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**11 Facts About Alexander “the Great” and the Jews**

**By Rabbi** [**Yehuda Altein**](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/17830/jewish/Altein-Yehuda.htm)



***Art by***[***Sefira Lightstone***](https://www.chabad.org/3159160)

Alexander the Great of Macedonia was one of the classic conquerors of ancient history, defeating mighty nations and distant armies until he ruled the largest empire the world had ever seen. What is not as well-known is his notable impact on Jewish history. What’s more, Alexander even became a Jewish name! Read on for 11 facts about the intriguing connection between this celebrated ruler and the Jewish people.

**1. He Conquered the Land of Israel in the 4th Century BCE**

In the initial decades following the rebuilding of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the Land of Israel was subject to Persian dominion. In the year 3448 from creation (313 BCE), Alexander the Great conquered the region from Persian forces, annexing the Holy Land to his ever-growing empire.

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**2. Daniel Foresaw Him**

The Book of Daniel[1](javascript:doFootnote('1a6210512');) records a vision in which the angel Gabriel foretells, among other things, the rise and fall of Alexander the Great. Here is the prophecy along with how it was fulfilled (based on the classic commentaries):

***Another three kings will arise for Persia.*** These were Koresh (Cryus), Achashverosh (Ahasuerus), and Daryavesh (Darius).[2](javascript:doFootnote('2a6210512');)

***The fourth will amass great wealth, and when he grows strong with his wealth he will incite all to fight the kingdom of Greece.***Darius (called “fourth” when including Darius the Mede, who preceded Koresh) incited all the inhabitants of his kingdom to wage war against Greece.[3](javascript:doFootnote('3a6210512');)

***A mighty king will then arise; his dominion will be vast and he will do as he pleases.*** The mighty king is Alexander,[4](javascript:doFootnote('4a6210512');) who smote Darius and gained control of the Persian Empire.[5](javascript:doFootnote('5a6210512');)

***But after he arises his kingdom will be broken.*** At the zenith of his success, Alexander died suddenly at a young age.[6](javascript:doFootnote('6a6210512');)

***It will be divided to the four directions of the heavens—but not to his posterity.***Alexander’s vast kingdom was divided among his four generals instead of being inherited by his children.[7](javascript:doFootnote('7a6210512');)

**3. He Attributed His Success to the High Priest**

As Alexander approached [Jerusalem](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4246466/jewish/Jerusalem.htm), the [High Priest](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4195084/jewish/The-High-Priest-in-Jewish-Tradition.htm) [Shimon HaTzaddik (Simeon the Just)](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2833935/jewish/Shimon-Hatzadik-Simeon-the-Just.htm) donned the priestly garments and went to greet him, accompanied by a delegation of Jewish dignitaries bearing torches. When Alexander saw Shimon HaTzaddik, he descended from his chariot and bowed before him.

When the members of his entourage questioned this uncharacteristic display of respect, Alexander explained: “I did this because the image of this man’s face appears before me and leads me to victory when I am on the battlefields.”[8](javascript:doFootnote('8a6210512');)

**4. He Wanted to Have His Likeness in the Holy Temple**

Shimon HaTzaddik then took Alexander the Great on a tour of the Holy Temple. Impressed at what he saw, Alexander wished to donate gold to have an image of himself placed in the Holy Temple. Shimon demurred, saying that it was forbidden for the Jews to have graven images. Instead, he suggested that he give the gold to the poor.[9](javascript:doFootnote('9a6210512');)

**5. The Priests Named Their Sons After Him**

Shimon HaTzaddik further suggested that instead of erecting a statue in Alexander’s likeness, there was a better way to memorialize the occasion: all male priests born that year would be named “Alexander.”[10](javascript:doFootnote('10a6210512');) Thus, Alexander forever became a Jewish name, still in common use today.

**6. He Engaged in Discussion With Jewish Scholars**

The Talmud relates that Alexander presented 10 questions before a group of Jewish scholars known as “the elders of the south.” Among them were queries as to the order in which G‑d created the world; who is truly considered wise, strong, and wealthy; what one should do to become well-liked by others; and why Jews do not accept other religions.[11](javascript:doFootnote('11a6210512');)

One way of understanding the conversation was that Alexander wanted these scholars to admire his tremendous power and wealth, while the Jews contended that true greatness comes from serving [G‑d](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/433240/jewish/God.htm).[12](javascript:doFootnote('12a6210512');)

**7. Talmudic Sources Describe His Exploits**

Several incidents involving Alexander the Great’s exploits in distant lands are recorded in the [Talmud](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2537389/jewish/Talmud.htm) and Midrash. In one account, Alexander is impressed at the benevolent method of judgment carried out by the king of a region called Katzia, in stark contrast to the way he would have decided the case himself.[13](javascript:doFootnote('13a6210512');)

Another narrative tells how Alexander discovered the entrance to the Garden of Eden, only to be barred entry.[14](javascript:doFootnote('14a6210512');) The Maharal, [Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4117874/jewish/10-Facts-About-the-Maharal-Every-Jew-Should-Know.htm), presents a metaphorical understanding of this story: Despite Alexander’s tremendous knowledge[15](javascript:doFootnote('15a6210512');) and the powers he was granted from Above, he was unable to reach the spiritual heights attained by the righteous.[16](javascript:doFootnote('16a6210512');)

**8. He Presided Over a Dispute Between the Jews and Egyptians**

Another story recorded in the Talmud involves a monetary claim brought before Alexander’s court. Egyptian representatives demanded that the Jews pay restitution for all the gold and silver they took during the Exodus. Their argument was refuted by a wise Jew named Geviha son of Pesisa, who counterclaimed that it was first necessary to subtract the wages the Egyptians owed the Jews for enslaving them, which far surpassed the riches they took.[17](javascript:doFootnote('17a6210512');)

**9. Many Jews Lived in Alexandria**

The Egyptian city of Alexandria was founded by, and named after, Alexander the Great. Jews lived in Alexandria since ancient times. The Talmud describes the city’s opulent synagogue which could contain many thousands of worshippers who sat according to profession. It was so large that it was impossible for everyone to hear the cantor. One person was thus designated to stand on the *bimah*(platform) in the center of the column-lined sanctuary and raise a handkerchief whenever it was time to say “amen.”[18](javascript:doFootnote('18a6210512');)

Jews continued to reside in the city throughout the centuries, until the mass emigration of Egyptian Jewry in the 1940s and ‘50s.

**10. His Death Set the Stage for Chanukah**

After Alexander’s death at the age of 33, his vast kingdom was split between four of his generals, progenitors of the Ptolemaic, Antigonid, Antipatrid, and Seleucid dynasties. Of these four, the land of Israel fell within the territory of the Seleucid (or Syrian-Greek) Empire. Over a century later, the ruler of the Seleucid Empire was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose struggles against his Ptolemaic counterparts and tyrannical decrees resulted in the Maccabean revolt and the Hanukkah miracle.

**11. Legal Documents Dated From His Reign**

One of the dating methods used in Jewish legal documents (such as bills of divorce) was known as *minyan shtarot*, “dating used in documents.” It marked the years that had passed since the reign of Alexander the Great, and was widely in use at least until medieval times.[19](javascript:doFootnote('19a6210512');)

**FOOTNOTES**

[1.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef1a6210512) [Daniel 11:2](https://www.chabad.org/16494#v2)–4.

[2.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef2a6210512) Rashi to Daniel ad loc. See Ibn Ezra ad loc. for alternative identifications of these three kings.

[3.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef3a6210512) Rashi ad loc. [4.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef4a6210512) Rashi, Rasag, Ibn Ezra, et al. ad loc. [5.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef5a6210512) Rashi ad loc.

[6.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef6a6210512) Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc. [7.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef7a6210512) Rashi ad loc. [8.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef8a6210512) Talmud, Yoma 69a; Megillat Ta’anit, ch. 9. [9.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef9a6210512) *Sefer Yosippon*, ch. 5. (Not to be confused with *Antiquities of the Jews*of Josephus.) [10.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef10a6210512) *Sefer Yosippon*, ibid. [11.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef11a6210512) Talmud, Tamid 32a.

[12.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef12a6210512) Commentary of Maharsha ad loc. [13.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef13a6210512) Bereishit Rabbah 33:1.

[14.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef14a6210512) Talmud, Tamid 32b. See ibid. 32a–b for a description of Alexander’s visit to a land ruled by women and the lesson he learned from them.

[15.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef15a6210512) As a student of Aristotle (see Maharsha to Tamid 32a). [16.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef16a6210512) Chiddushei Aggados to Tamid 32b. [17.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef17a6210512) Talmud, Sanhedrin 91a. See there for two other claims brought before Alexander, one by descendants of the ancient Canaanites and another by the offspring of Yishmael and Keturah.

[18.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm" \l "footnoteRef18a6210512) Sukkah 51b. [19.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6210512/jewish/11-Facts-About-Alexander-the-Great-and-the-Jews.htm#footnoteRef19a6210512) See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Geirushin* 1:27. *Shem Hagedolim*, entry on Rabbi David ibn Zimra.

*Reprinted from the current website of Chabad.org*

**What Can We Learn from**

**The Desecration of Kever**

**Yosef by the Palestinian Arabs?**

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We can learn that the Arabs are here to destroy everything that they can. I’ll tell you a little story. Once upon a time there was a rabbi who said that the Prime Minister of Medinas Yisroel is a rodef; by yielding so much to the Arabs he’s causing us to lose a great deal of Jewish lives so he’s a rodef.

So, somebody put one and one together and shot the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister of Medinas Yisroel was shot and killed by someone. And now the whole world was up in arms against this rabbi. “Look what you did! You caused a man to shoot the Prime Minister!” They don’t realize, however, that the rabbi was right.

At that time the Prime Minister had begun to yield to the Arabs. He was willing to give them certain concessions in order to appease them so that they shouldn’t commit acts of violence against Jews, that they should make peace. That was a terrible mistake. You don’t make concessions with violent people in order to achieve peace.

Let the other side make the concessions. “First you behave,” the Arabs have to be told. “If you behave, then we’ll see.” Don’t make any concessions until they behave. But he made concessions and they weren’t behaving yet. And he went further and further and further and today they’re willing to give away almost everything.

Barak is willing to give away parts of Yerushalayim. And therefore, today, the Arabs see that it pays to make trouble. The more they commit acts of terror, the more they can gain opportunities to bargain. And the goyim go along with this. The goyim like the idea of taking away from the Am Yisroel and giving to the Arabs.

Now, I don’t say that you have to make a milchamah but you have a right to protect the security of your citizens. I’m not a patriot of Medinas Yisroel but it’s wrong to yield. Don’t give away any land until you see that they, first of all, behave. If they behave, then we’ll see what to do. But before that, while they are still committing acts of terror, there can be no kind of concessions at all.

*Reprinted from a recent email of Toras Avigdor. (Tape #E-229, October 2000.)*

**Thoughts that Count**

**for Parsha Vayigash**

*Hurry back to my father and say to him...G-d has made me lord (samani) over all of Egypt* (Gen. 45:9)

The intention was not that Jacob would be pleased to learn that Joseph now occupied a high political position. Rather, samani can also be translated "I put" - that through me, Joseph, G-d's name has been publicized and made great throughout the land of Egypt. Indeed, such a message would surely bring immense joy to Jacob. *(Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin)*

*Here is seed for you, that you sow the land* (Gen. 47:23)

In every generation there is one "Joseph," a single tzadik (righteous person) who empowers and encourages all the members of the Jewish people in their service of G-d. Nonetheless, a person mustn't rely on the strengths he receives passively, for a Jew must also "sow the land" under his own effort. *(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

*Reprinted from the Parshat Vayigash 5761/2000 edition of L’Chaim.*

**Understanding the Role of Moshiach as Both King and Teacher of the Jews and the World**

**From the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt”l**



The haftara for the portion of Vayigash states: "And David My servant will be king over them...and My servant David will be Nasi [prince] to them forever." As King David is alternately referred to as "king" and as "Nasi," it is important that we understand the difference between these two terms.

Moshiach, too, is referred to as "David." It states in the Book of Ezekiel, "And they will serve the L-rd their G-d and David their king, whom I will raise up to them." This is a reference to King Moshiach, who is a descendent of King David.

In his Laws of Kings, Maimonides enumerates the various functions of Moshiach: Moshiach will compel the Jewish people to follow Torah and mitzvot, wage the "battles of the L-rd," rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, gather the Jewish exiles, and bring the whole world to worship the One true G-d. These functions, however, are not specific to Moshiach, but are the role of any Jewish king: to elevate the status of Judaism, and establish righteousness and justice.

At the same time, Moshiach's "job description" is also that of teacher. Not only Jews but gentiles will be guided by his advice and counsel, till "the entire world will be filled with G-d's wisdom, as the waters cover the sea." For this reason, Moshiach is also called "Nasi," the leader of the Sanhedrin (the supreme Jewish court and legislature), whose function was to teach Torah.

As reflected in the verse in this week's haftara, King Moshiach will combine both of these aspects.

Significantly, the Torah refers to Moshiach as being "king over them." A king is on a superior spiritual level, and is therefore somewhat removed from the rest of the people. A Nasi, by contrast, exerts an influence on the people precisely by being close to them.

By teaching them Torah, he enables them to understand its wisdom. True, the Nasi is spiritually exalted (the word itself is derived from the Hebrew meaning elevated), but his basic relationship with the people is one of closeness and proximity. For this reason, the Torah refers to Moshiach as being "Nasi to them forever," rather than "over them."

When Moshiach is revealed, it will not be necessary for him to exert that much effort as "king" (i.e., wage battle against evil), as the world will already be sufficiently prepared. His main function will be as Nasi, teaching and guiding the world and disseminating Torah. It states accordingly, "My servant David will be Nasi to them forever," as Moshiach's eternal reign will be characterized primarily by this quality.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Vayigash 5761/2000 edition of L’Chaim. Adapted from Volume 35 of Likutei Sichot.*

**More Thoughts that Count**

*But now do not be sad...that you sold me here* (Gen. 45:5)

According to the Midrash, the word "now" refers to the act of teshuva, sincerely repenting of one's misdeeds and returning to G-d. Thus, in effect Joseph was saying to his brothers, "If you are truly intent on doing teshuva and regret having sold me, 'do not be sad' - do not allow yourselves to wallow in sadness. For true teshuva can only be attained through joy..." *(Mishmeret Itamar)*

The emotion of sadness is essentially selfish, as it is derived from an individual's feeling that something, either spiritual or material, is lacking that rightfully belongs to him. Such an outlook concentrates solely on the self, rather than on others. *(Rabbi Chanoch Henoch of Alexander)*

*Reprinted from the Parshat Vayigash 5761/2000 edition of L’Chaim.*

**Rabbi Berel Wein on**

**Parshat Vayigash 5784**



The opening verses of this week's Torah reading are among the most dramatic and challenging in the entire Torah. Two great, powerful personalities in the house of the children of Yaakov, Yehudah and Yosef, engage in a clash and debate of epic proportions, regarding the release of their brother Binyamin.

**Who Has the Upper Hand?**

At first glance it seems obvious that Yosef has the upper hand in his struggle. After all, he is the viceroy of Egypt, the commander of the palace guard who are armed and ready to do his bidding. On the other hand, Yehudah has very limited options as to what to say and what to do in order to obtain the release of Binyamin. Yosef’s position of power appears to prevail but the impassioned plea and tone and contents of the words of Yehudah are not to be easily ignored.

**A Clash of Ideas and Worldview**

So, in a sense one could say that Yehudah will himself prevail over Yosef. But in a clear analysis one should come to the conclusion that neither of the two great antagonists, the leaders of the tribes of Israel, is the victor in this clash of ideas and worldview.

The true champion that will emerge from this entire baffling and fascinating story is the old hoary Yaakov, seemingly isolated back there in the land of Canaan, morning and despondent as to what has happened to his family. In anguish, he shouts: “Yosef is no more, Shimon is no more; both of them will be lost to me!”

It is that image of their father that haunts both Yehudah and Yosef. And each, in his own way, wishes to do justice to their father and to everything that he represents. And it is this image of Yaakov that brings Yosef to the climax of the story and to his ability, nay, necessity to reveal and reconcile himself with his brothers.

**A Story that is Relevant of**

**Every Generation of Jews**

Jewish rabbinic thought over the ages has always attempted to make the story of Yosef and Yehudah relevant to each individual generation of Jews. I think that the most relevant message that all of us can gain from this great narrative is that it is the image of our ancient father Yaakov that truly hovers over all of our current struggles.

It is our task, not merely to win the debate with our other brothers or even with outside powers that are seemingly stronger and greater than we are, but rather to somehow remain faithful to the old man that we can no longer see but who is somehow always with us. What gives both Yehudah and Yosef troubling pause in the midst of their impassioned debate is the question as to what their father thinks of their words and their actions.

**“What Would Our Father Think?”**

It is this unseen presence of Yaakov that drives the brothers to reconciliation and to restoring a common purpose in their lives and those of their families. In effect they are thinking: “What would our father think of this conversation and of this confrontation?” Father Yaakov has looked down at all of the generations of the Jewish people and in one way or another, every generation has been forced to ask itself what would Yaakov think of us, our words and our behavior.

It is that ever-present idea in Jewish life that has been an aid and a boon to our seemingly miraculous survival as a people and as a faith. We may not see him but we can be certain that he is there with us today as well.

*Reprinted from the current website of rabbiwein.com*

**Exchanging Hostages**

**for Terrorists:**

***Is it permissible to free hostages by releasing terrorists?***

**By Rabbi Hillel Raskin**

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**Rabbi Hillel Raskin**

Halacha highlights the importance of redeeming captives but, at the same time, prohibits paying “above their value” (see issue 750). How does this translate when discussing prisoner exchanges?

Some acharonim hold that the limit in these cases follows what other countries offer for such “transactions” based on historical precedents. Based on this, it would be permitted to perform a prisoner swap after the conclusion of a war when the accepted custom is to do so, even if the number of prisoners doesn’t match. Other poskim, however, contend that the fair price tag remains one-for-one, and anything beyond that is against halacha.

**A Different Status for Soldiers**

Soldiers, some poskim claim, have a different status for this halacha, and their ransom isn’t capped. Since the country sent them to war, they have complete responsibility for them, unlike a regular hostage scenario where the community doesn’t have full responsibility for the captives.

Furthermore, just as one may redeem himself for any price, the same should apply if one commits in contract with someone else, as a country does with its soldiers.

However, releasing terrorists or even carrying out such negotiations is problematic. It is proven historically that many of the freed terrorists return to terror. Moreover, it is perceived as a weakness, and it encourages terrorists to commit terror attacks, thinking that they will ultimately be freed.

In 5739 (1979), the Rebbe strongly protested a prisoner swap when over 70 Arabs prisoners – including over 30 convicted terrorists – were exchanged for one Israeli soldier, when not long before, America and Russia had swapped five for two! Though a Jewish life has infinite worth, the Rebbe explained, they could have obtained the same soldier for many fewer Arabs. Furthermore, this crossed the red line of negotiating with terrorists who openly said they would continue their terrorism. The Rebbe called it a weakness and a diplomatic move to win favor in the eyes of the Americans and Arabs.

Moerover, said the Rebbe, putting terrorists in prison to begin with, rather than executing them, was a big mistake, since it invited pressure to release them at some point.

In conclusion, releasing prisoners in exchange for hostages introduces new angles that aren’t dealt with in the Gemara’s discussion on ransoming captives. These decisions must be weighed by experts on security and terrorism to determine which option will cause fewer Jews to be harmed and that is the correct route to take.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Mikeitz 5784 edition of The Weekly Farbrengen. Rabbi Raskin is Rov of Anash in Petach Tikva, Israel.*

**The Answer to All Our Questions**

And Yosef said to his brothers ‘I am Yosef. (45:4) The entire time from when Yosef’s brothers first came to Mitzrayim to buy food, questions upon questions arose among the brothers. Who is this man? Why is he so interested in who we are? Why is he asking so many questions? Why does he suspect us as being spies? What does he really want from us.? How will this ever be resolved?

Two words - I am Yosef - answered all the questions. We go through life with many questions. Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this? Why is this the way the world runs? We will hear the words I am Hashem - which will answer any and all questions that we have. (Chofetz Chaim)

*Reprinted from the Parshat Vayigash 5784 email of R’ Yedidye Hirtenfeld whY I Matter parsha sheet for the Young Israel of Midwood in Brooklyn, NY.*