



### Like a Sapphire Brick

*By Rabbi Chanan Strassman (05)*

While Parashat Mishpatim contains many Mitzvot, there is also a significant narrative section at the end. The Torah records that Moshe, Aharon, and the seventy elders ascended toward Har Sinai, and astonishingly, the text describes that they were able to look directly at God. “VaYiru Eit Elohei Yisrael, VeTachat Raglav KeMa’asei Livnat HaSapir”, “They saw the God of Israel, and under His feet was the likeness of a sapphire brick” (Shemot, 24:10). Of all the possible detail from God’s heavenly abode, why did this sapphire brick merit particular mention? Why was it important for this group of Jews to encounter the divine presence in this way?

According to Rashi, this sapphire brick served a special purpose. During their years of slavery in Mitzrayim, the Jews were forced to manufacture bricks and build with them as part of their labor. In fact, Paroh devised a plan to increase their workload by withholding the straw they needed for production while demanding that they continue to meet each day’s quota of bricks (Shemot, 5:6-8). Says Rashi, their anguish did not go unnoticed. As Klal Yisrael toiled over their bricks, HaKadosh Baruch Hu kept one for Himself as a reminder of their pain. (Rashi, Shemot 24:10) When Moshe, Aharon, and the seventy elders saw this brick, perhaps it was a sign that they had not suffered alone.

It is curious, though, that Hashem used a sapphire brick to reflect the experience of slavery. A precious gem sparkling at the foot of the Kisei HaKavod seems rather far removed from forced labor with crude mortar bricks. Furthermore, Rabbeinu Bechaye cites the Midrash Tanchuma in identifying the seventy elders as the Jewish foremen appointed by the Egyptians to oversee their brethren during slavery. These men were intimately familiar with bricks, after having crafted them by hand and enduring harsh beatings on their account. Are we to believe they could gaze at a pristine sapphire glittering from above and recognize it as a fitting homage to their years of unbearable torment?

While Rashi spoke to the sapphire brick’s significance, Chizkuni shared Rebbi Akiva’s theory regarding its tragic origin story. Without exaggeration, Bnei Yisrael toiled over their bricks with blood, sweat, and tears. Scouring the fields for straw was a grueling task, and the Jews would often sustain cuts and bruises to the extent that their blood mixed into the mortar itself. Along these lines, Chizkuni maintains that the strain and physical exertion from such arduous work caused one pregnant Jewish mother to give birth prematurely. Sadly, the fetus tumbled into the mortar, and this mother cried bitterly over her loss. Her lament shook the heavens until the angel Micha’el came down to retrieve the batch of mortar, and upon his return to Shamayim he fashioned it into a brick for Hashem to keep as a reminder of the pain His children suffered. In Hebrew, the word “Sapir,” meaning sapphire, is similar to the word “Shefir,” meaning placenta. Thus, in a Midrashic play on words, Chizkuni suggests that Hashem’s special “Livnat HaSapir” refers to this brick fashioned from the very lifeblood of a Jewish mother. (Chizkuni, Shemot 24:10) Following this approach, it is indeed plausible that the Jews could relate their harrowing experience in Egypt with Hashem’s brick in Shamayim.

Of course, the Torah described a sapphire brick, not a placenta-brick, so Chizkuni’s theory might be hard to accept on a literal level. Yet, his insight is arguably worth consideration from a thematic standpoint because this narrative demonstrates how the Ribono Shel Olam shared a parallel experience with the seventy elders. Hashem did more than simply commemorate their experience of slavery, rather He chose to join in it Himself. The scene from the Midrash depicted a divine Foreman overseeing His servant collecting mortar to fashion a brick. Clearly it was more than a fancy keepsake, and maybe even deeper than a sobering memorial stone. The Torah introduced this brick as “KiMa’aseh,” “the likeness of,” yet another meaning for “Ma’aseh” is an “action” or “event”. A brick hewn from the blood of God’s children can certainly tell a story on its own, though perhaps Hashem intended for us to know that He played an active role in that story.

Furthermore, one could suggest that Hashem's empathy can explain the Torah's emphasis on a Sapir (sapphire) brick, as opposed to the alternative Shefir (placenta) brick. Chizkuni concluded his remarks with the line, "Peirush Liveinah SheNa'Aseit MeiShefir HaYoledet," "Meaning, a brick that was fashioned from the Shefir of a mother giving birth." While "Shefir" is the word for "placenta," the root "Shin-Pey-Reish" also means "good," "pleasing," or "beauty." A rather telling example would be how this Shoresh is employed as a term for beautifying Jewish infants in Egypt, when the midwife called "Shifra" earned her name by cleaning the Jewish babies at birth (Rashi, Shemot 1:15). So, another way to interpret the language of Rabbi Akiva's Aggadah would be to say the Liveinah resulted from beautifying or cleansing the Yoledet. After all, Chazal do compare the suffering of Am Yisrael to the pain of a Yoledet, and here Hashem demonstrated that He shares in our suffering. In a way, His empathy may have cleansed the Jews from some of their pain. Joining with Am Yisrael in this experience could very well have been His way to beautify the Yoledet. When the elders saw Hashem's brick and felt comforted by His message of empathy, it's possible that the Shefir gave way to the Sapir. In order to truly reflect the totality of their experience at that moment, the brick glowed like a sapphire.

We cannot claim to know for certain what the elders saw, though it is comforting to know that Hashem shares in our struggles. Indeed the elders suffered, but they did not suffer alone. This change in perspective can make a world of difference, turning a brick into sapphire.

## Stop and Smell the Ketoret

*By Ariel Kryzman ('23)*

*Adapted from Rabbi Yamim Goldsmith's FMT series*

The last Pasuk from last week's Parashah, Parashat Yitro, tells of the prohibition of building stairs on the Mizbe'ach. The Pasuk states that there should not be stairs ascending the Mizbe'ach "*Asher Lo Tigaleh Eivatcha Alav,*" "so that your nakedness should not be exposed to it" (Shemot 20:23).

The first Pasuk of this week's Parashah, Parashat Mishpatim, says, "*Ve'Eileh HaMishpatim Asher Tasim Lifneihem,*" "These are the laws that you should put before them" (Shemot 21:1). The Torah specifically places the Issur of building stairs on the Mizbe'ach next to the introduction of the laws. Why does the Torah juxtapose these two seemingly unrelated topics?

The Midrash Tanchuma comments that the Torah's reason for the Issur of building stairs on the Mizbe'ach is not to prevent the Kohein's nakedness from

facing the Mizbe'ach, as Kohanim wear pants as part of their Bigdei Kehunah. Rather, the Issur prevents Kohanim from walking with Pesiot Gasot, long and quick strides. The Midrash adds that this Pasuk is the proof for the requirement of judges to be deliberate in their judgments. Just as Kohanim shouldn't walk with quick strides in the Beit HaMikdash, so too judges shouldn't judge too quickly; instead, they should judge deliberately. What does this Midrash mean? What is so bad about Pesiot Gasot?

Rav Yehoshua Weitzman, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ma'alot, asks this exact question. Rav Weitzman says that to better understand the essence of Pesiot Gasot, one must first look at another place in which Pesiot Gasot is mentioned. The Gemara (Shabbat 113b) quotes Rabbi Yishmael saying that walking with Pesiot Gasot takes away one five hundredth of someone's vision. Rav Weitzman states that a judge should not judge a case with Pesiot Gasot because one must be attentive to be a good judge. A judge must be observant and not miss any details. If a judge walks with Pesiot Gasot, the judge may lose part of his vision and not be fully attentive to the case.

The same is true with Kohanim. Kohanim should work with Zerizut and enthusiasm. However, they should not rush through the Avodah with Pesiot Gasot. Kohanim must be attentive and focused on every part of the Avodah. If they walk with Pesiot Gasot, the Kohanim may lose part of their vision and miss details of the Avodah. They must make sure not to go too quickly; Instead, they must be observant and careful with every aspect of the Avodah.

The same is true with us, says Rav Weitzman. Although we should act with Zerizut and eagerness, that should not come at the expense of having to walk with Pesiot Gasot. We must be attentive and observant of the miracles that are happening around us. We may not walk with Pesiot Gasot so that we can be aware of all of the blessings that Hashem gave us.

## The Essence of an Ivri

*By Jacob Becker ('22)*

Parashat Mishpatim talks about so many different things. When one takes a glance at the many things brought up, he tends to overlook the deeper meanings. The Midrash in Shemot Rabbah emphasizes this, saying that in many of these "Mishpatim," "laws," there is a hidden deeper meaning which one can find. "Anochi Hashem Elokecha Asher Hotzeiticha Mei'Eretz Mitzrayim," "I am Hashem your God that took you out of Mitzrayim" (Shemot 20:2). In light of this, the Midrash

asks what the meaning of Shemot 21:2, a Pasuk describing the Eved Ivri and how he works for six years and is set free in the seventh. It is important to note, however, that the Midrash only quotes “Ki Tikneh Eved Ivri” when one acquires an Eved Ivri which is only part of the Pasuk. The Midrash goes on to say Hashem, by limiting the working period of the Eved Ivri to six years, said that just how I created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, so shall you do when it comes to an Eved Ivri. The Midrash then expounds on the connection between slavery and the Aseret HaDibrot.

The Midrash goes on to ask what is it that is written in proximity to this Pasuk? The Midrash then quotes a Pasuk regarding the Eved Ivri saying that if he entered his service unmarried, he leaves unmarried, and that if he entered with a wife, he leaves with his wife. The Pasuk then says that if the Eved Ivri’s master gives him a wife with whom he has children, then he goes free on his own. The Midrash says that the people of Bnei Yisrael would not enter such a low state unless they have transgressed the Torah’s commandments.

The Shem MiShmuel is bothered by this Midrash. He asks, “if we are connecting the Eved Ivri to the first of the Aseret HaDibrot, why did the Midrash only quote the first half of the Pasuk in context of the Ivri. If we are connecting it to “Anochi Hashem Elokecha Asher Hotzeiticha Mei’Eretz Mitzrayim MiBeit Avadim,” why didn’t the Midrash mention the second half of the Pasuk in which the Eved Ivri goes free after six years? Furthermore, what is the basis of the Midrash connecting the Eved Ivri’s six years of service to the six days of creation? Moreover, what does the Midrash mean when it says that Bnei Yisrael does not enter into such a state unless they have transgressed the commandments? Do we not already know the punishment is as a result of sin? We certainly do know, as he is sold for stealing! Why does the Midrash have to repeat this point?

Shem MiShmuel answers these questions with a wide ranging explanation from which we cull portions. He quotes his father, the Avnei Neizer, who explains why the Eved Ivri goes free after six years of service as follows: the “six” involved here represents the six dimensions of physicality (front, back, right, left, up, and down). “Seven” is different. “Seven” represents the inner core of spirituality. There are only six dimensions of a Jew’s material nature that can be enslaved. This seventh aspect should by nature be beyond the realm of enslavement. The six years of slavery serve to cleanse the impurities of the six dimensions of physicality. Once the cleansing is over, the inner core is free to dominate once more, which produces freedom and then “on the seventh he shall go free.”

By nature, Bnei Yisrael are inner directed. Their focus is on the inner core of true reality, not on externalities. This is why they’re assumed to keep secrets as the Gemara (Chullin 133b) says, but also why Moshe Rabbeinu was able to find gossipers among them. As mentioned above, the Pasuk here is dealing with a Ganav, who, as opposed to a Gazlan, is secretive as the Midrash Tanchuma says. Therefore, a Jewish thief takes his spiritual inner nature and perverts it to the service of the outer physical dimensions. As he has enslaved his inner core to sin, his master has the right to pair him with a Canaanite maidservant, whose children from him will have the status of Canaanite slaves. This is because children are the product of one’s inner core and the slave’s inner core has become locked in the chains of sin.

In truth though, the sin should not touch his inner core. How then, did the thief approach this state where the sin attacked his inner essence? This is only because “Aveirah Goreret Aveirah,” “Sin leads to sin” (Pirkei Avot 4:2). There is a downward spiral of sin. At first, one’s sins only come to affect their outer shell. As they continue on this path, however, the sin becomes impressed into the service of sin. That is how the thief came to misuse his inner core to encourage his sinful ways.

The inner core however, has only become “subserving” to sin. The core’s reality remains unchanged. Thus, once the six years of service are complete and the cleansing has taken place, then the inner core is freed from its enslavement and the inner light, which was once so bright, can shine yet again.

We can similarly understand our shortened time in Mitzrayim. Originally, we were supposed to be there for four hundred years in order to become purified. whereas we went free after two hundred ten years (Megillah 9a). What happened to the remaining one hundred ninety years of cleansing? The answer is that Bnei Yisrael’s inner core was never affected. It was only the outer core that needed to be purified. The inner core was lifted beyond reach when Hashem placed his name upon Bnei Yisrael and gave them the Torah. This relates to the Gemara (Yevamot 46a) which says that sanctification releases one from restraint making the additional purification of the externalities unnecessary. When Bnei Yisrael sins, however, the still contaminated externalities surround this inner core and we become subject to “Shi’abud Malchut,” “subjugation of the nations”, an expression of the one hundred ninety years in Mitzrayim that were never completed.

A similar concept underlies the relationship between the six days of creation and Shabbos. The six days of creation were a progressive movement of spiritual essence to physical expression with the attendant ascendancy of the outer physical dimension of

the universe. Shabbos, however, marks the return to the inner core of reality and its dominance, and with it a release from the shackles of spirituality.

We can now resolve that which bothered the Shem MiShmuel. The Midrash is saying that the first commandment serves to explain what it says regarding the Eved Ivri. The Midrash comes to answer why the Torah speaks in terms of acquiring an “Eved Ivri, a “Hebrew slave”. Why at the time of the purchase is the Hebrew not yet a slave? Shouldn’t the Pasuk have said “if you acquire a Hebrew to be a slave?” To this the Midrash answers that the many laws of our passage derive from the first commandment. The entire nation should by rights have still been slaves, were it not for Hashem placing his name on them, making their Kedushah lift them beyond slavery’s shackles. Our thief though, who through sin blemished his inner core and placed it once more in the shackles of externalities, has fallen from that exalted level to that initial level of slavery which he and his nation were never cleansed from. Thus, at the time of his purchase he is indeed already a Hebrew slave.

The Midrash then draws a parallel between Hashem creating the world in six days and the Eved Ivri going free after six years, for just as the world returned to its inner core of spirituality after the six days of physicality, so too does the Eved Ivri return to his inner essence after six years of work as we have explained.

When the Midrash says that Bnei Yisrael has not reached that state unless they have “transgressed the commandments,” it means to explain how the Hebrew slave reached this state of his inner core mindless state of externalities. One does not stoop that low just from transgressing one commandment. It is only because he “transgressed the commandments” time and time again until he impressed his inner core into the service of sin. We all have our ups and downs. Sometimes we transgress commandments, but we bounce back. We need to realize that there is this seventh day that is coming for us. All we have to do is be careful because one Aveirah leads to another. How do we do that though?

What many do not realize, however, is that when it comes to Mitzvot, the same applies. Sometimes all we have to do is remember and apply the full Mishnah which also says that “Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah,” “one mitzvah leads to another”.

## Discovering Extraordinary Jewish Talent in a Roman Prison

*By Rabbi Chaim Jachter*

The Gemara (Gittin 58a) presents an extraordinary story (William Davidson translation): There was an

incident involving Rabi Yehoshua ben Chananya who once went to the great city of Rome, where they said to him, there is a child in prison with beautiful eyes and an attractive appearance, and his curly hair is arranged in locks. Rabi Yehoshua went and stood by the entrance to the prison. He said, as if speaking to himself, “Mi Natan Limshisah Yaakov Ve’Yisrael LeVozezim,” “who gave Yaakov for a spoil, and Yisrael to the robbers?” (Yeshayahu 42:24). The child answered by reciting the continuation of the Pasuk: “Halo Hashem Zu Chatanu Lo VeLo Avu BiDerachav Haloch VeLo Shamu BeTorato,” “Did not Hashem, He against Whom we have sinned, and in Whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient to His law?”

In simple terms, Rabi Yehoshua tested the young lad, who was acclaimed for strikingly handsome features, to see if he knew a Pasuk in Yeshayahu which asks why our people have been degraded. The boy, without missing a beat, completed the Pasuk which assigns blame on our sins. Rabi Yehoshua was so impressed that he predicted greatness for this child and was willing to redeem the youngster at any price. The child emerged to be the great Rabi Yishma’el ben Elisha.

### Halachic Ramifications

Before we delve deeper into the story, let us note two Halachic points communicated by this story. Most prominently, although Halachah forbids ransoming captives for exorbitant prices unless captors are motivated thereby to grab others (Gittin 45a), in a case where the captured individual is of overwhelming importance to the Jewish community he may be redeemed (as noted by Tosafot ad. loc. s.v. Kol Mammon). Tosafot’s insight may justify the Israeli government’s releasing an outrageous amount of Palestinian criminals to obtain the release of a kidnapped Israeli soldier. Maintaining the morale of Israeli soldiers is of paramount importance to the extent it may warrant the shocking price.

The second insight is Rabi Yehoshua’s framing the boy’s great promise as an eventual “Moreh Hora’ah Bi’Yisrael”, or a Poseik (a Halachic decisor). Rabi Yehoshua regards one who renders Halachic decisions to be of the highest level of Torah achievement. Rabi Yehoshua’s view supports a point repeatedly stressed by both Rav Ovadia Yosef (e.g. in his introduction to the Yabia Omer) and his son Rav Yitzchak Yosef (many times in his work Yalkut Yosef) in their writings. While some (such as Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his *Ish Halacha*) extol delving deeply into the “Lomdus” (underlying Halachic logic) as the ideal of Torah learning, Rabi Yehoshua supports the idea that rendering practical Halachic decisions is the ultimate achievement for a Torah scholar.

### **A Practical Lesson**

On a practical note, the child is redeemed not because he begs for release or presents himself as being in greater need than others. He projects himself with confidence and proves his value to the community, thereby achieving redemption. This type of stance for someone in need is crucial for a wide variety of areas ranging from fundraising to dating for marriage to obtaining a raise at work. Posturing as pitiful and pathetic is most often not an effective means to move forward.

### **A Powerful Question**

Our story is deceptively simple. However, a powerful question is needed to unlock the deeper meanings of the story.

While it is impressive that the child was able to complete the Pasuk, how does this demonstrate that he is, in Tosafot's words, an extraordinary scholar? How does knowing one Pasuk indicate that he will eventually be a great Halachic authority?

### **Inclusion in the Community**

As a first step, the Pasuk (and the child's immediate response, indicating his internalizing its message) expresses inclusion in community. Although isolated in a Roman prison, the child states "Chatanu", "we have sinned," including himself in Am Yisrael (quite the opposite of the Ben Rasha of the Seder). The young lad is not self-centered. Instead, he sees himself as part of a much greater entity, Am Yisrael.

Moreover, by including himself in a Pasuk in Yeshayahu, written hundreds of years before his encounter with Rabi Yehoshua, the boy shows that he views himself not only as part of the Jews of his days, but rather as part of an even greater entity – the Jewish People of the present, past, and future. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik is fond of citing Ramban who refers to this great entity as "Kenesset Yisrael."

The critical importance of connecting with our people even of the distant past and far away future lies at the heart of the astounding Talmudic teaching that "Whoever mourns for Jerusalem will merit seeing its joy" (Ta'anit 30b). The Gemara states that the opposite is true as well. One who connects to the sorrowful episodes of our past is also part of the glorious moments in the future, even before they happen!

### **Taking Responsibility**

Moreover, by citing the Pasuk, the child assumes responsibility for his suffering. He does not blame the Romans and he does not cast himself as a victim. This stance represents the beginning of his redemption.

The boy's attitude contrasts sharply with other suffering groups who instead of assuming responsibility for their plight, cast the blame on others. This

disempowering attitude serves only to perpetuate their difficulties.

Rabi Yehoshua, living on the heels of Churban Bayit Sheini, recognized that the Jewish future depends on leaders who will promote the attitude of the young lad in a horrid Roman jail. Since he felt we needed such leadership so desperately, he was willing to pay any price to ransom this young man.

### **Recognizing the Bigger Picture – Hashem**

For the young lad, his evil Romans oppressors are irrelevant. Hashem is behind his suffering and the suffering of so many other Jews that share his plight.

### **A Road to the Redemption**

The boy's attitude is an empowering one. Since he is part of the cause of his suffering, he can partake in his redemption. Identifying the cause of his difficulty also sets forth its solution. The suffering can end when we commit to the Hashem and His Torah. Of course, this is the core message to communicate to our people.

### **How Did the Boy Know the Pasuk?**

The boy's ability to complete a Pasuk on-demand not only shows that before his capture he assiduously studied. It also proves that he continued to study while in captivity!

Torah must be constantly reviewed, otherwise, it is easily and very readily forgotten. Chazal state that "Im Ta'azveini Yom, Yomayim E'ezveka," "if one abandons the Torah for one day he distances himself from Torah for two days." The reason is that he was away for Torah for one day and the Torah was away from Torah for a day as well, bringing the total to two days!

Accordingly, how did this boy continue to learn Torah while in a horrid Roman prison? Chazal very rightfully refer to the Romans as the "Umah HaResha'ah", the evil nation. The Nazis, Yimach Shemam, looked to the Romans as role models of evil behavior. Thus, one can only imagine how horrible the conditions were for a Jewish captive in a Roman prison!

And yet the boy still could complete a Pasuk on a dime! How could he still do this? He assuredly did not have holy Sefarim from which to learn in the Roman jail. It must be that the boy was constantly reviewing the Torah in his head.

Moreover, the fact that a Pasuk that addresses his plight is foremost on his mind, as evidenced by his fluency in the Pasuk, shows he is keenly aware of this Pasuk and its powerful message.

### **How Did the Boy Maintain His Good Looks in Jail?**

Finally, we must ask how this Jewish youngster maintained his handsome appearance in a very nasty environment. He probably did not have an opportunity to bathe, and he likely was given little to eat. The fact that he looked so good in the Roman jail was so striking that

people called this very surprising phenomenon to the attention of the great Rabi Yehoshua.

The boy's good looks, I suggest, stems from his positive attitude. While his external environment was deplorable, his inner environment, namely his mindset, was positive and happy. On the outside, he was a wretched prisoner in a Roman jail, but on the inside, he was an aspiring Torah student regardless of his environment. Such is the stuff of greatness.

### **Conclusion**

Two of the greatest leaders two generations after the Churban were not candidates to be voted as "most likely to succeed" by their peers. Nonetheless, the extraordinary talent of Rabi Yishma'el was discerned and discovered by Rabi Yehoshua, just as Rachel, the wife of Rabi Akiva, realized the potential for her husband's greatness.

Although each of us is unlikely to rise to the level of Rabi Yishma'el, we can still achieve our own level of greatness by embracing the attitude exemplified by Rabi Yishma'el as a child in a Roman prison.

By digging deep and discovering the extraordinary quality of this story, we have unlocked the very essence of our people: a great nation that has preserved and thrived even in the most difficult of situations.

### **Postscript**

Many have noted that it seems very unusual for Rabi Yishma'el to carry the name of a less than wholesome character from Sefer BeReishit. However, based on our story, my son Binyamin notes that the name fits perfectly. Yishma'el of Bereishit Perek 21 emerges from a near-death experience and develops into a nation great in numbers, as a result of crying out to Hashem. Rabi Yishma'el, in turn, elevates himself from the depths to a great leader of our people, by his complete allegiance and fidelity to Hashem and His Torah even in the darkest of times. Therein lies the secret of the eternal vitality of our people.

**Editors-In-Chief:** Ezra Lebowitz and Aidan Samet  
**Publication Editors:** Chanan Schreiber, Kivi Davis, Ariel Kryzman, Micah Cyrulnik, and Azarya Tiger  
**Layout:** Kivi Davis  
**Communications:** Anna Rubin  
**Rabbinic Advisor:** Rabbi Chaim Jachter  
Questions, comments? Contact us at:  
Phone: (201) 837-7696  
[webmasters@koltorah.org](mailto:webmasters@koltorah.org)