



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שלח תש"ע 5770 *Parshas Shelach*

### DOWN THE TUBES

This week's *parshah* relates the tragic episode of the *Meraglim* (spies), who had scouted out Eretz Yisrael prior to the Jews' imminent arrival there. Their defamation against the Land turned the people against Moshe Rabbeinu and greatly aroused Divine anger. Consequently, they were denied entry to the Land, and had to wander the desert for forty years.

After completing this narrative, the Torah seems to suddenly shift gears. It launches right away into the details of sacrificial laws, centering on the topic of the libations (liquid offerings). What could be the association between these neighboring, yet seemingly disparate sections of the *parshah*?

We may be able to gain an insight by turning to a fascinating account of an incident related to the libation offerings. The story is based on a statement in the Mishnah in Succah (4:5), which describes a certain feature of the Beis Hamikdash:

חמש עשרה מעלות היוֹרדות מעֹזרת ישׂרָאֵל לְעֹזרת נְשִׁים,  
כִּנְגַד חֲמֵשֶׁה עָשָׂר שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת שֶׁבַּתְּהֵלִים.

“There were fifteen steps that led from the (courtyard known as the) *Ezras Yisrael* down to the (courtyard known as the) *Ezras Nashim* (Women's Arena). These fifteen steps corresponded to the fifteen chapters of Tehillim, which all begin with the heading of ‘*Shir Hama'alos* (Song of Ascents, or Steps).”

### WHAT GOES DOWN MUST COME UP

The Gemara in Succah (53a) records the incident that prompted the recitation of the *Shir Hama'alos*. It occurred while Dovid Hamelech (King David) was excavating the *shisin*, hollowed-out conduits through which the

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libations flowed after being poured on the *Mizbe'ach* (sacrificial altar). The Gemara states (*Ibid. 49a*) that they extended down to the very depths of the earth. Apparently, tinkering with the depths had the effect of stirring up the water table of the deep, which surged upward and threatened to engulf the entire world.

Now, Dovid Hamelech knew of a method to contain the threatening upsurge: through the use of Hashem's Holy Name. By tossing a piece of clay bearing the Name of Hashem into the stream, the waters would recede. The snag in this plan was that it entailed a grave transgression: dissolving Hashem's Name. With time running out, Dovid was unsure of how to proceed.

His famously ingenious advisor Achitophel ruled that this method was permissible. He based his ruling on a precedent in the Torah: the case of the *Sotah*, the wayward wife, whose conduct has aroused suspicion. Until her innocence is established, she must remain separated from her husband. The laws of the *Sotah* are delineated in *parshas* Nasso. One element of the process of clarifying her status entails dissolving a scroll – which contains the Name of Hashem – in water.

And so Achitophel deduced the following: In order to restore harmony between man and wife, the Torah permitted the erasure of Hashem's Name. Surely, then, in the instance at hand – which affected the state of harmony between Hashem and the entire world – it would likewise be permitted to erase Hashem's Name. Dovid accepted Achitophel's ruling and cast the clay upon the waters.

The effort was successful – too successful, in fact. The waters receded so deeply that a new concern was raised. With the water table so far beneath the surface at this point (the waters rested at 16,000 cubits below

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the earth's surface), the soil now lacked sufficient moisture, which would adversely affect the crops.

To remedy the situation Dovid recited the "Songs of Ascents" in order to now bring the waters up to the proper level. He recited *fifteen* of them, which brought the waters up by *fifteen* thousand cubits to their final resting place of one thousand cubits beneath the surface. This was the perfect level: far enough below so as not to present a flood-danger, yet close enough to the soil to provide sufficient saturation.

### PEACEFUL RESOLUTION

Commenting on this episode, the Ben Ish Chai (*Ben Yehoyada, Succah 53a*) makes a pointed observation regarding the language used by Achitophel. When explaining his rationale, Achitophel referred to the prospect of containing the surging waters as "restoring peace between Hashem and the world." This characterization seems puzzling. Why refer to it as such? Wasn't there a much more obvious and pressing need than merely restoring peace, namely,

"saving the world from destruction"? Why emphasize the "harmony" aspect of the situation?

The Ben Ish Chai's answer is quite illuminating. He suggests that, in reality, an erasure of Hashem's Name was not really necessary to "save the world," for there was another option that would both calm the waters *and* prevent deletion of the Name: simply writing the Name on the top side of the clay! In this way, only the underside would be subject to the corrosive force of the surging waters!

The issue with this approach, however, is that it solves one problem while giving rise to another. True, the waters would recede with the Name facing toward the surface and not toward the waters underneath. However, as mentioned, the libations were poured down the *shisin*; the liquid from these would then land on the upward-pointing Name of Hashem. In other words, now the libations would cause Hashem's Name to be erased!

This, in fact, was the intent of Achitophel's phraseology. "Saving the world" was not the real issue, as that could be accomplished *without* erasing Hashem's Name. It was only necessary to erase Hashem's Name in order to perform the libations, which was sanctioned on the grounds of "restoring harmony between Hashem and His world."

This could also explain the connection between the libations and the story of the Meraglim. The commentators (*cf. Ramban, Rabbeinu Bechaye*) explain that Hashem intended to send a comforting message to B'nei Yisrael by focusing on the laws of libations at this point. As this ritual is only applicable in Eretz Yisrael, Hashem was in effect announcing that eventually there would be Jewish people entering the Land.

Based on the episode of Dovid and the *shisin*, there could be an added element to this message as well. Emerging from the Ben Ish Chai's explanation is the fact that the libations are key to the restoration of harmony. This idea was particularly appropriate at this time; Hashem was indicating that – despite B'nei Yisrael's downfall – a large measure of harmony between Hashem and His people was restored.

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