

# A Taste of Torah

## The Real You

By Rabbi Shmuel Halpern

After twenty years of marriage and no children in sight, our forefather Yitzchak and his wife Rivka set out to pray in earnest. The Torah relates that Hashem listened to Yitzchak, and Rivka conceived. Rashi, quoting a passage in Yevamos (64a), notes that the Torah specifies that Hashem listened to Yitzchak over Rivka, as the prayer of a righteous person of wicked descent can't be compared to the prayer of righteous person who descends from the righteous. In the second verse of the portion, the Torah (Toldos 25:20) relates the lineage of Rivka as "the daughter of Besuel and the sister of Lavan." Rashi is bothered by the need to state Rivka's lineage; after all, the Torah already discussed her lineage previously. The Torah is stressing, answers Rashi, that despite her difficult background, Rivka became the great woman she was.

The Alter (Elder) of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv (1824-1898), asks, how can we say that Yitzchak had a greater merit based on his background; wouldn't Rivka's merit be that much greater because of what she had to overcome? The Alter answers that while it's certainly true that Rivka worked hard to become who she was, in a sense, Yitzchak had to work even harder. A person who grows up surrounded by evil, upon encountering the truth, is blown away and strives to make it a part of his or her life. Someone who grows up with amazing role models, though, runs the danger of considering goodness normal and never striving to make it an integral part of their lives.

This brings out an amazing insight as to how we measure the value of a good deed. It's not enough to do good deeds; we must also examine our positive actions and determine how much of them are a part of our essence, and how much is done out of habit.

Another example of this idea is found with Lot, the nephew of Avraham. Rashi teaches us that the merit for which Lot was saved from Sodom was because when Avraham descended to Egypt during the famine in Canaan, he told the authorities that Sara was his sister, for he feared they'd kill him upon discovering he was her husband. Lot kept quiet and did not reveal the truth; it was this silence that saved him from Sodom. The Alter of Kelm asks, why wasn't Lot saved for having risked his life to host guests in Sodom, a crime that carried the death penalty? That act seems to be far greater than not announcing Avraham's true identity, especially considering all the kindness Avraham had shown Lot.

The Alter answers that while it's true that risking one's life to host guests in Sodom in itself is much greater, it was something he had learned at Avraham's house; it therefore pales in comparison to that which he did on his own. For an act done on one's own initiative represents one's own achievements. The Rambam writes that even one mitzvah performed properly and completely can earn a person a portion in the World to Come! May we all merit to put in the necessary effort and do many such mitzvos.

## Stories For The Soul

### It's A Mitzvah Now

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman (1874-1941) was one of the foremost Torah leaders prior to, and during the early years of, WWII. Following the passing of his great rebbe, the Chofetz Chaim, in 1933, Rabbi Wasserman's leadership role increased, and he felt that he had to keep abreast of newsworthy events. To that end, he had a newspaper brought daily. The newspaper would be left on the *shtender* (lectern) where he studied in the bais medrash and, when he arrived, he would spend several minutes quickly perusing the news. (It should be noted that newspapers in 1930's-Poland did not contain much of the inappropriate material many secular papers include today.)

Someone asked Rabbi Wasserman, "I understand why you need to read the paper, but why do you specifically read it in the bais medrash? Wouldn't it be better to read it outside the place reserved for the study of Torah?"

Rabbi Wasserman explained, "If I read the paper, it is because I must do so to properly fulfill my responsibilities. It is thus a mitzvah for me to do so, and I do this in the bais medrash. If it is not a mitzvah, and therefore doesn't belong in the study hall, I have no business reading it in the first place!"

Yaakov's place was in the bais medrash, where he studied Torah and served G-d. But when he was required to adopt a more shrewd approach to procure the blessings that were rightfully his, he did not shirk his obligations; despite his apprehension, he did what needed to be done, as that was what G-d expected him to do.

## Kollel Happenings

**AXIS OF EVIL THIS MONDAY**  
Join Senior Educator Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher on a journey in the dark as he explores the nature of evil in Creation - and see the light at the end of the tunnel! For men and women at Aish Denver, Monday, November 16 from 7:45-8:45 PM.

### ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & HALACHA AT NEXT TORAH FOR TYCOONS

Join Daniel J. Sherwinter, Esq., partner, Marsh Fischman & Breyfogle LLP, and adjunct faculty at University of Colorado - Boulder, and Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher, Senior Educator for the Denver Community Kollel, as they delve into the challenges posed by artificial intelligence. December 2nd, 12-1:15 p.m. at the East Side Kosher Deli. Cost: \$25. RSVP [info@denverkollel.org](mailto:info@denverkollel.org).

### INSIDE THE NUMBERS

In Judaism, numbers are not simply a way to count things. Every number has a special significance. From *gematria* to *Who Knows One?* recited at the end of the Passover Seder, discover the world of numbers with Rabbi Moshe Heyman of the Denver Community Kollel. Every other Thursday from 2-3 pm Marathon Investments, 6565 South Dayton St., #1200. For more info, contact [rmh@denverkollel.org](mailto:rmh@denverkollel.org).

# Increase Your Jewish IQ

By Rabbi Yaakov Zions

**Last week we asked:** Every prayer recited in the presence of a *minyan* is preceded and followed by *kaddish*. When is *kaddish* said immediately following the *Shemone Esrei* recited by the congregation?

**A:** Following *ma'ariv* on weekdays and Yom Tov. (On Shabbos, though,

there are usually additional prayers added.)

**This week's question:** When may one recite *kaddish* twice in close succession without a *minyan*?

To submit an answer to Rabbi Zions, email [ryz@denverkollel.org](mailto:ryz@denverkollel.org)

## Lives of Our Torah Leaders Rabbeinu Gershom Me'or Hagolah - Part I

Rabbi Gershom ben Yehuda is known as Rabbeinu Gershom Me'or Hagolah - our teacher Rabbi Gershom, the light of the exile - due to the tremendous influence he exerted upon his and future generations of Ashkenazic Jewry. The great commentator Rashi stated, "Rabbeinu Gershom, who illuminated the eyes of the exile, and we all live from his mouth, and all the people of the German exile... are the students of his students."

Rabbeinu Gershom was born in the city of Metz, France in 960. He studied under Rabbi Yehudah ben Rabbi Meir HaKohein, also known as Rabbi Leontin and Sir Leontin. (The origin of the name Leontin is rather interesting. The secularized name "Leon" and "Leo" is based on "lion." The tribe Yehuda is referred to as a lion in the Torah; hence, Leontin was based on his name "Yehuda." We find a similar phenomenon today; the name "Yehuda Leib" is quite common, for "leib" is Yiddish for "lion.")

Rabbi Leontin moved his yeshiva to the German city of Mainz in the year 989, and a number of his prominent students, including Rabbi Gershom ben Yehuda, followed him there. In Mainz, the yeshiva flourished and attracted many new students.

After Rabbi Leontin's passing, his student Rabbi Gershom became the *rosh yeshiva* (dean) of the yeshiva. Many of his students became the Torah leaders of the next generation. Among them were Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar, who was the teacher of the great Scriptural and Talmudic commentator Rashi. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehudah and Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi, who are quoted by Rashi, also numbered among his disciples.

Rabbeinu Gershom authored a number of liturgical works; of these, ten of his compositions for the *selichos* prayers survive today. His most famous composition, *Zechor Bris Avraham*, is recited a number of times during the Days of Awe as part of the *selichos* prayers. Many of his responsa and his commentary on parts of the Talmud are also extant today.

Rabbeinu Gershom enacted a number of decrees that took hold in the Ashkenazic communities. Perhaps the most well-known of these are three bans he put into place and are observed until this day by Ashkenazi Jewry. They are 1) the ban on polygamy, 2) the ban on divorcing a woman against her will, and 3) the ban on reading another's private mail.