

TORAH WEEKLY

בס"ד

26 May – 01 June, 2019

21 - 27 Iyar, 5779

Torah: Leviticus 26:3-27:34

Haftarah: Jeremiah 16:19 - 17:14

PARSHAT BECHUKOTAI

CALENDARS

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi / Chaplain to contact us.

FAMILY PROGRAMS

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

GRAPE JUICE & MATZAH

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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HOW ARE WE TO VIEW JEWS BY CHOICE?

Are converts looked down upon in Judaism? Is conversion to our faith frowned upon? To be sure, I have been privy to plenty of disparaging remarks over the years—ironically, often made by people who themselves are far from religiously observant. “A leopard doesn’t change its spots” is one of the milder ones I’ve heard. But, never mind what certain individual Jews may say. What does Judaism say?

The simple answer is that the classic, age-old definition of a Jew has always been “one born of a Jewish mother, or one who has converted to Judaism according to halachah (Torah law).” So, provided the conversion process was supervised and performed by a valid, authentic rabbinic body, a convert is just as Jewish as any born Jew. Those who would look down upon converts should remember that some of our greatest Torah sages were descended from converts, including the legendary Rabbi Akiva.

Furthermore, the Midrash contends that a genuine convert is more precious in G-d’s eyes than one who was born Jewish. Why? Because one born of a Jewish mother had no choice in the matter. If your mother is Jewish, you are Jewish. Period. You cannot surrender your birthright. Like it or not, it is a biological and spiritual fact of life. You can attempt to convert out of the Jewish faith, but Judaism does not recognize such artificial alterations. A Jew is a Jew is

a Jew. If you were born a Jew, you will die a Jew.

But a convert did not have to become Jewish. No one forced him or her into it. If anything, those electing to join the Jewish faith are aware of something called anti-Semitism. Do they need it in their lives? Are they suicidal, or just plain stupid? Why would anyone in their right mind go looking for tzoris?! Says the Midrash: one who does make that conscious, deliberate choice to embrace the G-d of Abraham despite the unique unpopularity of the children of Abraham is someone worthy of G-d’s special love. A Jew by choice is a Jew indeed.

There remains a difficult passage in the Talmud (Yevamot 47b) that begs some elucidation. “Converts are as difficult for Israel as a blight!” Not a very flattering depiction. A simple explanation might be that when converts are insincere, and they are not really committed to living a full Jewish life—perhaps they converted for ulterior motives, like to marry a Jew—then their failure to observe the commandments brings disrepute to Judaism, and may have a negative ripple effect on other Jews.

But there is also an alternative interpretation. Some understand the suggestion that converts are a blight upon Israel to mean that they give born Jews a bad name. Why? Because all too often, converts are more zealous than any other Jews in their commitment to the faith. Have we not seen converts who are more

observant and more passionate about Judaism than most born Jews? “A blight upon Israel” would then mean that their deeper commitment and zealotry puts us to shame.

This week we read the Tochachah—the Rebuke. A series of dire warnings to the Jewish people not to stray from G-d’s ways, and of the curses that will befall us if we should, the Rebuke is always read shortly before Shavuot, the holiday of the giving of the Torah. That moment at the mountain, when we stood at Sinai, experienced the great Revelation and received the Ten Commandments, was the moment when we became constitutionally enfranchised as a people. Shavuot marks the day when we were transformed from a family—children of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah—to a nation. That is the day we all converted to Judaism. We all became Jews at Sinai.

So, every year at this time we read the sobering Rebuke to prepare us for the reliving of the historic event when we too became “converts,” so that we should enter into our covenant with G-d sincerely and genuinely, in reverence and in awe.

May all of us, those born or those who have become, be true Jews who will be true to our faith, our Torah and our tradition. May we accept the Torah anew with the passion and zeal of one who has just made that momentous choice, the choice to become a Jew.

by Rabbi Yossy Goldman

EFFORT THAT REALLY COUNTS As we conclude the third book of the Torah in synagogues around the world this week, I am reminded of the traditional prayer recited upon completion of a tractate of the Talmud. In it, we thank G-d for the great opportunity to toil in the study of Torah. The prayer contains a line that goes like this: "We toil and they toil. We toil and receive reward, while they toil and don't receive reward." This line is originally found in the Talmud (Berachot 28b), as part of the prayer that Rabbi Nechunia ben Hakanah would say upon exiting the study hall. The prayer is obviously contrasting Torah study with all other activities and forms of work: while Torah study offers meaningful compensation, other endeavors don't.

But this needs further explanation. Is this really so? Is there really no meaningful compensation in other fields of work? Last I heard, people were being compensated in other areas as well! So, how does Torah study differ?

Torah study is mostly about the means, not so much about the ends. The explanation lies in careful examination of the words of the prayer: "...they toil and receive no reward." Why did the author of this prayer of thanksgiving choose the word "toil" as opposed to, let's say, "work" or "achieve"?

The answer, I believe, is that Torah study is all about the effort and the "toiling," in contrast with other endeavors or sciences, where the main focus is on accomplishment and the final product. Torah study is mostly about the means, not so much about the ends. In other areas of life, who cares about your toiling? Toiling is just a means to an end. There is no reward for hard work and shvitzing. In fact, if you could accomplish the same job without toiling, that would be just as good. No extra reward is given for the toiling. It is mostly the results that count! In Torah study, however, it's the opposite. Even if you were to toil in Torah study without any tangible results, that itself is worthy of reward!

The reason for this is because unlike other sciences, Torah study is not about accumulating knowledge. Unlike other self-help books and religious manuals, the Torah is not only about learning how to observe. Torah study is primarily about forging a relationship with G-d. When we toil in the study of Torah, and connect to the fountain of G-d's wisdom, we are at that moment experiencing oneness and forging a relationship with our G-d—regardless of whether we succeeded in totally mastering the subject we are studying. The relationship with G-d is experienced mostly while toiling and studying, not in the results or accomplishments. This thought is echoed in this week's Torah portion, which tells us: "If you will walk in my statutes" (Leviticus 26:3), explained by Rashi to be a reference to "toiling in Torah." Again, the emphasis here is on the effort and not so much on the results.

What a refreshing approach and dramatic contrast to all those other areas, where the only thing that matters are your results! From a Torah perspective, we don't care so much about what your grades are, or even how many titles and degrees you master in life. What is most cherished and valued by G-d is the hard work and effort that you put into your Torah studies! The quality and effort while on the journey of Torah study is way more important than the destination.

By Rabbi Avraham E. Plotkin

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, May 26, 2019 - 21 Iyar, 5779

Kfar Chabad Established (1949)

The Chabad-Lubavitch village in Israel, Kfar Chabad, was founded by the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, on Iyar 21 of 1949. The first settlers were mostly recent immigrants from the Soviet Union, survivors of the terrors of World War II and Stalinist oppression. Kfar Chabad, which is located about five miles south of Tel Aviv and includes agricultural lands as well as numerous educational institutions, serves as the headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch Chassidic movement in the Holy Land.

Monday, May 27, 2019 - 22 Iyar, 5779

Shabbat Commanded (1313 BCE)

Following the descent of the manna (the miraculous "Bread from Heaven" that sustained the Israelites in the desert), G-d commanded the Children of Israel to keep the Shabbat. This Shabbat was the 22nd of Iyar, of the year 2448 from Creation (1313 BCE) (see "Today in Jewish History" for Iyar 15).

Tuesday, May 28, 2019 - 23 Iyar, 5779

Water from a Rock at Rephidim (1313 BCE)

The Children of Israel arrived at Rephidim on the 23rd of Iyar, 1313 BCE -- 38 days after their exodus from Egypt. Rephidim was desert land and waterless, the people grumbled that they and their flocks were in danger of dying of thirst. G-d commanded Moses to take the elders of the people to a rock which he was to hit with his staff. Moses hit the rock and from the dry stone, a well sprang forth.

Wednesday, May 29, 2019 - 24 Iyar, 5779

Germany Surrenders (1945)

In Rheims, France, the Chief-of-Staff of the German Armed Forces High Command signed the unconditional surrender documents for all German forces to the Allies, thus marking the official end of World War II in Europe. The surrender took place following a fierce seven days of battles and truces across Europe.

Thursday, May 30, 2019 - 25 Iyar, 5779

Passing of R. Yaakov Lorberbaum of Lissa (1832)

R. Yaakov Lorberbaum was a well-known halachic authority who served as rabbi in the Eastern European cities of Kalish, Lissa, and Stryi. Among the famous and widely-studied works of this prolific author are Chavos Daas and Nesivos Hamishpat, both in-depth commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law).

Friday, May 31, 2019 - 26 Iyar, 5779

Passing of R. Saadia Gaon (942)

Iyar 26 is the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the passing) of Rabbi Saadia Gaon (892?-942), author of Emunot V'deot, one of the earliest works of Jewish philosophy. ("Gaon" was the title given to the leading Sages of Babylonia in the post-Talmudic period).