

# Torah Weekly

December 6-12, 2020  
20-26 Kislev, 5781

Torah reading:  
Vayeishev: Genesis 37:1 - 40:23  
Chanukah 2: Numbers 7:18-23  
Haftarah: Zachariah 2:14 - 4:7

## PARSHAT VAYEISHEV

### 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 You Today?"

Would you think that "how are you today?" can be a religious question? And that it plays an important role in a major Biblical narrative?

In this week's Parshah, *Vayeishev* (Genesis 37-40), we read the dramatic story of Joseph—the technicolor dream coat, the sibling rivalry in Jacob's family, and Joseph's descent to Egypt, sold into slavery. After being framed by his master's wife for scorning her attempts at seduction, young Joseph finds himself incarcerated in an Egyptian jail. There he meets the Pharaoh's butler and baker, and correctly interprets their respective dreams. Later, when Pharaoh himself will be perturbed by his own dreams, the butler will remember Joseph, and Joseph will be brought from the dungeon to the royal court. His dream analysis will satisfy the monarch, and the young Hebrew slave boy will be catapulted to prominence and named viceroy of Egypt.

How did Joseph's salvation begin? It began with the imprisoned Joseph noticing that the butler and baker were looking somewhat depressed. "And Joseph came to them in the morning and he saw them, and behold, they were troubled. He asked Pharaoh's officials... 'Why do you look so bad today?'" (Genesis 40:6-7). They tell him about their disturbing dreams, he interprets the dreams correctly, and the rest is history.

But why did Joseph have to ask them anything at all? Why was it so strange to see people in prison looking sad? Surely depression is quite the norm in dungeons. Wouldn't we expect most people in jail to look miserable?

According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the answer is that Joseph was exhibiting a higher sense of care and concern for his fellow

human beings. Torn away from his father and home life, imprisoned in a foreign land, he could have been forgiven for wallowing in his own miseries. Yet, upon seeing his fellow prisoners looking particularly unsettled, he was sensitive enough to take the time to inquire about their well-being. In the end, not only did he help them, but his own salvation came about through that fateful encounter. Had he thought to himself, "Hey, I've got my own problems, why worry about *them*?" he might have languished in prison indefinitely.

Sometimes, says the Rebbe, a simple "how are you today?" can prove historic.

It's a lesson to all of us to be a little friendlier. To greet people, perhaps even to smile more often.

Some years ago, after studying in the Talmud how one of the great sages declared that he had never allowed anyone else to greet him first but always made a point of initiating the greeting, I made a personal resolution to try and put this approach into practice. Every Shabbat I walk quite a few kilometers to and from our shul here in Johannesburg. I pass by many fellow pedestrians, mostly local black residents. Rarely had any of them greeted me, but now I am the one to say "good morning" to them. They always respond, though I must confess that some do look rather surprised. In a country where for many years they were not acknowledged as full-fledged citizens, a simple "hello" can become a very humanizing experience. Conversely, I am sometimes unpleasantly surprised when, ironically, a fellow Jew will walk right by me without even so much as a nod.

When we meet someone we know and ask, "Hey, how are you doing?" do we wait for the answer? Try this experiment.

Next time you are asked how you are doing, answer "Lousy!" See if the other person is listening and responds, or just carries on his merry way, oblivious to your response.

Aside from Joseph's many outstanding qualities which we ought to try and emulate, in this rather simple passage Joseph reminds us to be genuinely interested in other people's well-being. And that it should not be beneath our dignity, nor should we be inhibited, to make an honest and sincere inquiry as to their condition. Who knows? It may not only change their lives, but ours.

By Rabbi Yossi Goldman

## Answering the Call, Day and Night

A few weeks ago, a friend invited my family for Shabbat dinner. On the table, I noticed a highly unusual item. Alongside the delicious food and beautiful dishes was a live walkie-talkie placed close to the father.

My friend's husband is a volunteer for Hatzalah, a Jewish volunteer ambulance service that provides emergency pre-hospital care. As a paramedic, he is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing life-saving assistance. The Torah permits (actually, commands) us to break the laws of Shabbat to save lives. My friend told me that her husband often gets called in the middle of the night, occasionally, a few times a night. Sometimes, just as he is falling into a deep sleep, he'll need to jump out of bed again. As the only paramedic in the area, he averages two to three calls every Shabbat.

Though her husband has a full-time job and is the father of a busy household of many children, including a toddler, he still finds time and energy for this holy work. My friend (who also works) and her children are

incredibly proud of him. The kids speak passionately about his activities even though it means that their father might leave a family celebration, and that each of them has to pitch in more to help. The family understands the precious mitzvah of saving lives, and knows that their encouragement and support enables him to do it.

In this week's Torah portion, Joseph's brothers sell him as a slave. While deliberating what to do with him, the brothers decide to throw him into a pit. "The pit was empty; there was no water in it." (Gen 37:24)

If the pit was empty, isn't it obvious that there was no water in it? The Talmud (Shabbat 22a) learns from this unusual wording that although there was no water in the pit, there were scorpions inside.

The Chassidic masters comment on this passage: The mind and heart of man are never empty. If there is no life-nourishing "water," there are "snakes and scorpions in it."

In our lives, we need to be busy with something meaningful. Our minds and hearts are not empty vacuums; they will quickly fill. "Water" refers to Torah and its nourishing teachings. If our minds are occupied with Torah teachings—and our hearts and schedules are jam-packed with good deeds—there won't be any space for negativity to creep in.

Not all of us need to be like my incredibly selfless friend, on call day and night saving lives. But as I left my neighbor's home, I realized that despite how busy we all think we are, how much fuller our schedules can actually become.

Let's find something positive that we feel passionate about and let's work on filling up our days (to the brim!) with meaningful acts.

By Chana Weisberg

**Sunday, December 6, 2020 --- 20 Kislev, 5781**

**Ezra's Address (347 BCE)**

Ezra, head of the Sanhedrin and the leader of the Jewish people at the time of the building of the Second Temple, made an historic address to a three-day assemblage of Jews in Jerusalem, exhorting them to adhere to the teachings of the Torah and to dissolve their interfaith marriages (the Jewish people were on the verge of complete assimilation at the time, following their 70-year exile in Babylonia).

**Tanya Published (1796)**

The first printing of the "bible of Chassidism", the *Tanya*, the magnum opus of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad.

**Monday, December 7, 2020 --- 21 Kislev, 5781**

**Alexander in Jerusalem (313 BCE)**

On Kislev 21 of the year 3448 from creation (313 BCE), there occurred the historic meeting between Shimon HaTzaddik and Alexander ("the Great") of Macedonia.

The Samaritans, bitter enemies of the Jews, had convinced Alexander that the Jews' refusal to place his image in their Temple was a sign of rebellion against his sovereignty, and that the Holy Temple should be destroyed. The Kohen Gadol ("High Priest") at the time was Shimon HaTzaddik, the last of the "Men of the Great Assembly" who rebuilt the Holy Temple and revitalized Judaism under Ezra. On the 21st of Kislev Alexander marched on Jerusalem at the head of his army; Shimon, garbed in the vestments of the High Priest and accompanied with a delegation of Jewish dignitaries, went forth to greet him. The two groups walked towards each other all night; at the crack of dawn they met. As Alexander beheld the visage of the High Priest, he dismounted his horse and bowed respectfully; to his men he explained that he often had visions of a similar-looking man leading him into battle. Shimon HaTzaddik brought the emperor to the Holy Temple and explained that Judaism prohibits the display of any graven image; he offered to name all the male children born to priests that year "Alexander" as a demonstration of loyalty to the emperor (which is how "Alexander" became a common Jewish name). The Samaritans plot was rebuffed, and Kislev 21 was declared a holiday. (Talmud Yoma 69a) *According to an alternative version, this episode occurred on the 25th of Tevet.*

**Satmar Rebbe Rescued (1944)**

The Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), was rescued from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, along with 1,368 other Jews, through the efforts of Rudolf Kastner, head of the Zionist rescue operation in Hungary (an earlier transport of 1,686 Jews had been rescued on Av 29). The Satmar community celebrates the 21st of Kislev as a day of thanksgiving.

**Tuesday, December 8, 2020 --- 22 Kislev, 5781**

**Passing of Rabbi Eliezer ben Eliyahu Ashkenazi (1585)**

Rabbi Eliezer ben Eliyahu Ashkenazi (1512-1585) was a highly regarded Talmudist, as well as a physician. He authored various works, including *Ma'ase ha-Shem* -- a commentary on the historical portions of the Pentateuch, also including a commentary on the Passover Hagaddah -- and *Yosef Lekach*, dedicated and named after Don Yosef Nasi, the Duke of Naxos.

**Thursday, December 10, 2020 --- 24 Kislev, 5781**

**Construction of the Second Temple Resumes (353 BCE)**

In the first year of rule of Cyrus, the King of Persia, Jews were given permission to return to Israel and rebuild the Holy Temple. A group of Jews led by Zerubavel set out for Jerusalem and began working on the second Temple. However, the Cutheans falsely accused the Jews of plotting a rebellion against King Cyrus and were successful in halting the construction of the Holy Temple for the remainder of his reign and throughout the reign of Ahasuerus, his successor. Construction resumed in the second year of the reign of Darius, Ahasuerus's son, on the 24th of Kislev.

**Friday, December 11, 2020 --- 25 Kislev, 5781**

**Cain Kills Abel (3720 BCE)**

The first murder in history occurred on the 25th of Kislev in the year 41 from creation (3720 BCE), when Adam and Eve's eldest son, Cain, killed his younger brother, Abel, as recounted in the 4th chapter of Genesis.

**Shabbat, December 12, 2020 --- 26 Kislev, 5781**

**2nd Day of Chanukah Miracle (139 BCE)**

On the 25th of Kislev in the year 3622 from creation, the Maccabees liberated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, after defeating the vastly more numerous and powerful armies of the Syrian-Greek king Antiochus IV, who had tried to forcefully uproot the beliefs and practices of Judaism from the people of Israel. The victorious Jews repaired, cleansed and rededicated the Temple to the service of G-d. But all the Temple's oil had been defiled by the pagan invaders; when the Jews sought to light the Temple's menorah (candelabra), they found only one small cruse of ritually pure olive oil. Miraculously, the one-day supply burned for eight days, until new, pure oil could be obtained. In commemoration, the Sages instituted the 8-day festival of Chanukah, on which lights are kindled nightly to recall and publicize the miracle.