

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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THE KING'S CROWNS

by Rabbi Chaim Goldberger

When Moses ascended heavenward (to receive the Torah), he found G-d sitting and tying crowns onto the letters [of the Torah].

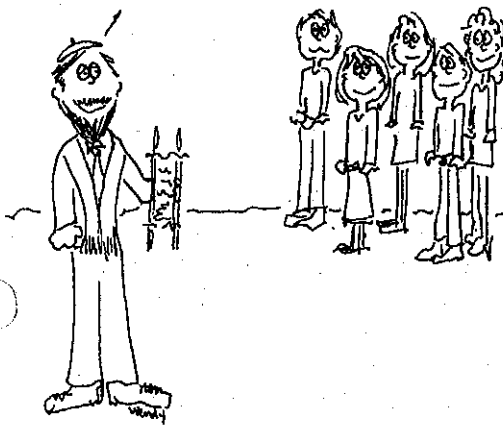
"Who is causing you to do this?" exclaimed Moses.

"There will be a man several generations from now by the name of Akiva ben Yosef", answered G-d, "who will derive mounds and mounds of *halachot* (legal details) from these thin lines." [Talmud Menachot 29b]

In his Thirteen Principles of Faith, Maimonides asserts that the Torah is eternal and absolute, and that all laws in it are inherently true and are not dependent on anything or anyone. Yet, the Talmudic passage above seems to be implying that were it not for the fact that Rabbi Akiva would derive these laws in the future, they would not have been included in the Torah. How could any laws in the Torah be dependent on the perception of a person?

Furthermore, why does the Talmud first describe them as "crowns", but later, when "quoting" G-d, refers to them as "thin lines." (cont. on p. 3)

"ARE WE KINGS OR
ARE WE SERVANTS?"



KEEPING KOSHER - - A 90'S THING

by Bari Brochstein-Ruggeri

Keeping kosher -- it's not just something that your grandparents used to do. In fact, it is a very 90's thing, or at least it is for my family and me.

In 1996 my then 14-year old daughter began the eighth grade at the Hebrew Academy. I knew that the school was more "traditional" than our way of life, but I had no idea the impact those traditions would have on my teenager and ultimately on us. The Academy's "New Opportunities" program was designed to help students from a multitude of backgrounds progress into the mainstream of students at their own speed.

Jennifer was fortunate to experience her first "real" Shabbat at the home of a classmate. The next few weekends spent in many different neighborhoods and attending a variety of synagogues. The list included United Orthodox

(cont. on p. 2)

BLACK FIRE ON WHITE FIRE

retold by Yehoshua Rubin

In Europe there were two childhood friends who went to yeshiva together. They were inseparable. They played together, studied Torah together, and served G-d together. Time passed, and as they grew in their Torah knowledge, it became clear that they were both destined to become great rebbes (Chassidic leaders).

And so it was.

One became the rebbe in Vork--the Vorke Rebbe, and the other became the Rebbe in Trisk--the Triske Rebbe.

They made a promise to each other that every week, no matter what, they would write to each other. In fact, among the chassidim, it was considered a great honor to deliver the letters each *Erev* Shabbat. Finally, one chasid was chosen to regularly deliver the letters between the Vorke and Triske Rebbes. He dared not miss a week, lest another chasid jump in and take his place.

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KEEPING KOSHER (cont. from p. 1)...Synagogues, Young Israel, Beth Rambam and Chabad.

Six weeks after school started, Jennifer told me that she wanted to keep kosher. We discussed it as a family. Given the world we live in and the other choices that she could have made, it was an easy decision. I wanted all of her friends to be able to eat in our home. So, as we began this adventure of keeping kosher, it was being done for Jennifer.

We began by "thinking kosher"- not serving meat and milk at the same meal, not eating anything inherently unkosher, and buying only kosher products. Now, you may be thinking that kosher products are too expensive, hard to find and inferior to nonkosher items. Guess what? Heinz ketchup, French's mustard and Hellman's mayonnaise are all kosher, just to name a few. In fact, many of the items already in your kitchen are kosher. (Just look at the labels for the telltale circled "U", called "O-U", or circled "K", called "O-K", or other symbols of kashruth supervision). It is true that some kosher products are more expensive than nonkosher ones, but it's worth it. Besides, when was the last time you heard of a recall on bad kosher meat? Health benefits may not be the primary reason for keeping kosher, but they are a nice added bonus.



"MTV, INTERNET, CELL PHONES, RAP MUSIC AND 'KASHRUT'-- THINGS OF THE 90'S!"

During this period of "thinking kosher," I read several books, went to some classes, and visited many homes of people at different stages in the becoming kosher process. Most of all, I asked a lot of questions. One thing that I noticed immediately was that everyone had his or her own comfort zone. Some people ate nonkosher outside the home, but limited themselves to vegetables and fish or chicken. Some people ate only baked potatoes or just salad. But everyone that I met could relate to where my family and I were, and everyone was willing to help.

I bought color-coded labels and nail polish. Meat was red, dairy was blue, and pareve (neutral) was green. Everything would be identified. My sponges, dish towels and Tupperware were also color coded.

I stocked up on paper plates and plastic utensils, just in

case we were not sure what to use. In addition, I began buying some new pots and pans, dishes, towels, silverware, etc., and putting them aside.

After six months of "pretending," we were ready to *kasher* our kitchen. We were also moving, so it was perfect time. On Mother's Day morning of 1997, Rabbi Boruch Perton of the Hebrew Academy came to our home. Using an industrial-size pot, we began by dipping all the utensils that were being made kosher in boiling water and then in running cold water. In a matter of hours, my kitchen was kosher.

I felt an overwhelming sense of pride and joy that day, and I continue to feel it each time I walk into my kitchen. Now, a year later, I am certain it was a wise decision. But now, keeping kosher is for everyone in my family, not just for one person. Each meal that my family eats, reminds us of our special connection to thousands of years of the rich history of our ancestors and to G-d. Through my teenage daughter, I learned the transcendent value of the *mitzvab* of *kashruth*.

Bari Brochstein-Ruggeri is a member of United Orthodox Synagogues in Houston, Tx, and Director of Sales, Pro Mark Corporation, which makes drumsticks for drummers.

This article first appeared in the Houston Jewish Herald Voice.

BLACK FIRE ON (cont. from p. 1)

Friday morning the Vorka Rebbe would hand the chasid an envelope. He would carry it through the woods, reach Trisk about midday, and wait for a reply. Usually within half an hour the response was ready, which he would carry to Vork.

This went on week after week, year after year. In fact, our story begins after this had been going on for almost fifteen years.

The chasid was carrying the letter to the Triske Rebbe and in the middle of the forest a *ruach sbtut*--a foolish spirit entered his mind, "You know, I have been carrying these letters back and forth every week for fifteen years now. I wonder what is written inside? . . ."

But to open the Rebbe's mail. . . whoever heard of such a thing?!! So he put the foolish idea out of his mind and delivered the letter. Yet his curiosity kept nagging at him.

The next week, the chasid took the letter from his Rebbe, the Vorka Rebbe, and started on his way through the forest to the town of Trisk.

I really wonder what they have to say to each other. After fifteen years of writing every week, what could they possibly say? . . . But to open the Rebbe's mail!"

Yet the chasid could not help himself. He stepped off the path into the thick of the woods and with trembling fingers opened his Rebbe's letter.

It was blank--a blank piece of paper. "What's going on here?" he thought. "Can it be, can it be that I have been carrying a blank piece of paper back and forth for fifteen years?"

The chasid was beside himself, but he had to deliver the letter, and so he did.

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BLACK FIRE ON (cont. from p. 2)

After about twenty minutes, the Triske Rebbe gave him his response and the chasid set off for Vork. Once again, in the thick of the wood, he stepped off the path. With trembling fingers he opened the Triske Rebbe's response.

It too, was just a blank piece of paper.

The chasid thought he was losing his mind. But what could he do? Soon it would be Shabbat and he had to return home.

He could barely rest that Shabbat, his thoughts kept plaguing him. At the Friday night *tish* (gathering), he could barely look at his Rebbe sitting at the head of the table. And the whole following week, his mind was in turmoil.

The next week he again stepped off the path to open the envelope, and again--A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER!!

"*Gut in himmel!*" - G-d in heaven! What is this? For fifteen years I've been going back and forth, in the cold, in the heat, in the rain, to deliver blank pieces of paper. These people are supposed to be *tzadikim!* They're supposed to be holy! Is this how they have their fun!? Torturing a poor chasid for fifteen years! I must talk to the Rebbe about this. But how can I tell him that I opened his mail?"

That Shabbat was a Shabbat from hell. The chasid was so tortured. "How can I go on? But how can I tell the Rebbe?"

By Saturday night it was too much.

"Rebbe I have to talk to you. I need to ask your forgiveness, but I must to talk to you."

"Rebbe, for fifteen years I have been carrying your letters to Triske Rebbe. After all these years, I just couldn't help myself...well, two weeks ago I opened your letter and I found a blank piece of paper. I did it again last week and again found a blank piece of paper. Rebbe, I am so embarrassed that I opened your letter, yet I am so troubled that you would ask me to carry a blank piece of paper back and forth for so long."

The Vorke Rebbe, who was known for his great *Abavat Yisrael* (love of his fellow Jews), looked gently at the troubled chasid. "You needn't be so upset--many times in the course of those years I did send you with regular letters, and yes, sometimes with a letter that was totally blank. Let me explain."

"It says in the Zohar, our book of mystical knowledge, that the Torah is made of black fire written on white fire, and that the white fire is holier than the black fire."

"The black fire is, of course, the letters of the Torah and the white fire is the parchment. How can the Zohar say that the white fire, the parchment, is holier than the black fire, the letters? After all, the letters make up the Torah itself!"

"Let me explain. There are two kinds of relationships one can have with Judaism."

"One relationship is definable. I am connected to Judaism because I know this information about Judaism. I understand this truth about Judaism. I am fond of this or that *mitzvah*."

"The other relationship is undefinable. I am Jewish because I am infinitely connected to being Jewish. I can not explain it in words, yet I feel it with every aspect of my being."

"The letters of the Torah--the black fire, represent the relationships that can be explained rationally. Just as I can read the letters, understand and grasp them, so too, these relationships."

"Yet the parchment is the white fire. Just as the parchment is clear or white, boundless without any definition, so too is my relationship with Judaism. It is there, it touches the depths of who I am, yet no words, no definition, can describe it or explain it."

"That is why the Zohar says the white fire is holier than the black fire, because the connection that one makes with Judaism, or with other people, which is explainable and definable, is not nearly as deep or as sweet as the connections we make with Judaism or with others which are beyond definition."



"FOR FIFTEEN YEARS I'VE BEEN CARRYING A BLANK LETTER?!"

"I grew up with the Triske rebbe. We were childhood friends and went through a great deal together. We are deeply connected to one another. Sometimes I do write him regular letters. But sometimes, we just want to share with each other that we have no words to express how connected we feel--it is beyond words."

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THE KING'S CROWNS (cont. from p. 1)

There are two ways to ascertain someone's wishes. One is to ask what he or she wants and let him or her tell you. The problem with this method is that words can be limiting. People may not be able to find the precise words to fully express what they are feeling, and that can hinder your ability to determine exactly what they desire.

Another way is to get to know people so well that you can read their will from the way they use their words, from the words they don't say, or from the nuances that shade the speaker's choice of words. For example, a man comes home at the end of the day. His wife asks him, "How was your day, honey?" and he answers simply, "fine." If she knows him well enough to know that he is ordinarily very talkative about his day's activities, she may sense from his (cont. on p. 4)

THE KING'S CROWNS (cont. from p. 3) uncharacteristic silence that something is troubling him and that he wishes to have her adopt an empathetic mode.

In the first way, people's words are their servants. They are expressing the speaker's will precisely as stated, without embellishment or interpretation.

In the second way, the words are functioning as kings. A king's job is to ascertain and carry out the will of the people. But the king is not required to poll them and do what they say. The king is supposed to have such an intimate knowledge of his subjects that he is able to determine their will innately through his observation and knowledge of them. The Talmud declares, "*Lev melachim lev kol ha'am*" - "The heart of the king is the heart of the entire population." If a person's words are conveying unspoken information that express the person's will more fully than the simple meaning permits, the words are acting not as servants, but as kings. But there is one catch. There has to be someone intimate enough with the speaker to be able to grasp all those subtleties.

That someone was Rabbi Akiva. The crowns atop the letters would have been there regardless of Rabbi Akiva. But if not for Rabbi Akiva's intimacy with the Torah's nuances

enabling him to "*derive mounds and mounds of balachot*" from them, our ability to ascertain G-d's meaning from His words would have been limited to their simple translation; the words would have been His "servants," and the pointed adornments atop the letters would have remained nothing more than just "thin lines." It was the existence and perceptivity of Rabbi Akiva that enabled the letters and words of the Torah to act as "kings," and enabled what G-d was tying on to them to be called "crowns."

In our lives as serious Jews, we have the same option. If we relate to the commandments by asking what we are to do, being told what to do, and doing it, we are expressing the will of our Creator as stated, and our performance is the performance of a servant. But if we let ourselves learn, if we begin to grow in our understanding of the deeper meaning behind the *mitzvot*, and we thereby develop an intimacy with the Almighty, our performance of *mitzvot* becomes the performance of a King, and we can experience the majestic dignity that comes with wearing Hashem's crown.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית

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