

# **BROOKLYN TORAH GAZETTE**

## **FOR PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI 5779**

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## **Save the Planet, Don't Cremate, Says this Jewish Cemetery**

**By Ben Sales**



**Rabbi Jay Lyons, founder of the South Florida Jewish Cemetery, wants to persuade local Jews to choose traditional burial as opposed to cremation. (Ben Sales)**

LAKE WORTH, Fla. (JTA) — When Rabbi Jay Lyons prepares a dead body for burial, it feels like he's in synagogue on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Lyons, along with other Jews charged with caring for the dead, will first strip the body of its clothes. The entire body is then bathed and wrapped in white shrouds. It's watched over, uninterrupted, until burial.

In Jewish tradition, the white garment is meant to mimic the dress of the Jewish High Priest on Yom Kippur when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Just like Jews on the Day of Atonement, Lyons said, the departed are about to present themselves before their creator.

"The soul is about to go on this amazing final journey and basically have its final day of atonement," he said in an interview at the new Jewish cemetery he founded here this year. "We're very much aware of the fact that the body and soul are partners for life. The body is now useless, but in reality the soul isn't just going to move on and cast it aside. The soul needs the body to be taken care of properly, even after death."

That's the idea behind Lyons' new venture, the South Florida Jewish Cemetery in Palm Beach County, which he advertises as both trendy and radically traditional: In an age when a majority of Americans opt for cremation, he is asking Jews to bury their dead the way Jewish tradition has commanded for millennia. But Jewish burial, he's quick to add, is also green burial — a selling point for families who may not be religious but care about reducing their carbon footprint in death as in life.

"From the environmental point of view, you're preserving the land, you're taking what could have been used for a crematorium and ensuring that it's going to be a grassy, tree-filled place," said Lyons, 40. "There are plenty of Jews out there who are more concerned about the environment than about Jewish tradition."

As of 2017, a majority of people in the United States and Canada cremate their dead — up from around 28 percent in 2002, according to the Cremation Association of North America. But advocates of natural burial are also pointing to cremation's environmental impact. One cremation releases more than 800 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and uses as much energy as a 500-mile car trip, according to the Natural Death Centre, a British charity that advocates green burial.

Hillside Memorial Park, a Jewish cemetery in Los Angeles, offers a green burial option in which no toxic or non-biodegradable materials or chemicals are used in preparing the body or casket. Options include an "eco-friendly" woven willow casket lined with natural unbleached cotton.

West View Cemetery in Pittsburgh, associated with Rodef Shalom Congregation, has set aside an area for burials that comply with current standards for minimal environmental impact.

The Green Burial Council in Placerville, California, offers certification programs for burial grounds, funeral homes and products.

“You’re seeing a lot more interest, especially among the baby boomer generation, in returning to the earth as naturally as possible,” said Gail Rubin, a funeral planning expert in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “And the funeral industry is seeing that as an opportunity to save their business model because they don’t make as much money with cremation.”

Despite the Jewish religious taboo on cremation, more Jews appear to be opting for cremation, too. A cemetery manager and funeral director in South Florida agreed that they’ve seen local Jewish cremation rates grow to about 15 percent of all services from as little as 2 percent in the 1970s.

Jews and others choose cremation because it’s much cheaper than traditional burial, said Laurie Dockler, general manager of Menorah Gardens & Funeral Chapels, northwest of Miami. She estimated that cremations cost \$5,000 to \$10,000, as opposed to \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a traditional burial.

Lyons’ cemetery is hoping to compete with cremation on cost as well as values. Lyons charges \$3,600 for the plot and burial, not including a monument, which can cost anywhere from \$800 to a bit more than \$4,000.

The cemetery is a project of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha, which provides resources to Jewish burial societies and advocates traditional Jewish burial. Lyons is trying to keep the costs low by operating as a nonprofit with \$4.5 million of startup costs and an annual budget of \$1 million, which comes mostly from Orthodox donors in the area and across the country. The cemetery has eight employees.

By keeping the entire process natural, the cemetery limits its emissions. Graves are dug by hand, and the monuments are small enough (a plain gray tombstone about 3 feet high) that they can be carried by hand truck. Bodies are not embalmed, per Jewish tradition, and are buried in plain wooden coffins without concrete vaults, such that everything is biodegradable.

While the cemetery looks like an empty green field, Lyons plans to pave paths for golf carts for those who need assistance reaching graves. His staff has buried 32 people to date and reserved some 160 plots. In total, the 15-acre cemetery can hold about 15,000 plots. On a weekday earlier this year, a team of four Jewish men in T-shirts and jeans prepared a plot for burial the next day with no machinery in sight.

“We basically say, forget about the concrete box, forget about the 10-ton claw,” Lyons said. “We’ll dig by hand. It takes a little longer, not much, but it’s a nicer way of doing it. We’re doing everything by hand, everything very lovingly.” A longtime local funeral director, Keith Kronish, said that the South Florida Jewish Cemetery is making traditional burial affordable for observant Jewish families. But

he does not expect it to put other local Jewish cemeteries, which allow for both interment and cremation, out of business.

“There are always people that want the palatial appearance that other cemeteries can provide — they like the bling,” said Kronish, who runs Kronish Funeral Services in Boca Raton. “What the South Florida Jewish Cemetery is doing is saying, ‘Here’s an alternative.’ A lot of people like that.”

Rubin likewise does not expect Lyons’ take on traditional Jewish burial in and of itself to have mass appeal for American Jews, who are largely not Orthodox and often live in a different city than their parents.

“We’re losing the meaning behind the ritual and the benefits of it,” said Rubin, who is not Orthodox and volunteers with her local chevra kadisha, or burial society. “I don’t know how many people are going to drop everything, get on a plane and take advantage of this traditional burial if you’re not Orthodox. I don’t know how many people are going to want to play by those rules.”

*This article is sponsored by UJA-Federation of NY, to raise awareness and facilitate conversations about end of life care in a Jewish context. The story was produced independently and at the sole discretion of JTA’s editorial team.*

*Reprinted from the Parshat Behar 5779 email of AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) Update from the May 14, 2019 dispatch of the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency.)*

## Rav Avigdor Miller On Sefiras Ha’omer

QUESTION: What is the reason for the mitzvah of sefiras ha'omer and what is the lesson we should be taking from the mitzvah?

ANSWER: Well, *sefiras ha'omer* is a *mitzvah di'oraisah* and therefore I wouldn't say that I know the reason. But I can tell you one of the things that we can learn from it.

We don't count how many days it is until *matan Torah*. That's how we should do it. Fifty days till *matan Torah*. Forty-nine days till *matan Torah*. Forty-eight days till *matan Torah*. Forty-seven days. Less and less. But no, we don't do that. We're counting from the *omer*. One day from the *omer*. Two days from the *omer*. Three days from the *omer*. We count up, from the *omer*, until we get to Shavuos.

Why do we do that? Why don't we count how many days are left until the great event of *matan Torah*? That's what we're looking forward to, isn't it?



**Rabbi Avigor Miller, zt"l**

The answer is that we're looking backwards. We're looking backwards at the *korban omer*. What is the *omer* saying? The *omer* tells us that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is giving us food. הֵזַן וּמִפְרָנס לְכָל. He feeds the whole world. That's the greatest of all things that He does in the world.

We say that קִשָּׁה מְזוֹנוֹתָיו שֶׁל אָדָם כְּקָרִיעַת יָם סוּף - "The food of a person is as difficult as the splitting of the Yam Suf." Now, for who is it *kasheh*, for who is it hard? People are making a living. Look, you're making a living. You're making a living, but you still can't do *kriyas Yam Suf*. So what it means, is that it is *kasheh* for Hashem. For Hashem, it is more of a *neis* to produce food than to do any other thing.

That's why, after all the other praises, after all the other *nissim* are mentioned: גִּזְרָה יָם סוּף לְגִזְרֵים כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ and so on, He drowned Pharaoh in the Yam Suf and we say כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ. The Bnei Yisroel passed through the sea, כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ, He led us through the wilderness, כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ. We go through a long list of *nissim* and then the last one, the grand finale is לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ: נוֹתֵן לֶחֶם לְכָל בֶּשָׂר כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ.

You, Hashem, give food to all the living. That's the biggest *neis* of all. That's the climax! Because food is the biggest of all *nissim* that we see. Hakodosh Boruch Hu is הֵזַן וּמִפְרָנס לְכָל the whole world! The Italians are eating sausages. The Irish are eating potatoes. The Americans are eating everything. The Jews are eating, *l'havdil*, whatever they eat. The whole world is eating. And birds are eating. And fish are eating. נוֹתֵן לֶחֶם לְכָל בֶּשָׂר כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדוֹ.



And therefore, how great is the opportunity of thanking Hashem for the food! And, the *korban ha'omer* is *hakaras ha'tov* for the food. So you say, "Hashem, You gave us food one day." "Now, two days you're giving us food." "Now, it's three days and you're still giving us food." Four days food, five days food. You're giving us food one day after the next.

We're so happy that you're feeding us, and if that's the case, we're going to thank You by accepting the Torah at the end of those forty-nine days, with a *leiv shalem*. Out of gratitude to you, because you're זן ומפרנס לכל, that's why we're going to accept your Torah with *simcha* and gratitude."

And that's why even though some people say that *birchas hatorah* is not *di'oraisah*, but everyone agrees that *birchas hamazon* is *di'oraisah*. Everyone says that. Because it's so important to thank Hashem for food! And even if both are *di'oraisah*, but the food is so important.

All day long, wherever you go, you see the miracle of food. You see the *yad Hashem* everywhere. When you pass by an Italian delicatessen and the Italians are eating their sausages, you look at them eating and you should praise Hashem. Say "נותן לחם לכל בשר כי לעולם חסדו." Hashem is feeding the whole world all the time!

And if there is no *kemach*, there is no Torah. If you don't feel a tangible *hakaras hatov* for the food that Hashem gives you, then you won't really be accepting the Torah.

And therefore, the *lechem* that we celebrate at the *omer* gives us such an intense feeling of gratitude to Hashem. We're so involved in the happiness and in the *hakaras hatov* of what He does for us - He feeds us! Every day! Every day! Every day! We're counting the days, one day at a time, of Hashem feeding us.

We're so full of happiness and gratitude that when it comes to Shavuos, we are ready to accept the Torah with a full heart, with a *leiv shalem*. Now we're ready for *kabolas Hatorah*!

From: Toras Avigdor [<mailto:info@torasavigdor.org>] Sent: Tuesday, April 30, 2019 6:30 AM Subject: Eating your way to Matan Torah

*Reprinted from the April 30, 2019 email of Toras Avigdor (Tape #E-185 – April 1999).*

The Shmuz on Parshas Bechukosai

# If You Will Labor In Torah Study

By Rabbi Bentzion Shafier  
Founder of TheShmuz.com



*“If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them. . .” — VaYikrah 26:2*

The Torah lays out two divergent destinies for the Jewish people: “If you will go in the ways of my statutes. . . I will give you rainfall in its time, the land will give forth with abundance, the trees of the field will produce fruit...you will eat until you are satisfied. . . There will be peace in land...”

However, “if you do **not** guard my statutes . . . you will suffer diseases and famine. . . you will plant and not harvest. . . your enemies will chase you. . . the skies will turn to iron. . . wild animals will attack . . . [and finally,] an avenging sword will come into the land.”

Rashi explains that the pivotal point of these two paths is: **If you will labor in Torah**. If you will labor in Torah, then you as a nation will find great success. Your enemies will fear you, and you will rise ever higher. If, however, you cease to labor in Torah study, then curses will befall you. In short, our success or failure as a nation hinges upon this one activity.

However, as Rashi also points out, this concept of **laboring in Torah study** is not found in the posuk. The words are, “If you will go in the ways of my statutes.” Nowhere does it specify what this refers to. Rashi explains that it cannot refer to keeping the mitzvahs because that is specifically mentioned at the end of

the posuk. So by process of elimination, he reasons that this must be referring to laboring in Torah study.

This Rashi is difficult to understand. There seems to be no indication of the concept in the posuk. Granted, learning Torah is very significant, and we may know from other sources that laboring in Torah study is central to serving HASHEM, but there doesn't seem to be any indication **here** that this statement is speaking about laboring in Torah study. How does Rashi know that this statement of "If you will go in the ways of my statutes," refers to laboring in Torah study, as opposed to any other mitzvah?

### **The Inner Workings of the Human**

The answer to this question stems from understanding the inner nature of man. The Chovos Ha'Levovos (Shaar Avodas Elokim) explains that HASHEM created man from two very distinct elements. Part of man is pure intellect and wisdom. This part of the person only wishes to do that which is noble and proper. It desires to be generous and giving. It needs to do that which is good and right. This part deeply hungers to experience HASHEM. Chazal call this segment the "Nefesh Ha'Sichili" – the pure soul.

However, there is another component of the human personality that is pure instinct and desire. That part of the individual doesn't care about anything but fulfilling its needs and wants. It is comprised of base appetites and inclinations. This is referred to as the "Nefesh Ha'Bahami" – the animal soul.

### **The Human is in a Constant State of Flux**

When HASHEM created man, He took these two diverse segments and mixed them together, creating a new synthesis called man. Man has two competing sides to him, each one crying out to fulfill its needs, each one demanding its fill. These two elements are in competition for dominance of the person. Much like a muscle that grows stronger with use and atrophies with disuse, each side is constantly being strengthened or weakened.

If a person gives in to his animal instincts, those instincts become stronger and more dominant. If a person listens to his spiritual soul, it becomes stronger, gaining primacy over his personality. The human is in constant flux, with one side or the other always growing, always gaining supremacy and control over the person.

Man was put on this planet to grow. By resisting the pull of the animal soul and allowing the pure soul to flourish, man elevates himself and reaches the state of perfection of which he is capable. On the other hand, if he gives in to the cries of the animal soul, he elevates it, allowing it to take control of him. His appetites



become stronger and dominate him until they effectively rule over him. He becomes more animal than man.

### **The Torah: the Ultimate Guide for Self-Perfection**

The Torah, which is the ultimate guide of human perfection, warns us against certain activities that give an unusual advantage to the Nefesh Ha'Bahami. These are the sins as outlined in the Torah. We are cautioned to avoid certain foods, and we are warned against certain activities because they give an unfair edge to the animal soul.

However, any activity that a person engages in strengthens one side or the other. When a person eats, sleeps, works, or goes about all of his daily activities, these physical actions strengthen the Nefesh Ha'Bahami. In a sense, there is an unfair lead given to the animal soul. All day long it is in its element, and by being utilized, it is thereby strengthened.

To bring balance to the equation, HASHEM gave us specific mitzvos to nourish the Nefesh Ha'Sichili. The single greatest nutrient of the nishomah is learning Torah. For the nishomah, Torah is like rocket fuel. When a person learns Torah, his nishomah is strengthened and invigorated. It becomes fortified and then takes the lead in the battle against the Nefesh Ha'Bahami. However, without it, the nishomah doesn't stand a fighting chance because the animal soul is so much more in its element in this world.

This seems to be the answer to Rashi. Since this expression, "If you will go in the ways of my statutes" is the pivotal point of the Jewish people's destiny, it must be referring to that element that is the key to the equation: **laboring in Torah study**. Therefore, Rashi points this out almost as the translation of the words.

There is a great lesson for us in this concept. The Jewish people is never stagnant. We are either going up towards great heights or down to the lowest abyss. The single greatest nourishment for the soul of the individual, and therefore for the soul of the nation, is laboring in Torah study. If we engage in it, support it, and actively pursue it, we will flourish as a people and enjoy unparalleled success. If not...

*Reprinted from this week's website on TheShmuz.com This is an excerpt from the Shmuz on the Parsha book.*

# **The Jew's Obligation to Study The Torah Based Not on Our Logic but Acceptance of G-d's Will**

**From the Talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe  
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt"l**



"If you will walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments....," begins this week's Torah portion, Bechukotai.

In general, the Hebrew word for statutes, *chukim*, refers to the 613 commandments of the Torah. Yet in this instance, *chukim* cannot be synonymous with *mitzvot*, as the second half of the verse specifically enjoins us to keep G-d's commandments.

Our Sages therefore concluded that this verse contains a distinct commandment to "labor in our acquisition of Torah knowledge.

*Chukim* are those *mitzvot* that are above human understanding, such as the commandment of the red heifer.

Why then would a word implying blind acceptance of the yoke of heaven be utilized when commanding us to use our intellectual capacities?

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Chasidut, explained that the word "*chukim*" is related to the word "*chakika*," meaning engraving.

There are many ways to write, but the most permanent method is when the letters are actually engraved on an object.

Moreover, engraving achieves the highest level of unity between the letters and the material upon which they are inscribed.

A letter written with ink can later be erased; furthermore, the ink and the parchment or paper remain two separate, distinct entities.

By contrast, letters that are inscribed in stone can never be erased, and become an integral part of the stone itself.

From this we learn the proper approach to studying Torah:

Rather than two separate entities that can be split asunder, G-d forbid, the Torah is inscribed upon the soul of every Jew and is an integral part of his essence. In fact, the Jew's objective is to perceive this truth in his daily life.

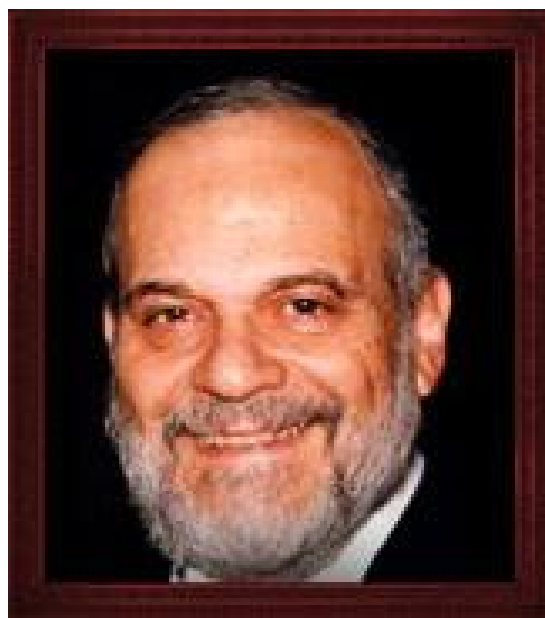
But how can such a degree of unification be achieved? "If you walk in My statutes," the Torah responds. The Jew must labor to understand G-d's Divine knowledge with the simultaneous understanding that mitzvot are, nevertheless, chukim -- beyond human logic and rationale.

Although we are commanded to study the Torah with our intellectual capacities and not to rely on simple faith alone, our learning must ultimately be based on the acceptance of G-d's will, something that transcends comprehension. An additional aspect of the relationship between the Jew and Torah is expressed in the words "If you will walk."

A Jew must never be satisfied with his previous learning and spiritual attainments, but must always strive ever higher, ascending "from strength to strength." For that which was accepted yesterday purely out of faith is today fully comprehended, bringing our faith in G-d to even higher levels.

*Reprinted from the Parashat Bechukosai 5755/1995 edition of L'Chaim Weekly (Issue #263), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

# Rabbi Berel Wein on Parashat Bechukosai



The final portion of this third book of the Torah contains an ominous tone. This is because of the vivid description of evil events that will befall the Jewish people when they desert their G-dly mission and sink to the level of the societies that surround and outnumber them. The Torah promises us that such behavior and attitudes will surely lead to disaster, exile and persecution from the very societies that the Jews try to emulate.

All Jewish history bears testimony to the accuracy of the words that exist in this week's portion of the Torah. And the way the Torah presents these events, which will occur in the future, is not in the necessary framework of punishment but rather in the inevitable picture of events that inexorably lead to consequences.

It is not G-d Himself, so to speak, that is punishing the Jewish people but rather it is the Jewish people itself that is doing the punishing. This is a logical and even an evitable result of past behavior and misguided attitudes and beliefs. This is a very important lesson for Jews to understand.

Behavior, speech, attitudes and beliefs always have consequences in the real world in which we live. They are not to be taken lightly and not to be shrugged off as just being examples of the fallible nature of human beings. We are not allowed to dig a hole under our seat in the boat. The words of the prophet Jeremiah ring

true today as they did thousands of years ago: “the fathers ate sour grapes and therefore the children of later generations will have their teeth set on edge.” One has to be blind to history or even to current events not to realize the lessons involved and described in this week's Torah portion.

The Torah will expand upon this much later towards the end of the fifth book of the Torah. We will be presented with a full and graphic picture of the cruelty of humanity towards the Jewish people over the centuries until our day. Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman in his commentary to Torah explains that this week's portion and its predictions referred to the destruction of the first Temple and the relatively short exile of the Jewish people after that in Babylonia.

The later section, towards the end of the Torah, refers to the destruction of the second Temple and the long and seemingly endless exile that follows upon its demise. The latter exile, which was, and to a certain extent still is, a long and difficult one to endure, one that has cost countless generations of Jews their lives and their futures and others their spiritual heritage and legacy, seems to have little if any redeeming features.

And yet the remarkable fact of Jewish history is the vitality and productivity of the Jewish people in exile, suffering persecution and living under adverse circumstances. This resilience is also reflected in the prophecies of the Torah regarding the eternity of the Jewish people and its eventual return to both its physical national heritage and spiritual greatness.

*Reprinted from this week's website of Rabbiwein.com*

## **Thoughts that Count for Parashat Bechukotai**

***If ("Im") you will walk in My statutes*** (Leviticus 26:3)

"The word 'im' ('if') is used to imply pleading and entreaty," the Gemara states, teaching us that G-d pleads, as it were, with each and every Jew: "Please walk in My statutes! Please keep My mitzvot!"

G-d's request also endows us with the strength to overcome all difficulties that might stand in the way of observing Torah and mitzvot. (*Hayom Yom*) If you will walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments and do them (Leviticus 26:3)

As Rashi, the foremost Torah commentator explains, this refers to the mitzva of learning Torah. For the more Torah knowledge one acquires, the easier it is to observe the commandments, as Torah study itself saves a person from the Evil Inclination. (*Melo HaOmer*)

*Reprinted from the Bechukotai 5755 edition of L'Chaim Weekly.*



# The Blessing Among The Curses

**Rabbi Eli J. Mansour**



We read in Parashat Behukotai the Torah's description of the dreadful curses which G-d threatens to send upon us if we disobey His commands. Toward the end of this section, the Torah writes that Eretz Yisrael will become desolate after the Jews are exiled from the land, "Ve'shamemu Aleha Oyebechem" – "and your enemies shall leave it desolate" (26:32).

The Ramban explains this phrase as a blessing which G-d interjects amid the description of the curses. The Torah here promises that although we will be driven from the land, throughout our period of exile it will remain desolate. The gentile nations who try to settle the Land of Israel will be unsuccessful in their attempts to cultivate and develop the land.

Even as G-d warns us of the painful tragedies we will suffer for disobeying the Torah, He emphasizes the special connection between us and the Land of Israel, how it will not produce fruit or be developed while we are in exile, as though waiting for us until our return.

Remarkably, we see with our very eyes how this promise of the Torah has proven true. The only times since the Torah was given that Eretz Yisrael blossomed were when our nation settled it. For nearly two thousand years since we were ousted from the land, it remained mostly desolate and undeveloped. It was only when large numbers of Jews began returning to Eretz Yisrael in modern times that it "responded."

In just several decades, the Land of Israel became by far the most developed and affluent country in the Middle East. The territory that resisted attempts at cultivation for nearly 2,000 years was suddenly transformed into a thriving, prosperous country. This is precisely what the Torah promised – the Land of Israel is very “sensitive” and “agrees” to be developed only by its natural inhabitants – the Jewish people.

As the Ramban wrote, this has truly been a blessing. If Eretz Yisrael was capable of being developed before our return, we could hardly imagine the other nations giving it back to us. Before 1948, the land was under the British Mandate. Is it conceivable that England would have left it for the Jews if it was developed and thriving at that time? Or if it had anywhere near the amount of oil that exists in other parts of the Middle East? Our homeland was given to us because it wasn’t wanted, and it wasn’t wanted because efforts to rebuild it failed, time and time again.

Even as G-d warns us of the curses that would befall us, He reassures us of our eventual return to our homeland, and that our land will lie alone, barren and desolate, anxiously awaiting our long-awaited return, which is happening now before our very eyes.

*Reprinted from this week’s website of the Edmund J. Safra Synagogue in Brooklyn, NY.*

## More Thoughts that Count

I will then remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember (Leviticus 26:42)  
Why are the Patriarchs listed in reverse chronological order in this verse?

In general, this entire portion of the Torah relates to the future of the Jewish people, and alludes to the order of service of G-d until the coming of Moshiach: The first period in our history was characterized by Torah (symbolized by Jacob, the pillar of Torah study).

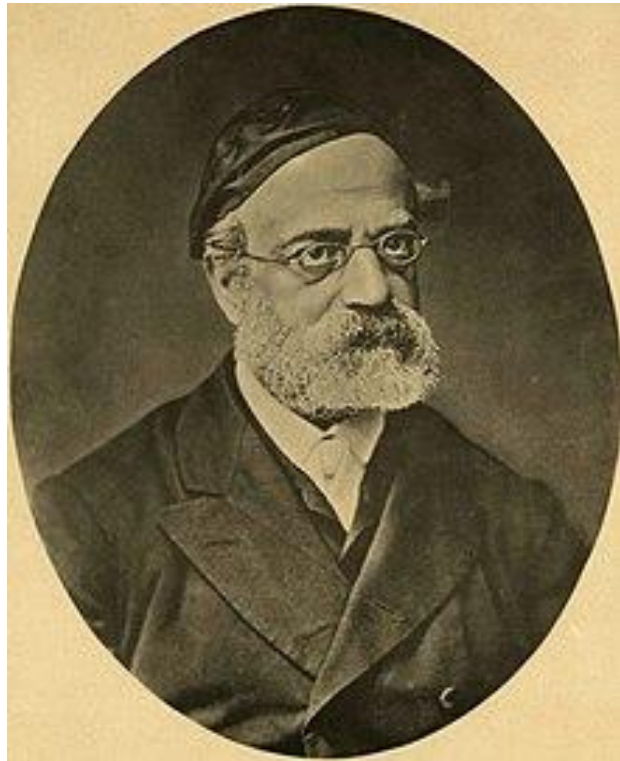
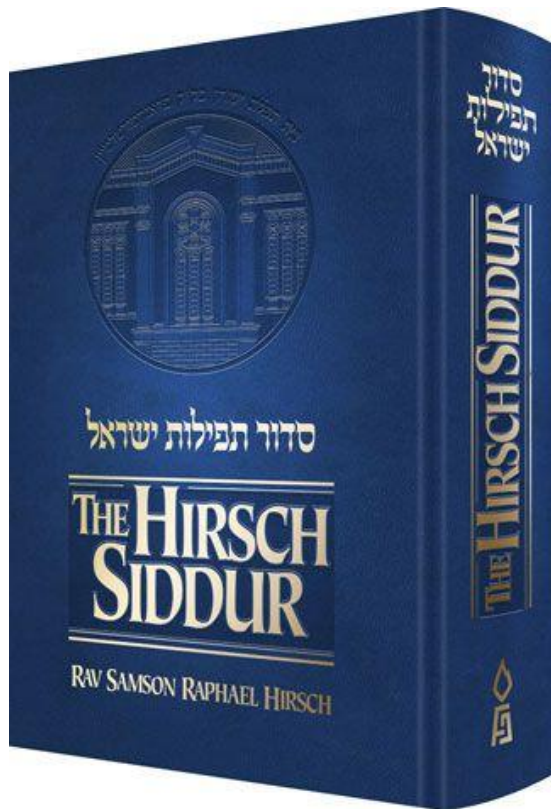
The second period, when the Holy Temple was in existence, was characterized by avoda (literally service). After the Temple was destroyed, however, prayer came to take the place of our offerings, symbolized by Isaac.

The third period prior to Moshiach's arrival is characterized by good deeds (emphasized by the Baal Shem Tov), symbolized by Abraham, the epitome of doing good for one's fellow Jew. For it is in the merit of good deeds that we will ultimately merit the Final Redemption. (*Rabbi Bentzion of Bobov*)

*Reprinted from the Bechukotai 5755 edition of L’Chaim Weekly.*

# Lessons from the Revised Hirsch Siddur for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jews

By Daniel Keren



(“The Revised edition of The Hirsch Siddur” with translation and commentary by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, 825 pages, Feldheim Publishers, 2018)

The Hirsch Siddur based on the original German translation and commentary of the Ashkenaz prayerbook by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888) has now been published in a revised English translation by Feldheim Publishers, some fifty years after the original publication of the English translation of “The Hirsch Siddur.”

Born in Hamburg in 1808 when that German city was briefly a part of the French Empire after being annexed by Napoleon prior to his ultimate fall at Waterloo; Rav Hirsch against the tide of the Reform movement that turned most of Germany’s Jews away from Torah loyalty became a strong defender of Orthodox

Jewish values, creating a new movement known as Torah im Derech Eretz that explained that one could be a successful professional without surrendering a strong Torah commitment to G-d.

Much of the credit for Rav Hirsch's major success was his brilliant gift of writing about the Torah in the then contemporary mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century intellectual style that impressed thousands of German-reading Jews throughout the European continent. In 1851, Rav Hirsch gave up his prestigious post of Chief Rabbi of Moravia and Austrian Silesia to accept an invitation by a small and struggling Orthodox secessionist community (that broke away from the predominantly Reform community of Frankfurt-am-Main) to become its spiritual leader.

### **Revitalizes the Orthodox Jewish Community in Frankfurt**

Rav Hirsch remained in Frankfurt till the end of his life in 1888 and during this time period the shul he led became revitalized with 500 families becoming members. He strengthened the community by creating Jewish schools along the lines of his innovative and unique Torah im Derech Eretz philosophy as well as continued publication of translations and commentaries of the Torah, Tehillim and the Siddur.

After his death in 1888, his son-in-law Rabbi Solomon Breuer succeeded to the leadership of the community and following his death in 1926, his son – Rabbi Joseph Breuer although not selected to lead the Frankfurt secessionist Orthodox Jewish community was recognized as the Rosh Yeshiva of the Frankfurt Yeshiva founded by his grandfather.

### **Struggles to Preserve Jewish Community After the Rise of the Nazis to Power**

Following the rise to power in 1933 of the Nazis under Hitler (yemach shemo), Rabbi Breuer tried with great difficulty to continue to school. Arrested on Kristallnacht and released shortly thereafter, he left Germany and was able to obtain a visa for himself and his family to come to America where he established a vibrant religious community in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan that attracted like-minded German refugees based on the Torah im Derech Eretz principles established by his illustrious grandfather – Rav Hirsch.

Fifty-one years ago leading members of that community including Rabbi Breuer celebrated the publication of the original English translation of "The Hirsch Siddur" that opened up the unique 19<sup>th</sup> Century German modern insights of Rav Hirsch to a much larger English-reading world of Jews, many tens of thousands who had become inspired to become Torah observant in the aftermath of the

miraculous Six Day War that overnight transformed Israel and Jewish communities around the world.

The new revised English translation of “The Hirsch Siddur” is based on the realization that original translation which aimed to capture the beauty of Rav Hirsch’s eloquent German writing style was perhaps no longer relevant to today’s English speaking community that desperately continues to need guidance in discovering the beauty and significance of tefillah or prayer in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century World.

### **Rav’s Hirsch’s Insights on Prayer Are Just as Relevant to Jews Today**

In reading the revised translation of Rav Hirsch’s wisdom on the importance of prayer to the Jew today, one is overwhelmed by the realization that the author’s insights published originally in 1895 are just as relevant to the thinking Jew in 2019 as it was at the time the author had completed his book on the Siddur just months before his death in 1888.

At the beginning of the Siddur on page 14 where one recites the blessing to G-d for not making him a non-Jew, slave or woman (or in the case of a woman who blesses the A-mighty for making her in accordance with His will); Rav Hirsch writes:

“This is not a prayer of thanks that G-d did not make us heathens, slaves or women. Rather it calls upon us to contemplate the task that G-d imposed upon us by making us free Jewish people, and to pledge ourselves to do justice to this mission.

“These three aspects of our own status impose upon us duties much more comprehensive than those required of the rest of mankind. And if our women have a smaller number of mitzvos to fulfill than men, they know that the tasks that they must discharge as free Jewish women are no less in accordance with the Will and desire of G-d than are those of their brothers.”

### **The Spiritual Challenge to Jewish Women in Today’s Intellectual Climate**

Today in an age when all too many women in the Western World (including many in the Orthodox Jewish community) are crippled intellectually and emotionally by the dogma of feminism, these simple but heartfelt words of Rav Hirsch touch upon an eternal truth that will make for a much happier and meaningful life for all concerned.

In his commentary of Pirkei Avos that appears in the Siddur after the Shabbos Afternoon Prayer, Rav Hirsch on page 495 in a pitch to those of his fellow 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jews perhaps shaken by the arguments of the Enlightenment



Movement addresses the 19<sup>th</sup> Mishna in Chapter 2: “Be diligent to study the Torah and know what to answer one who treats the law with scorn.”

Reflecting on the advice of Rabbi Elazar, Rav Hirsch declares: “Only one who is not thoroughly familiar with the Torah will be afraid of the arguments advanced by the apikorsim [an unbeliever or skeptic]. One who has studied and continues to study the law adequately and thoroughly delves into it with devotion will clearly see the hollowness and invalidity of their allegations and will know that their arguments are founded on ignorance and distortion of facts.”

### **The Importance of the Shabbos**

With regards to the importance of Shabbos, Rav Hirsch explains on page 349 with reference to the liturgy “Therefore let all of His creatures glorify and bless G-d...Who, in His holiness, has given rest to His people Israel on the holy Sabbath” that:

“All creatures rejoice in the knowledge that in Israel the Sabbath has regained its true and real nature. For it is the Sabbath that affords the entire physical world its spiritual and moral purpose. Without the Sabbath the world would risk the danger of being buried alive through the folly and sin of man, the very being to whom G-d had originally entrusted the world so that he might manage it sanely and wisely.”

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for the Jew who prays three times a day is to not fall into the trap of making our requests a mindless robotic recitation of rote. Concerning this Rav Hirsch offers the following suggestion with regards to the words in the Shemonah Esrai – “Be well pleased, O G-d, with Your people Israel and in their prayer...”

### **The Challenge to Make Our Lives Worthy of Hashem’s Continued Pleasure**

He writes on page 159 that “G-d is entreated to take pleasure first in Amcha Yisroel [Your people] and only then in Tefillatem [their prayers.] This is to teach us that we may hope for G-d’s acceptance of our prayers only if our own lives and endeavors are not unworthy of His favor, or if, at least, we make a sincere effort to have our lives and our endeavors become worthy of Him.”

There are many brilliant but simply written gems on the Siddur in this new revised edition that can assist any Jew gain a clearer and more joyful attitude towards the important avodah of praying. One need not be of the Ashkenaz camp to gain benefit from this new edition of “The Hirsch Siddur,” which can be found in Jewish book stores or by contacting the publisher by either calling (800) 237-7149 or clicking [www.feldheim.com](http://www.feldheim.com)

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