

DOES MY (SEARCH) HISTORY MATTER? →

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE




All illustrations were created using AI technology

Tribe and Bnei Akiva
Shavuot Booklet 2023/5783



Intergenerational learning resource, primarily aimed at youth in secondary school.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & THE TORAH. WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

A feed full of puppy videos, a timeline that doesn't show you anything but football fan videos and a For You page that shows you endless scrolls of videos with the exact same dance challenge. Coincidence? No: algorithms. 

The algorithm that the smart **Artificial Intelligence** of your social media has created, is for you and by you. It is created by your previous use, your search history. And it will decide what you will see next, by custom-filtering content for you, displaying content that will likely interest you.

Do you control it, or does it control you?

The **Torah** is the blueprint of our lives. The stories, laws and lessons form a network of pathways that we can follow. It is our collective algorithm. We can follow it and learn from the footsteps of our ancestors. This principle is known as '**maaseh avot siman lebanim**' – everything that occurred to them is a sign for us. In a sense it represents our search history. At the same time, we are required to generate our own algorithm too.

The question is: Does my (search) history matter?

This Tribe and Bnei Akiva Shavuot booklet is designed to offer a learning resource for everyone. In it, you will find debates, textual learning, stories and essays that shed light on the topic from different angles. It is aimed primarily at teenagers; however, we invite you to use it as an intergenerational learning resource.

We are excited to be participating in the Chief Rabbi's Shavuot initiative 'Festival of Torah', which aims to create a genuine enthusiasm for Torah learning across our communities. By using this booklet, you are now a part of that too!

Delve into the world of Artificial Intelligence, ChatGPT and algorithms and learn more about your Jewish identity.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this publication.

Chag sameach!

Rabbi Eli Levin
Tribe Rabbi

Rabbi Avichai Goodman
Rav Shaliach Bnei Akiva

Batsheva Wolf
Head of Education, Tribe

AI AND CHATGPT- IS IT GOING TO MAKE US STUPID?

Laurie Maurer and Batsheva Wolf

INTRODUCTION

ChatGPT, the newest Artificial Intelligence (AI) hype, is a programme that can generate an answer to pretty much any question instantly. It can enhance our day-to-day lives with the ease of access to knowledge – but it can be ever so tempting to use it when you're late with submitting that history essay... With knowledge now so easily available, what are we missing out on? Why do we even need to go to school?!

It begs the question: Is study about the journey or the result?



SOURCE 1

Bill Gates says AI like ChatGPT is the most important innovation at the moment

Improvements in artificial intelligence are the “most important” innovation at the moment, billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates said in an interview published Friday.

“This will change our world,” he continued. The applications of generative AI like OpenAI's ChatGPT could improve office efficiency, drafting invoices and letters, Gates said in a podcast conversation with the German-language business paper, Handelsblatt.

The optimisations that AI can offer for reading and writing, Gates said, will make a “huge impact.” In the health care and education spaces, Gates said, AI can tangibly improve efficiency and meaningfully improve outcomes. “The easiest way to understand it is that AI has got very good at speech recognition and visual recognition, but they essentially couldn't read,” he said. In other words, traditional AI platforms couldn't actually process the language they were taking in. But newer platforms, like ChatGPT, are capable of training, improving, and reading and writing through new knowledge.

Gates pointed to applications within word processing and office tasks as optimal future applications for natural language platforms like ChatGPT. As an example, Gates pointed to... Microsoft's Teams software, noting that the AI could keep track of the conversation to produce relevant information based on a meeting.

“The progress over the next couple of years to make these things even better will be profound,” Gates said.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/10/bill-gates-says-ai-like-chatgpt-is-the-most-important-innovation.html>. CNBC, 10 Feb 2023.

POINTS TO PONDER:

Why does Bill Gates' opinion about this particularly matter?

Why do you think Bill Gates is positive about the use of ChatGPT?

How would ChatGPT impact your life positively?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Bill Gates, as founder of Microsoft, can give us a well-informed view about the technology, plus the many practical uses and applications of ChatGPT for our world. It can make a lot of things easier for us. In additional interviews, Gates spoke further about the positive sides of AI, for example the use of AI in the medical field to reduce the amount of paperwork and administrative tasks, which means, for example, that doctors will have more time to help patients in need. This could be a lifesaving exercise, especially for poorer countries. As the platforms are getting more sophisticated, the scope of things we can use them for broadens as well.



SOURCE 2

Too much information is not helpful. A broad document, for instance, of all the opinions on reheating food on Shabbat is not going to help someone know what to do. He might see many contradictory opinions depending on the kind of food and other factors. He could very well throw up his hands and say, "I have no idea what to do. I'll do whatever I want, and then I'll find one of the rabbis cited online who agrees with me." This would represent a serious misunderstanding of the halachic process.

For example, in the Gemara, Rabbi Yossi HaGlili rules that one can eat chicken with cheese... But we don't follow that opinion. If, however, one does an online search and sees Rabbi Yossi HaGlili's opinion, he might think that that's acceptable in halacha. He won't necessarily realize that it's a minority opinion that is not accepted.

Other people might deliberately seek out non-accepted halachic opinions. ChatGPT could easily write a convincing document based upon non-accepted halachic positions, illustrating how eating chicken and cheese together is allowed in Jewish law, when, of course, it is not. Some might use the information to then proceed to do what they want to do. This is a distortion of the halachic process.

Source: Jewish Action Magazine Vol 83, No.3, "AI Meets Halacha" an interview with Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, February 16, 2023

POINTS TO PONDER:

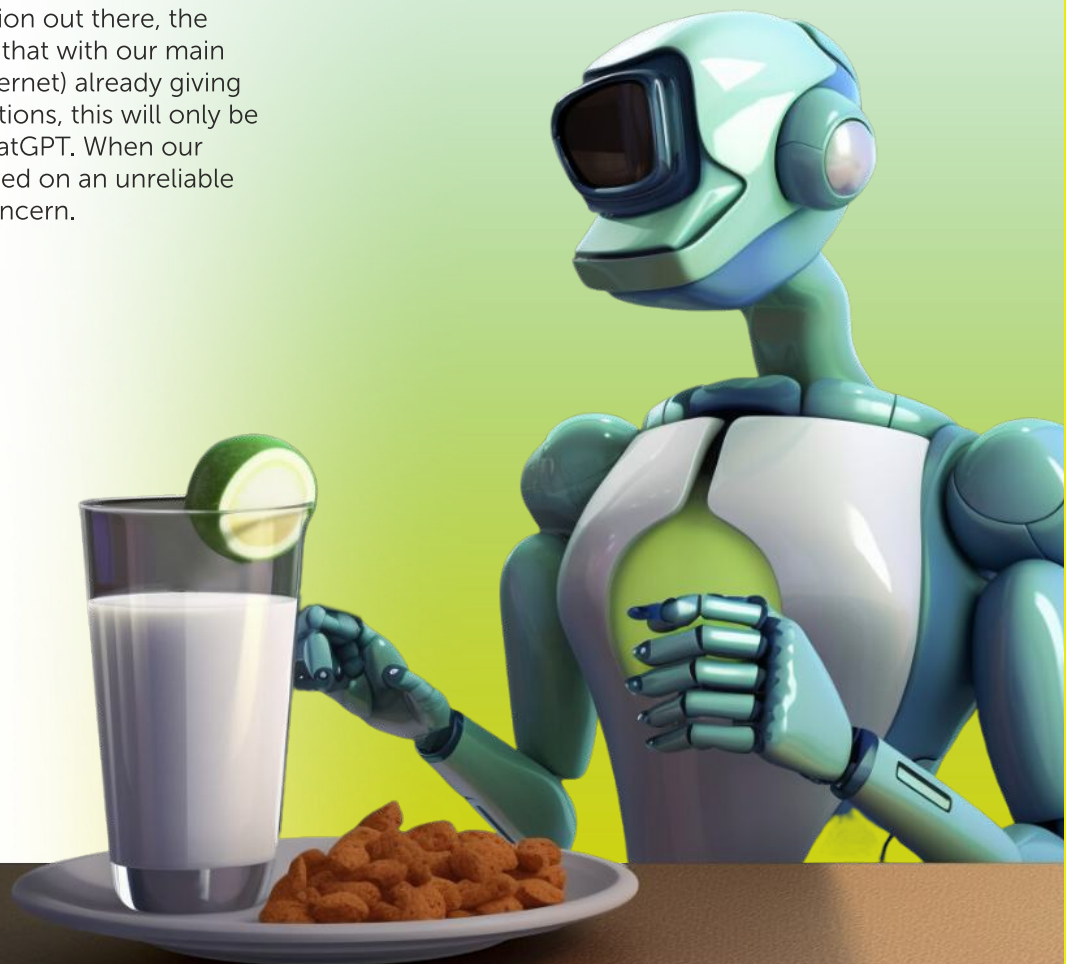
What is the author's concern when it comes to not always providing fully accurate information?

Do you relate to his worry?

What would you say to counter his argument?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

ChatGPT has acquired its knowledge through data already found on the internet, and what is inputted into it by its users. Given the amount of 'fake news' and false information out there, the author expresses his concern that with our main source of information (the internet) already giving us sometimes warped perceptions, this will only be exacerbated by AI such as ChatGPT. When our entire view of the world is based on an unreliable source, that is a reason for concern.



SOURCE 3

The importance of creativity

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma when they went to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Peki'in. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: What new explanation did you learn today in the study hall? They said to him: We are your students and we drink from your water, i.e., all of our Torah knowledge comes from you, and therefore how can we tell you something you have not already learned? He said to them: Even if you have learned from me, there cannot be a study hall without a new, creative explanation.

Source: Gemara Chagigah 3a

POINTS TO PONDER:

What do you think the Gemara means by a "study hall without a new, creative explanation"?

Why do you think the Rabbi didn't just give them all the information and knowledge necessary?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Rabbi Yehoshua was trying to teach his students, who were themselves great rabbis, that with anything we learn, just taking in the information is not sufficient. When studying matters of practical halacha (Jewish law) in particular, we have to apply the knowledge to daily life. When dealing with Jewish wisdom, values and the choices we make, we have to make sure we have understood these lessons properly so that we can put them to use. If we keep on delving deeper into the library of Jewish knowledge, we can internalise its teachings and make the knowledge ours. By coming up with a novel idea (a new insight) ourselves, we 'acquire' the text and truly make it part of our lives.



SOURCE 4

Building brain muscles

(...) If it's sometimes too much to engage in a regular extensive routine of dedicated Torah study – there are little things we can work into our everyday lives, if we remain alert to their potential value. A few minutes, maybe, to open a Chumash and read the parasha, and simply notice. What strikes me as interesting, or strange? Look at that word choice; what does that suggest to me? ...and now I have a Torah insight that's all my own. Or that other word choice that just seems really strange? ... and the next time I have a few minutes, I can see what the commentator Rashi has to say about it, or Ramban or Malbim or whomever I have time to consult, and before I know it, I own one or two or seventy facets of a little slice of Torah. My Torah muscles are stronger for having used them; I've connected with the Torah that was there for the taking all along. It's mine now, in this world and the next.

In Devarim 30:11-14, Moshe reassures the Jewish people that "this mitzvah which I am commanding you today, it is not too wondrous for you and it is not far. It is not in the heavens...Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it." Powerful words – but what do they mean? Which mitzvah is he talking about? This passage is about deep Torah study: It might seem to be beyond us, with ideas too high above our heads to grasp, or requiring resources too difficult to consult. But it's actually right there, in our very own mouths and hearts. We have the capacity, even if we think we don't, because God gave it to us. We just have to find ways to engage our rusty muscles and take what is rightfully ours.

Source: Sarah Rudolph, August 15, 2018 (<https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/building-muscles-one-rashi-at-a-time/>)

POINTS TO PONDER:

The author writes: "my Torah muscles are stronger". What 'muscles' is she referring to?

The article also states: "It is mine now, in this world and the next". Can you think of a time when you felt that the Torah was yours? How did that affect the way you live?

DEBATES



SUGGESTED ANSWER

This article speaks about ways of making Torah learning and its impact a part of our lives. How we can take baby steps in this process and ultimately make it our own. It is a matter of opening that book and starting the conversation which will start that process. Merely receiving an answer, therefore, does not lead to the same outcome – it does not build that muscle. At the same time, the author reassures us that this is not out of our reach: "It is not in the heavens", we do have the capacity.



OTHER QUOTES ON THE TOPIC

"Torah – not simply 'that which is taught' but the process of learning and teaching, the ongoing conversation between parents and children, teachers and disciples – is the oxygen which Judaism breathes." *

"A study by the University of California (San Diego) has found that in 2008 the average person's daily intake of information was 300 percent greater than in 1960." **

"The writer Geordie Williamson (also a professor of Mathematics at the University of Sydney) referred to [technology] as 'another powerful accelerant in the outsourcing of the human mind.'" **

Sources:

*Rabbi Sacks, *Community of Faith* p. 127

***Future Minds: How the Digital Age is Changing Our Minds, Why this Matters and What We Can Do About It.* Richard Watson, 2010.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed the benefits that Artificial Intelligence can bring, in the educational, medical and business fields. We also touched on the concerns: fake news, false information and skewed perceptions. From the Jewish sources, we learn that there is an inherent Jewish concept that we need to make Torah and learning 'our own': by actively delving, seeking, exploring and learning for ourselves with an emphasis on applying that knowledge. This cannot be achieved by simply receiving information. It is a journey that every person needs to make for themselves.

We see the benefits of what ChatGPT and AI can bring us and how it can transform the world positively, however we should stay aware of the risks of losing our ability to think independently.

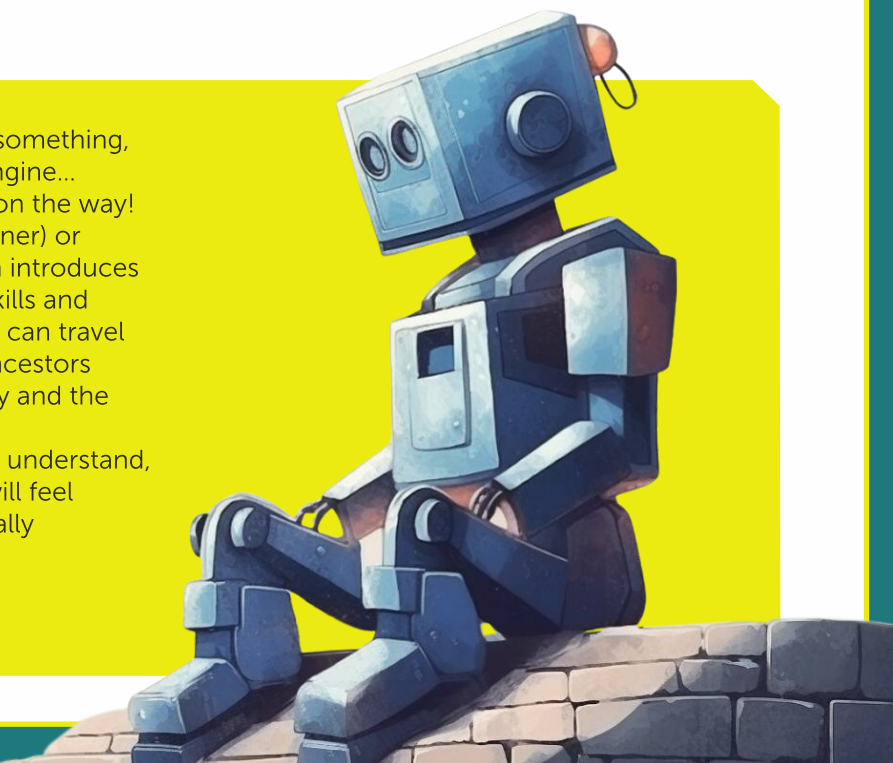
Artificial Intelligence can never replace our God-given human intelligence.

WE CHALLENGE YOU...

Next time you want to find an answer to something, use an encyclopaedia instead of a search engine... You never know what else you might learn on the way!

Try learning with a chavruta (learning partner) or a teacher – conversing with another person introduces you to new ideas, improves your listening skills and strengthens relationships. It also means you can travel the journey of Jewish learning which our ancestors began at Mount Sinai, continuing it for today and the future.

When you read something you don't fully understand, try and delve deeper. The satisfaction you will feel from grasping a difficult concept will be totally worth it!



YITZCHAK AVINU- CREATING YOUR OWN PATH OR FOLLOWING THE ALGORITHM? GUIDEBOOK TO BECOMING A PARTRIARCH

Batsheva Wolf

Imagine living a life in which all you are is “son of...” or “daughter of...”. That was Yitzchak’s challenge. Yitzchak, son of Avraham Avinu. The man who had a father so great that it seemed like an impossible act to follow.

How did he do that? And if so, did he just follow, or did he in fact also create his own persona in the process? Could he become a great man through his own merit?

How did Yitzchak our forefather deal with the ‘algorithm’, as we might put it today, which had been generated for him?

STRIKING RESEMBLANCE

From a young age, several significant events in Yitzchak’s life run parallel to those of his father Avraham’s. When Yitzchak was born, the Torah writes how his physical appearance was so similar to Avraham that people knew immediately that he was Avraham’s son. And because they looked so alike on the outside, people assumed that they were the same on the inside too, in their personalities and religious levels (Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi, 1160-1235) on Bereishit 25:18).

But the likeness didn’t end there. As Yitzchak’s life continues, his story also bears a striking resemblance to his father’s. Both Avraham and Yitzchak had to leave their hometown and suffered a famine. Both of them had their wives’ identities questioned by a foreign king and had to deal with jealousy from the Philistines. And both of them waited long years to bear children, followed by both of them bringing up both a righteous and a wicked son – Yitzchak and Yishmael, and Yaakov and Esav respectively (as explained by our early Rabbinic teachings in the Midrash Hagadol, Bereishit 26:1). So far, Avraham mapped out an ‘algorithm’ that Yitzchak followed to a T.

UNIQUE MISSION

We know that every person in this world has a mission, a reason why they are on earth (Talmud Sanhedrin 37a). If Yitzchak’s life was pretty much following in his father’s footsteps, what was Yitzchak’s mission? What was his purpose?

Jewish mysticism, in its primary source the Zohar (Toledot 10), teaches us that Yitzchak’s main characteristic is ‘Gevurah’, strength. However, when we look at Yitzchak’s life, we see a person who goes through life in a seemingly rather passive way. He starts off his life as the target of the bullying tactics of his older brother Yishmael. Later on, we read about the Akeida. Avraham is commanded to take his son Yitzchak and offer him to God as a sacrifice. At the last moment, as Avraham raises the knife into the sky about to kill Yitzchak, an angel of God tells Avraham to stop. Where the Akeida is viewed as The Biggest Challenge for Avraham Avinu, surely this was no small feat for Yitzchak himself?! And he just undergoes it- perhaps the first person to embody the saying, “like a sheep being led to the slaughter”. And when, later on in life, he is doing well financially and the Philistines express their jealousy and their wish for him to leave the area, he complies without putting up a fight (Radak, Bereishit 26:1). For someone who personifies Gevurah (strength, judgment), this seems rather weak and not very just, no?

WHAT IS STRENGTH?

Yitzchak’s attitude can be best understood when looking at his life through the lens of the famous phrase in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1), that defines strength as the ability to overcome an inner struggle. The power of self-control and self-sacrifice. The challenges in Avraham’s life centred around the complex question: is Chesed always the right answer? Yitzchak’s challenge was to have the strength, self-control and sacrifice to undergo it all. Where Avraham’s struggle was one of Chesed, an attribute which demands a limitless approach, Yitzchak underwent events that challenged his ability to exercise self-control. Giving versus holding back. Limitless versus required boundaries. The same goes for the other challenges in his life. Whereas to us it may look like Yitzchak took it all lying down, this was in fact his challenge. And, like the other patriarchs: their biggest challenge became their defining feature.

Being the son of Avraham wasn’t always easy for Yitzchak. When Rivka and Yitzchak are waiting to have children, year after year, they pray. Each in their part of the house, they turn to God. God answers, after years – the prayers of Rivka, his wife. Because she had miraculously become a shining Jewish role model despite her evil background and family. That is why her prayers had a higher value. In this lay the message: Yitzchak, just because you come from a highly regarded house doesn’t mean you can ride that wave. Become a person yourself.

The concept “Maaseh avot siman lebanim” comes to mind. “The actions of the forefathers (Avraham,



Yitzchak and Yaakov) are a sign for us". A sign. Think of neuropathways: once the pathway has been created in our brains, that path now becomes accessible. Once our forefathers have shown us how Chesed works, how far Gevurah goes, what self-sacrifice and self-control mean, we can now follow in their paths. It doesn't absolve us- the choice and responsibility still lie with us. But our forefathers have forged the way for us.

Yes, the foundations of Yitzchak's life had been laid for him by Avraham, the 'algorithm' was set out. But ultimately, Yitzchak made himself into the forefather, the giant and role model that he was, himself. And in that, he has shaped our 'algorithm', our collective spiritual DNA.

It is now up to us what we do with it.



LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL – OLD AND NEW UNITING

Rabbi Avichai Goodman

Adapted by Ben Rothstein, Chinuch Worker, Bnei Akiva

Who doesn't want to create big changes in life? Who doesn't want to be remembered as a person not just satisfied with the existing situation, but who aspired, and perhaps even achieved, improving the society in which they live?

We all want these things!

Each of us, each in our own field and with our own abilities, sees flaws that we want to correct. Some of us work hard to correct and change situations, and some succeed in doing so and really do change the world. But, every time we want to change something, we have to think carefully about whether the change is worthwhile. The approach for many centuries was one that puts emphasis on respect for the past, understanding that the generations before us were wise; things were not done for no reason, and we must remember the saying, "good things can be easily destroyed, but they are not easily created".

Even a person who respects the past knows that sometimes change is needed. But, contrary to the opinion heard these days that changes must be made in a drastic, extreme manner, and as quickly as possible, without thinking that we may be wrong – a conservative approach to life is that changes must be made carefully, moderately, while constantly checking ourselves. **Are the changes destroying more than they create? Do we want to hold onto tradition or can changes be beneficial?**

This approach – of linking to the past whilst evaluating the changes we make – is already found in our Torah and is found in the leadership structure of the State of Israel now.

When the State of Israel was formed in 1948, it was determined that its parliament, the Knesset, would have 120 seats. This is based on the fact that during the Temple era, there were 120 members of the "Men of the Great Assembly" (*Anshei Knesset Hagedola*), who were the ruling authority of the time.

Reflecting on our history, there are several other governmental institutions that complement each other, and I want to focus on two – the institutions of the *Shiva tovei ha'ir*, 'Seven Community Leaders' (known by some Sephardim as *parnasim*, the 'City Providers'), and the Sanhedrin, the supreme rabbinic court.

The 'Seven Community Leaders' is one of Judaism's early expressions of democracy. The leaders are chosen by public vote (*Talmud Berachot 55a*), and in many places there was a desire to choose the most practical people, even at the expense of choosing the most righteous people in the city (*Responsa (l:617) of Rashba, 1235-1310*).

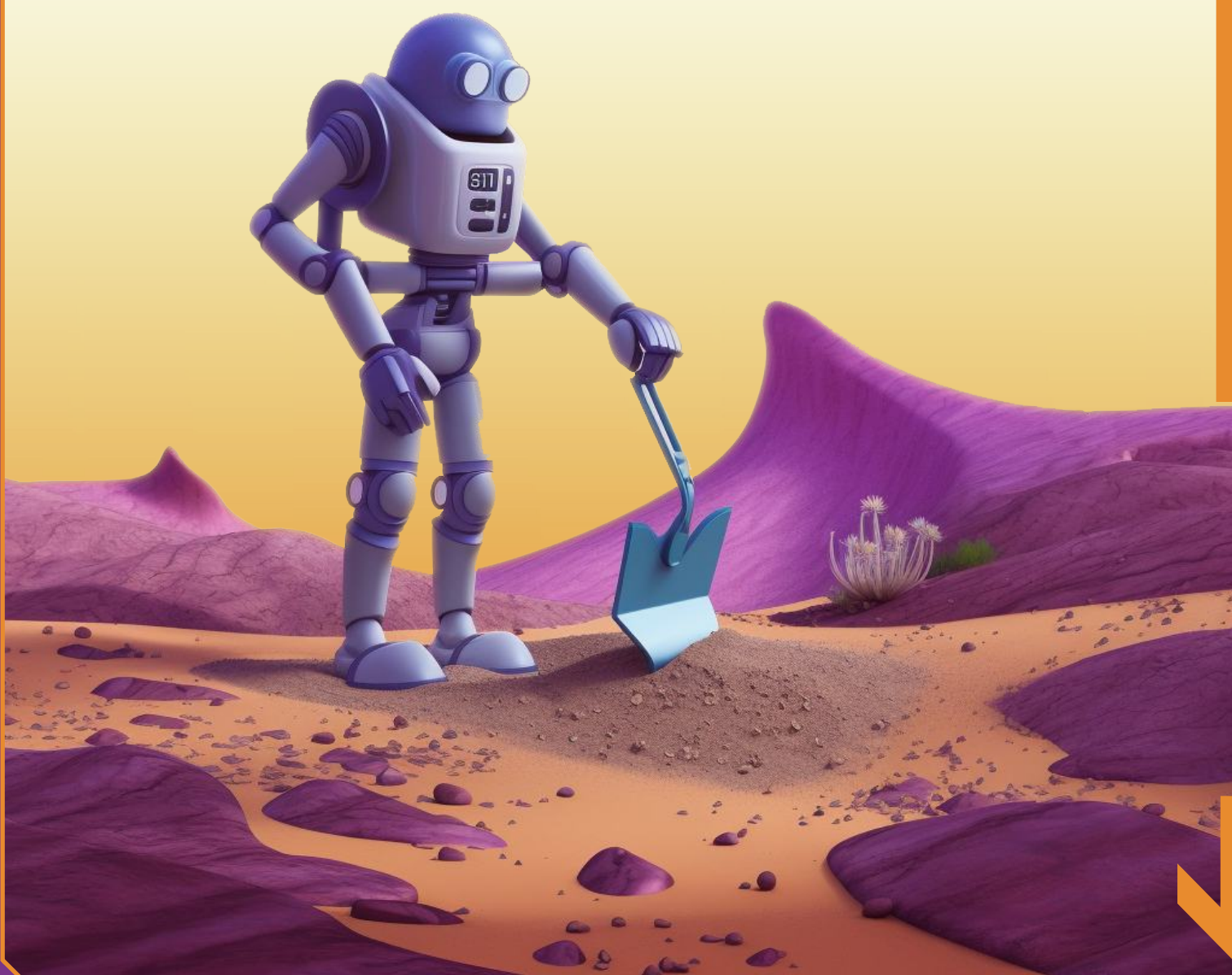
The Seven Community Leaders were authorised to oversee all affairs of the community – from small decisions, such as repairs to roads and houses, through social and community regulations, and up to dealing with religious needs, such as building synagogues and selling the community's Torah scrolls when necessary. The Seven Community Leaders were the prominent Jewish symbol of the desire for a community to promote things, to correct defects and, in general, to improve situations, at the expense of the present state. Compare them to trustees of an organisation. But the Sanhedrin can put a brake on all this.

That is, even if the Seven Community Leaders wanted to initiate some change, if the Sanhedrin determined that this was contrary to *halacha* (Jewish law), the community leaders would be subject to the Sanhedrin's decision. Since the Sanhedrin's laws were based on the Torah, we can begin to understand the bigger picture, and the similarity between the modern world and the ancient world of *halacha* – even if there is a need to make changes in our world, this must be done only in a way that befits our Jewish values, expressed in *halacha*.

The above helps us to understand the leadership structure in modern-day Israel. Whereas in ancient times the Seven Community Leaders was the expression of democracy, the Knesset is now in its place. The Sanhedrin formed the moral brakes on the Seven Community Leaders. This is now the Supreme Court's responsibility, to take care of the legal accountability of the Knesset.

The Torah teaches us that we need a synthesis of values: on the one hand we have a desire to change, not to be satisfied with any existing situation, but on the other hand, using the checks-and-balances model of our history, there is an understanding that not every change is good, and not everything that the majority wants is always right. In this way, modern-day Israel reflects the structure of our ancestors. Just like them, we like change and want to progress, and we have a system which holds us accountable. We have emulated the ancient leadership structure in modern-day Israel, thereby walking in their footsteps, whilst adapting this to modern times.

We will end with a prayer, that please God very soon, the Almighty will grant us that all the institutions of the Jewish people will fulfil their role, and that the prophecy "And I will return your judges as the first" will be fulfilled, when the judges and the Knesset in Israel all work together according to the values of Torah. Then we will truly be able to call ourselves "the city of justice, a faithful city."





SHAVUOT 1967

Rabbi Cobi Ebrahimoff

On the 29th November 1947 (16 Kislev 5708), the United Nations General Assembly approved the establishment of a Jewish State as part of the partition plan. Jews in Tel Aviv and around the world were celebrating the historic achievement. However, for many Jews living in and around Jerusalem, the partition plan brought about further instability as the future of Jews there was still uncertain. On that very night, 1,500 Jews gathered at the Kotel (Western Wall) to say "Tikkun Chatzot" (a ritual prayer recited after midnight as an expression of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem). The British Mandatory Authorities then blocked the road to the Kotel, and Jews were denied access. The United Nations planned to unite Jerusalem under international control. These attempts failed as the Arab population refused to accept the partition plan and declared war on Israel (The War of Independence) when David Ben-Gurion declared the State on 14 May 1948.

Following the War of Independence, Israel and Jordan signed an Armistice Agreement in 1949 with a firm Jordanian commitment that Jews will be allowed to visit the Kotel for prayer. Despite the signed agreement, throughout the 19 years of Jordanian rule from 1948, Jews were denied access to the Kotel. During the *Shalosh Regalim* (the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succot), Jews would gather and pray on Mount Zion or high hills in West Jerusalem to get a glimpse of the Kotel, sometimes targeted by Jordanian snipers.

The miraculous Israeli victory during the Six Day War of 1967 reunited Jerusalem with the Jewish people. The war officially ended on 10th June. Israeli soldiers worked tirelessly to remove land mines and open the Old City to civilians. On the eve of Shavuot (14th June), the IDF announced that the Kotel will shortly be accessible to the public. 250,000 Jews travelled from around Israel and gathered at the gates of the Old City, waiting with great anticipation and excitement for the opening of the gates. Throughout generations of Jewish history, Jews stood at those gates, begging various authorities for access. Finally, at 4am on Shavuot morning, after 2,000 years of hope and prayer, Israeli soldiers opened the gates of the Old City and welcomed Am Yisrael, the Jewish people, home.

The Israeli newspaper 'Yediot Acharonot' reported on 16th June 1967: "There was a magical atmosphere in the air, some people were carrying Sifrei Torah. Our own Jewish soldiers were guarding the Old City with pride. Tens of thousands were making their way down to the Kotel, dancing on the streets and singing:

"כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תּוֹרָה, וּדְבַר ה' מִירוּשָׁלַיִם"

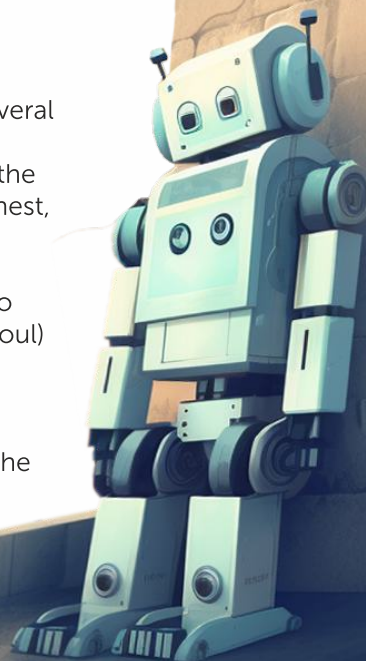
"The Torah shall emerge from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3)

The following years saw a surge of Jews from Israel and around the world visiting Jerusalem and the Kotel. That summer, the Israeli government declared the Kotel as a Holy Site, and in 1968, Rabbi Meir Yehuda Getz was appointed as the rabbi of the Kotel. Thousands of people continued to arrive in the Kotel daily, and Rabbi Getz welcomed them warmly to the home of all Jewish people.

The Knesset legislation and Rabbi Getz's appointment raised concerns in some political parties. The Israeli media published several opinion pieces by reporters who claimed that the Kotel should remain a cultural heritage site rather than a religious site. One of the strongly worded opinion pieces even stated, "Let's be brutally honest, the vast majority of soldiers killed in the Six Day War were not religious."

Rabbi Meir Yehuda Getz decided to respond in an open letter to the public. Rabbi Getz explained that "the Kotel is the *neshama* (soul) of our nation, our *neshama* cannot only serve one part of a body."

The rabbi's family and friends were surprised that he did not mention his son, Avner z"l, who was killed in the Old City during the Six Day War. Avner was a religious soldier, and highlighting his sacrifice would strengthen the religious cause. Rabbi Getz explained that mentioning Avner would have defeated his point.



The fact that Avner was his son and the fact that he was religious does not make the Kotel my own. The Kotel is a *neshama* and a *neshama* cannot and will not be divided.

Hearing the remarkable response of Rabbi Getz brought me to think of human intelligence as opposed to artificial intelligence. Rabbi Getz omitted the one fact we all expected to hear, his son was religious, and there must have been many more religious soldiers who fought and died in the Six Day War. A computerised system would provide such data within seconds and discredit the secular journalist.

It takes emotional intelligence to speak to the heart.

“דַּבְּרוּ עַל-לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, וְקְרְאוּ אֵלֶיהָ”

“Talk to the heart of Jerusalem and call upon her” (Isaiah 40:2)



LOOKING BELOW THE SURFACE

Laurie Maurer

*A study by the University of California (San Diego) in 2008 found that the average person's daily intake of information was 300% greater than in 1960, thanks to the internet¹. We live in an age where information of all kinds is available at our fingertips. Today we can **know** so much more; but does it make us any wiser?*

There is a well-known story of a person who came to Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik of Brisk (also known as the Brisker Rav, 1820-1892) before Pesach to ask if milk, instead of wine, could be used for the four cups at the Seder.

Instead of simply answering the question, Rabbi Yosef Ber took a sum of money from his pocket and gave it to the person with instructions to use it to purchase wine. His wife witnessed this and afterwards pointed out to him that the sum of money he gave was far more than was necessary to purchase wine.

Rabbi Yosef Ber responded with the observation that while it was obvious that the poor person could not afford wine, there was more to the question than that. No Jew would contemplate drinking milk after eating meat, as this is not allowed by Jewish law. Therefore, if the person sought advice regarding use of milk for all of the four cups, they obviously did not have the money to buy meat for Yom Tov. Someone so obviously needy required more assistance than just for wine.

Now his wife understood that her husband, looking through the prism of halacha (Jewish law), had seen more in this person than just a one-dimensional situation. He had seen someone who was having to make a Seder with minimal ingredients on an extremely tight budget.

This story shows how knowledge might only provide limited good on its own. Instead, it must be applied by us - humans - into real-life rather than theoretical situations. This is wisdom. We pray for it every weekday in the Amida prayer.

What is especially important in the story told of Rabbi Yosef Ber is context. Every person, every piece of knowledge, is part of a wider framework. In order to fully grasp something, we need to know its history, to discover more about the contributing factors to its being. This helps us to better understand both the present and the future.

Every human being is a vast, sophisticated system that is precious and important. **It takes more than just knowledge to understand others – we need our human wisdom as expressed through logic, empathy, perception and so much more.** Just gaining information through an external source, such as AI is not enough. It may guide us, but we need to apply our human minds to understand the world better, on a deeper level.

¹Future Minds: How the Digital Age is Changing Our Minds, Why this Matters and What We Can Do About It. (Richard Watson, 2010)



A FUSION OF PAST AND FUTURE

Rabbi Eli Levin

We have selected three pieces of text that reflect the idea of drawing on past events to inform our own decisions. None on these sources suggest that the past should entirely dictate our own decisions. However, all of them highlight the importance of being aware of previous actions as a crucial factor in determining our future. The final decision is up to us.

SOURCE 1

Bereishit (Genesis) 12:6

THE STORY SO FAR...

God told Abram (he is not yet called Abraham), "Lech lecha – go for yourself, from your land, from your birthplace and from your parents' house to the land that I will show you."

And Abram passed through the land, until the place of Shechem, until the plain of Moreh, and the Canaanites were then in the land.

וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם
עַד אֵלוֹן מוֹרָה וְהַכְנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאֶרֶץ:

RAMBAN (NACHMANIDES) WAS A LEADING SPANISH SCHOLAR AND BIBLICAL COMMENTATOR, WHO LIVED FROM 1194 - 1270.

On the above verse Ramban comments:

וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם – ABRAM PASSED INTO THE LAND AS FAR AS THE PLACE OF SHECHEM.

[What is the significance of Abraham's various stations upon his arrival in the land of Canaan that the Torah saw fit to record them in detail? In a dissertation fundamental to the understanding of the stories of the Patriarchs recorded in the Torah, Ramban explains:]

וְאֵלֶּיךָ אֶמְרֶנּוּ – I will tell you a principle, which you should keep in mind throughout all the coming passages regarding the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. והוא ענין גדול, הנזכר רבותינו בדרך קצרה, ואמרו "כל מה שאירע לאבות" – It is a major principle, which the Sages mentioned succinctly when they said (cf. *Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9), "Everything that occurred to the Patriarchs is a sign (or portent) for their descendants."²⁹

וְלָכֵן יִאֲרִיכוּ הַכְּתוּבִים בְּסִפּוּר הַמַּסְעוֹת וְחַפְצוֹת הַבְּאֵרוֹת וּשְׂאֵר הַמִּקְרִים לְכַלּוֹם בָּאֵיִם – This is the reason that the verses go to such length in recounting the details of the Patriarchs' travels and their digging of wells and other incidents, – and one contemplating these incidents may consider them matters that are superfluous and without purpose. – In truth, however, all of these events come to teach regarding the future, כי באשר יבוא המקרה לנביא משלשת האבות יתבונן ממנו הדבר הנגזר לבא לזרעו – for when an incident occurred to a prophet among the three Patriarchs,³⁰ there can be understood from it an allusion to something that was decreed to happen to his descendants.

POINTS TO PONDER:

- According to Ramban, why does the Torah go into so much detail about the lives of our ancestors?
- If 'maaseh avot siman lebanim' means that our ancestors set a blueprint for the future, are we still free to choose our own destiny?
- Can you think of situations in Jewish history or your own life when people had to leave their home and travel, just as Abraham did?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Ramban says that the reason we read about the patriarchs' lives in so much detail is because these episodes are a prophetic foreshadowing of what their descendants will experience on a national level. Often there is precedent for episodes that occur in our lifetime. We can look back at similar occurrences in the past and draw from peoples' responses, failures and successes, to apply them in our lives.

THE STORY SO FAR...

The Book of Ruth opens with the sad passing of three men, leaving Naomi without her husband Elimelech, and her daughters-in-law Orpa and Ruth without their husbands Machlon and Chilion. Naomi now speaks to Orpa and Ruth.

RUT/RUTH | CHAPTER 1 | KETUVIM

רות | פרק א | כתובים

But to her two daughters-in-law she said, "Go on now, turn back, each to your mother's home, and may the L-rd show you that kindness that you have shown the dead and me. The L-rd grant that you find a place of rest, each in your husband's home." As she kissed them, they wept aloud and said, "No. We shall return with you to your people." Said Naomi, "Turn back, daughters; why would you come with me? Have I still sons in my womb who could be husbands to you? Turn back, my daughters – go; I am too old to be with a man. Even were I to say, 'There is hope for me still,' were I even this night to be married, even if I could bear sons again, are you to wait for them as they grow? Would you be chained to them, never to be with another man? No, daughters, for your presence is most bitter to me now, for the hand of the L-rd has beaten me." Aloud they wept still more, then Orpa kissed her mother-in-law – but Ruth clung to her. And Naomi said, "Your sister-in-law has turned back to her people, to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law." But Ruth replied, "Do not entreat me to leave you, to turn back, not to walk after you. For wherever you walk, I shall walk, and wherever you stay, there I stay. Your people is my people; your G-d is my G-d. Wherever you die, there I die, and there shall I be buried. So may the L-rd do to me – and more – for death alone will separate me from you." Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to come with her, and she spoke to her no more.

ותאמר נעמי לשתיה בלתייה לכה שבנה אשה לבית אמה יעשה ה' עמכם חסד פאשר עשיתם עם הפרתים ועמדי: יתן ה' לכם ומצאן מנוחה אשה בית אישה ותשק להן ותשאנה קולן ותבפינה: ותאמרנה לה בראתך נשוב לעמך: ותאמר נעמי שבנה בנתי למה תלכנה עמי העודלי בניס במעי והיו לכם לאנשים: שבנה בנתי לכן כי זקנתי מהיות לאיש כי אמרתי ישלי תקוה גם הייתי הלילה לאיש וגם ילדתי בניס: הלהן תשברנה עד אשר יגדלו הלהן תעננה לבלתי היות לאיש אל בנתי פירמלי מאד מכם פירצאה כי ירה: ותשנה קולן ותבפינה עוד ותשק ערפה לחמותה ורות דבקה בה: ותאמר הגה שבה יבמתך אל עמה ואל אלהיה שובי אחרי יבמתך: ותאמר רות אל תפגעירי לעובד לשוב מאחריך כי אל אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אליו עמך עמי ואלקוני אלקי: באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר בה יעשה ה' לי וכה יוסיף כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך: ותרא פירמתאמצת היא ללכת אמה ותתהלך לדבר אליה:

POINTS TO PONDER:

- How does Ruth's response differ from Orpa's?
- What might have influenced her decision?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Ruth stands out as someone who is not afraid to divert from the path set out for her. She is the champion of innovation. We must learn from the past, but not feel bound to it. Sometimes we can be too focused on the past. Ruth challenges us to find the courage to make decisions for the sake of the future.

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THE STORY SO FAR...

There was a question over 2,000 years ago about whether the Pesach offering could be performed on Shabbat. The answer came from the leading scholar, Hillel, who knew how two prominent rabbis called Shemaya and Avtalyon had earlier ruled on this matter. As a result, Hillel was appointed as leader.

גמ' תנו רבנן: הלכה זו נתעלמה מבני בתירא. פעם אחת חל ארבעה עשר להיות בשבת, שבוהו ולא ידעו אם פסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו. אמרו: כלום יש אדם שיודע אם פסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו? אמרו להם: אדם אחד יש שעלה מבבל, והלל הבבלי שמו, ששימש שני גדולי הדור שמעיה ואבטליון ויודע אם פסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו. שלחו וקראו לו. אמרו לו: כלום אתה יודע אם הפסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו? אמרו להם: וכי פסח אחד יש לנו בשנה שדוחה את השבת? והלא הרבה יותר ממאתים פסחים יש לנו בשנה שדוחין את השבת.

GEMARA The Sages taught a *baraita* with regard to the basic *halakha* governing the eve of Passover that occurs on Shabbat: **This law was forgotten by the sons of Beteira, who were the leaders of their generation. The fourteenth of Nisan once occurred on Shabbat, and they forgot and did not know whether the Paschal lamb overrides Shabbat or not. They said: Is there any person who knows whether the Paschal lamb overrides Shabbat or not? They said to them: There is a certain man in Jerusalem who came up from Babylonia, and Hillel^p the Babylonian is his name. At one point, he served the two most eminent scholars of the generation, Shemaya and Avtalyon, and he certainly knows whether the Paschal lamb overrides Shabbat or not. The sons of Beteira sent messengers and called for him. They said to him: Do you know whether the Paschal lamb overrides Shabbat or not? He said to them: Have we but one Paschal lamb during the year that overrides Shabbat? Do we not have many more than two hundred Paschal lambs, i.e., sacrifices, during the year that override Shabbat?**

LANGUAGE
 Rebuking them [*mekanteran*] – מקנטרן – Related to the Greek root *kéntron*, *kentron*, meaning something sharp and stinging. The Hebrew-Aramaic root is derived from this word and means to sting with words.

TEXTUAL STUDY



אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מִמֵּינָה לָדָּךְ? אָמַר לָהֶם: נֹאמַר
 "מוֹעֵדוֹ" בְּפֶסַח וְנֹאמַר "מוֹעֵדוֹ" בְּתִמְדָּה.
 מִה מוֹעֵדוֹ הָאֶמּוֹר בְּתִמְדָּה – דּוֹחָה אֶת
 הַשַּׁבָּת, אִף מוֹעֵדוֹ הָאֶמּוֹר בְּפֶסַח – דּוֹחָה
 אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת.

They said to him: From where do you know this? He said to them: "Its appointed time" is stated with regard to the Paschal lamb and "its appointed time" is also stated with regard to the daily offering, for the verse says: "Command the children of Israel and say to them, My offering, the provision of My sacrifice made with fire, for a sweet savor to Me, shall you observe to offer Me at its appointed time" (Numbers 28:2). From here we learn that the daily offering is brought even on Shabbat. Thus, the daily morning and afternoon offerings are brought on more than fifty *Shabbatot* over the course of the year, and two sheep are offered every Shabbat as additional offerings, for a total of more than two hundred sacrifices a year that override Shabbat. **Just as the expression "its appointed time," which is stated with regard to the daily offering, indicates that it overrides Shabbat, so too "its appointed time," which is stated with regard to the Paschal lamb, indicates that it overrides Shabbat.**

וְעוֹד, קָל וְחוֹמֵר הוּא: וּמֵה תִּמְדָּה שְׂאִין עֲנוּשׁ
 כְּרַת דּוֹחָה אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, פֶּסַח שְׂעֻנוֹשׁ כְּרַת –
 אֵינּוּ דִין שְׂדוּחָה אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת.

And furthermore, it is an *a fortiori* inference: If the daily offering, the neglect of which is not punishable by *karet*, overrides Shabbat, is it not right that the Paschal lamb, the neglect of which is punishable by *karet*, should override Shabbat?

מִדֵּי הוּ שִׁיבוּהוּ בְּרֹאשׁ וּמִיָּנֹחַ נְשִׂיא עֲלֵיהֶם,
 וְהָיָה דוֹרֵשׁ כָּל הַיּוֹם כִּי לֹא בְּהִלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח.
 הִתְחִיל מִקְנֵטוֹן בְּדַבְרֵיהֶם, אָמַר לָהֶן: מִי גָרַם
 לָכֶם שְׂאֵעֵלָה מִמִּבֶּל וְאֶהְיֶה נְשִׂיא עֲלֵיכֶם –
 עֲצוּלוֹת שְׂהִיתֶה בְּכֶם, שְׁלֹא שִׁמְשַׁתֶּם שְׁנֵי
 גְדוּלֵי הַדּוֹר שְׂמֻעָה וְאַבְטָלִיוֹן.

After Hillel brought these proofs, **they immediately seated him at the head and appointed him *Nasi* over them, and he expounded the laws of Passover that entire day.** In the course of his teaching, he began rebuking them [*mekanteran*] **them with words. He said to them: What caused this to happen to you, that I should come up from Babylonia and become *Nasi* over you? It was the laziness in you that you did not serve the two most eminent scholars of the generation living in Eretz Yisrael, Shemaya and Avtalyon.**

POINTS TO PONDER:

- Did the people turn to Hillel because of his reputation or because he knew the words of Shamaya and Avtalyon?
- What do you think prepared Hillel to be a leader and how is this relevant in our lives?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

The motivation to approach Hillel does not seem to be his wisdom but rather his connection to past leaders. We then see Hillel's own greatness when he reasons about the situation. He draws on the past, but can connect what he has learned to current issues in society. In each generation, we as Jews face this challenge – how we can appreciate the ancient wisdom of the Torah and find its eternal message for our contemporary lives.

NOTES I

הֲלִכְהָ – הֲלִכְהָ – This law was forgotten by the sons of Beteira – **וְהוּא נִשְׁכַּח מִבְּנֵי בֵּתַיְרָא**: The question is asked in the Jerusalem Talmud: How could they have forgotten this *halakha*, seeing that Passover eve occurs on Shabbat at least once every twenty years, or as it says there, once every two sabbatical cycles? The answer is given that their forgetfulness was caused by heaven in order to allow Hillel's rise to prominence. The author of the *Terumat HaDeshen* suggests that in those times, when the month was sanctified based on the testimony of witnesses to the new moon, it would have been possible for Passover eve not to occur on Shabbat for many years. An alternate explanation is that the court that had served previously had been dominated by Sadducees and was not proficient in *halakha*. Still other commentaries assert that their question was not whether or not the Paschal lamb should be offered on Shabbat, but whether or not it was necessary to perform the biblically prohibited labors that the offering involved in an unusual manner, such as two people slaughtering together. In this way, the violation of Shabbat law on the Torah level would be avoided. Their concern was the possibility that the Sages had made a rabbinic decree prohibiting the violation of the primary categories of labor even for the purpose of the Paschal lamb (Rabbi Elazar Moshe Horowitz).

יוֹתֵר – מוֹתֵר – **More than two hundred Paschal lambs** – Three versions of this statement are cited in the Jerusalem Talmud: The first reading is more than a hundred sacrifices, which includes only the daily offerings sacrificed on Shabbat. The second text is more than two hundred, indicating the daily offerings as well as the additional offerings of Shabbat. The third version, following the reading of the *Tosefta*, is more than three hundred, which also includes the additional offerings of Festivals and those of New Moons that occur on Shabbat.

NOTES II

A fortiori inference – קָל וְחוֹמֵר: One of the fundamental principles of rabbinic exegesis, the *a fortiori* inference appears in all of the standard lists of exegetical rules. In essence, it is a rule of logical argumentation by means of which a comparison is drawn between two cases, one lenient and the other stringent. It asserts that if the *halakha* is stringent in a case where we are usually lenient, then it will certainly be stringent in a more serious case; likewise, if the *halakha* is lenient in a case where we are usually not lenient, it will certainly be lenient in a less serious case. *A fortiori* argumentation is already found in the Bible, and lists of biblical verses containing *a fortiori* arguments are found in the Talmud. This is one of the most commonly encountered exegetical principles since *a fortiori* inferences can be drawn even without support from tradition, as opposed to the verbal analogy, for example. Sometimes, the Sages referred to *a fortiori* inferences as logical argumentation [*din*].

What caused this to happen to you, that I should come up from Babylonia – מִי גָרַם לָכֶם שְׂאֵעֵלָה מִמִּבֶּל: Based on the wording of the Gemara, some commentaries posited that Hillel the Elder returned to Babylonia after having studied intensively with Shemaya and Avtalyon, and he happened to make a pilgrimage from Babylonia that Passover (Maharsha; *Iyyei HaYam*).

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PERSONALITIES

בְּנֵי בֵּתַיְרָא – The sons of Beteira were the heads of a well-known family that produced prominent individuals even several generations after the destruction of the Temple. The sons of Beteira appear to have had a unique standing in the spiritual leadership of the nation over the course of several generations, despite the fact that they may never have enjoyed the formal status of *Nasi*. Even after the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai consulted with them before establishing an important *halakha*.

הֵילֵל – Hillel: Hillel, referred to as the Elder due to his position in the Sanhedrin, was born in Babylonia and lived in Jerusalem during the time of King Herod and the Roman Emperor Augustus, about a hundred years before the destruction of the Second Temple. He and his colleague Shammai were the last of the *zugot*, the pairs of *tanna'im* who played a role in establishing the Mishna.

Although Hillel and Shammai established two distinct schools, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, and their disciples were involved in many controversies, Hillel and Shammai themselves disagreed only with regard to three or four cases. The real difference between them was one of character. Hillel was a calm and gentle individual who avoided conflict whenever possible, whereas Shammai was stern and uncompromising. When approached by a potential convert whom Shammai had rejected because he wished to learn the entire Torah on one leg, Hillel offered him the maxim: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah, and the rest is its interpretation; go and learn.

According to tradition, Hillel arrived in Eretz Yisrael to study at age forty in a state of poverty, but his perseverance brought him to the attention of Shemaya and Avtalyon, the heads of the academy, who welcomed him into the study hall. Ultimately, serving those scholars allowed him to settle questions whose solutions were unknown to others, and he was appointed head of the Sanhedrin.

The Gemara compares Hillel to Ezra the Scribe, crediting him with reestablishing Torah at a period in history when it was being forgotten (*Sukka* 20a). His disciples were praised, as well. According to the Gemara, Hillel the Elder had eighty students: Thirty of them were worthy that the Divine Presence should rest upon them like Moses, thirty that the sun should stand still for them, as it did for Joshua the son of Nun, twenty were average, with the greatest among them Yonatan ben Uzziel and the least among them Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai (*Sukka* 28a).

IN TRIBUTE TO YONI JESNER Z"l



Yoni Jesner z"l was killed in a Tel Aviv bus terror attack in 2002. Amongst Yoni's belongings that were found on the bus, were two pages of A4 with his handwriting. These had been started in 1999 and the latest date on them was 13 July 2001. They are of Yoni's thoughts on life; very brief, but incredibly insightful for one so young. He was not writing them to show people, he was not writing them to impress. He was writing them for himself - to live by and to think about. ✕

Yoni's writings are available at www.yonijesner.org

Yoni wrote:

"Time reveals depths that we never knew existed."

Yoni z"l believed that time is an essential ingredient in our perspective on life. When we consider the past, it helps us to formulate our views for the present and our actions for the future. We hope that you will take the ideas in this Tribe and Bnei Akiva booklet on your journey.



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