוק comes in the השנה מוסף?
- Which פסוק made this פרשה a candidate which the Talmud considers a possibility to be the 3rd פרשה?
- Which פסוק from the פרשה is one of the first said in the morning by many people?
- Where are two places in the משנה where בלעם is mentioned?
- Which shipping company gets its name from the פרשה?
- The משנה in אבות lists 10 things created פי הארץ, ופי הבאר, ופי השמים. They are: ופי האבות, והקשת, והסוף, והשמים, והקשת, והמקטב, והלוחות, ויש אומרים, אף המזיקין, וקבורתו של משה, ואילו של אברהם. How many have occurred in the last 3 weeks' פרשיות [including this week's]?
- What are the three things which ה' wants of you?

בלק ANSWERS:

- They were non-Jewish people whose names are the names of parshiyot. [In the case of Yitro, he converted.]
- A) Rashi compares him to בלעם in that both had נבואה lying down B) The wall which crushed the foot of בלעם was the מצבה which יעקב and לבן built.
- בלעם. ה' said to him 'neither your honey nor your sting; neither your blessing nor curse.'
- מזיקין, destructive angels – the ass saw one but Bilaam did not.
- He was an angel of mercy, coming to stop בלעם from sinning.
- He saw no sin in Yaakov לא הביט און ביעקב
- G-d brought them out of Egypt. As it mentions יציאת מצרים, it is considered as a possible way of fulfilling the daily mention of the Exodus.
- מה טובו אהלך is said by many people on entering synagogue in the morning.
- regarding his 3 bad מדות פרק י' and סנהדרין פרק י' עולם הבא in חלק as not having a.
- which refers to ships in the parsha - is the name of a Haifa-based shipping company.
- פי הארץ - קרח, ופי הבאר - חקת, ופי האתון - בלק, והפן - חקת, והמטה - חקת
- משפט חסד הצנע לכת: the הפטרה in פסוק 12, to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with G-d.