

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Chalutzim – Pioneers for Israel

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



At this time of struggle for the State of Israel, the Jewish state and our precious homeland, the introduction of the word *chalutz* in this week's *parasha* carries extra resonance. In the relatively recent history of modern Zionism, *chalutzim* were the farming pioneers who settled Israel and were instrumental in the eventual founding of the state. However, in the context of Parashat Matot, the word is introduced with a fury (Bamidbar 32:17, 20, 27, 29, 30). The tribes of Reuvein and Gad will get the good life on the Jordan River's East Bank if and only if they enter the promised West Bank, leading the Children of Israel to take possession of the Holy Land. Fittingly, while the word *chalutz* originally meant "loins" – as is "girding your loins" – many commentators have interpreted it as meaning "armed and ready to fight."

Yet in his great translation of the Torah into Aramaic, Unkelus consistently identifies *chalutz* as deriving from the root "z-r-z," a root denoting eagerness, passion, and speed. This is understandable since Reuvein and Gad had to show eagerness for and commitment to the conquest of the Land of Canaan in order to justify their possession of land on the East Bank of the Jordan, where Jordan and Syria are today. With this translation, Unkelus, who lived in Israel at the time of the Mishnaic scholars, gives Jews in the Diaspora a way of laying claim to the term *chalutzim*.

Many of us have friends or family fighting in the IDF to protect our brothers and sisters in Israel. They are literal *chalutzim*, girded in strength and courage, fighting the moral fight of our people. Some of us may be descendants of the Zionist *chalutzim* who helped build the modern Israel. But all of us can be Unkelus *chalutzim*: We can be eager, passionate, and unwavering friends of Israel. That might mean planning a trip to Israel now, when the visit might

include a dash into a shelter. It might mean connecting to Israel through contributions or moral and political support, making phone calls to our Senators or to the White House. It might mean sticking up for Israel in the workplace or in our neighborhoods. Even something as simple as activating the Red Alert app on your smart phone – allowing you to experience anywhere in *galut*, in real time, the sirens that our Israeli brothers and sisters are hearing in Israel – shows this sort of eagerness and passion.

However we demonstrate our enduring commitment to Israel, our *chalutzit*, let's make sure that the world sees it clearly, and let's make sure that God sees it as well. Together with Yehoshua, Elazar the High Priest was responsible for affirming the *chalutzit* of Reuvein and Gad. We don't have a High Priest anymore, but in the spirit of the original *chalutzim*, let us make our devotion to Israel not just a political or national experience but a religious one as well. The Jewish people and the people of Israel need *chalutzim* today as much as in the time of Yehoshua. Let's show that we are ready to be today's *chalutzim*.

FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

Matot - The Vessel or What's Inside of It?

By Rabbi Dov Linzer



A story is told that when Rav Soloveitchik's wife Tonya, z"l, was hospitalized due to an illness, he and Haym had the run of the house. Following the technical laws of *kashrut*, they proceeded to eat cold *milkhig* food on *fleishig* dishes. When Tonya returned from the hospital, she was apoplectic. The Rav explained that he was doing nothing more than following the *halakha* of the Shulkhan Arukh, to which Tonya replied: "You and your Shulkhan Arukh are going to *treif* up my kitchen!"

This story gets to the heart of what keeping separate dishes
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is all about. Most classically, it is treated as a concern that any flavor that might have seeped into the walls of the dish will transfer to the food currently in it – if there is no heat to transfer the taste, it shouldn't be a problem.

Alternatively, however, it may be about maintaining a strict division, of keeping like with like, of keeping the status and identity of things well defined – *milkhig* food gets *milkhig* dishes, *fleishig* food gets *fleishig* dishes. This latter approach is often thought of as one that more reflects the understanding of the laity, one that does not reflect the true *halakhic* concerns. The matter, however, is not so simple.

When the people come back from the war against the Midianites in this week's *parasha*, they bring with them the booty of war, including vessels and clothing. Elazar instructs them in what must be done with these items:

Everything that goes through fire, you shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean: nevertheless it shall be purified with the sprinkling water; and all that does not go through fire you shall make go through the water (Bamidbar 31:23).

The simple sense of these verses is that this is a purification process, since the people have just come in contact with dead bodies, and this is presumably the meaning of the "sprinkling water," that is, they must be sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer. This is certainly true regarding the purification of clothes mentioned in the following verse. However, this would not explain why the vessels in this verse must also be passed through fire or water. Rather than conclude that the Torah is introducing a new purification process, the Rabbis understand that a different issue is at play.

These cooking vessels, say the Rabbis, must not only be purified due to contact with the dead but purged of the non-kosher tastes that they have absorbed. Thus, vessels used directly over the fire, such as a spit, must be purified or *kashered*, as we would say, by putting it over a fire, and similarly vessels used with boiling water, such as a pot, must be *kashered* with boiling water. This is the principle of *ki'bolo kakh polto*, just as it absorbed the taste, so it expels it.

But maybe not. Maybe this whole process is not primarily about removing problematic absorbed taste. Maybe it is about changing the identity of the vessel, taking a *treif* vessel and redefining it, through this ritual, as a kosher one.

What is the evidence for this? First, this verse appears in the context of ritual purification, which is all about effecting a

change of status. Second, note that the Rabbis also learn from this verse that there is a mitzvah to immerse even brand new vessels purchased from non-Jews, the mitzvah of *tevilat keilim*. This is most easily understood as a ritual to change the status of the vessel – from a non-Jewish vessel to a Jewish one. The juxtaposition in the verse of this requirement to *kashering* one suggests that the two are serving a similar function – change of status. Reflecting and reinforcing this is the Mishna in Avoda Zara (75b) which deals with *kashering* and *toveling* vessels all in the same discussion. Taken together, it seems like we are dealing with issues of status and not necessarily absorbed taste.

Other *halakhot* and Talmudic discussions support this approach. When we *kasher* a vessel, we only look at its primary use – on the fire, with boiling water, etc. – and not at all the ways it might have absorbed the taste of food. After we do the *kashering* we have the custom of immersing the vessel in cold water, akin to a purification process (and what is done with a *chatat*, see Vayikra 6:21). Perhaps more significant is the fact that the requirement to *kasher* these dishes from Midian may not fit the general rules of absorbed taste, either because the taste would have already been spoiled, *lifgam* (Pesachim 44b), or as the 13th century Rav Aharon HaLevi (Ra'ah) points out, because there would not be enough of it to be considered the true taste of the original food (Chezkat HaBayit on Torat HaBayit 4:1, 11a).

If this isn't about the taste of the absorbed food, what is it about? Ra'ah states, in the name of his teacher Ramban, that the prohibition to use vessels that were used with non-kosher food is because of what they are. Don't use *treif* vessels. Whatever is in their walls doesn't matter, if they were used to cook *treif* food, they are *treif*. In this way, *kashering* vessels is a form of purifying them, of changing their status and transforming them.

So who was right? Was it the Rav or was it Tonya? Is it the vessel, or is it what is in it? The truth is that both of these approaches exist within *halakha*, and an ongoing dialectical tension exists between them.

And so it should be. For while Rebbe Yehudah haNasi famously teaches, "Do not look at the vessel, but at what is inside it," the reality is that we are always looking at the vessel, and this is not necessarily a bad thing (Pirkei Avot 4:20). We need to organize our reality. We need to assign labels, to categorize, to understand where one thing stands in relation to others. And the way a thing or a person appears, the identity they project, helps us do this in an

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efficient and effective way. There is a reason doctors go around wearing white coats and stethoscopes. It is true that this might lead to us dismissing someone who is not wearing that white coat or to giving too much weight to one who is, even if she is not such an expert, but it is better than the alternative – not having any idea who is who and how to navigate our way.

Tonya was right. Eating cold cheese off of a *fleishig* plate might be *halakhically* permissible. But blurring the boundaries and mixing categories is also a sure way to *treif* up the kitchen.

This approach is also central to the *halakhic* system, or any legal system for that matter. *Halakha* mostly operates with formalistic categories. Certain concrete, objective, quantifiable criteria are assessed, and that dictates what category something is in and what *halakhot* obtain. What *halakha* doesn't do, except in rare cases, is look at the full context, the circumstances relevant to an individual or thing, and apply one law to the whole as a category rather than apply a different law for each facet of the case. This is the principle of *lo plug* – we don't make distinctions. It would be highly inefficient, if not impossible, to have a legal system that operated on principles and not on formal categories. Looking at the vessel is absolutely necessary.

But if Tonya was right, so was Rebbe Yehudah haNassi. For a system that only looks at status and identity, that places labels on people and things and makes decisions on that basis, will lead to cases of error and injustice, to marginalization and exclusion. The woman in the white coat may not be a doctor, and even if she is, she may not know what she is talking about. If we are able, we need to stretch ourselves and go past the quick, easy categorization and its conclusions. We need to do our research, find out what truly is contained in the vessel.

Similarly with *halakha*. While a non-formalist approach undermines the *halakhic* system, an overly formalist approach can be blind to real people and real human suffering. There are times that we have to push ourselves and find ways to look at not just the category, but the real live person that is in it. There are ways that *halakha* accommodates this – concepts such as *sha'at ha'dechak*, an exigency where exceptions can be made, or times when we don't say *lo plug*, where situations are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. And then there are times when, like the laws of kosher vessels, the two exist in an ongoing dialectic relationship, where the particular circumstances and

context can influence how the formal categories are defined.

In the end, we must find a way to keep our kitchens kosher, and we must find a way to know and care what each and every vessel contains.

GUEST DVAR TORAH

Floating in the Air

By Dan Margulies (YCT '17)



At the beginning of Parashat Matot, the Torah provides for a process to nullify vows – *hafarat nedarim* – whereby a husband or father can nullify his wife's or daughter's vows (Bamidbar 30). However, the more general process for annulling vows (one with which modern Jews are more familiar) – *hatarat nedarim* – is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah at all.

The Mishnah questions the reliability of such an institution by pointing out that “the annulment of vows are [sic] floating in the air and they have no source to rely on” (Hagigah 1:8). This is a shocking suggestion. What can it mean that a *halakhah*, which is afforded biblical weight, is denied even a scriptural hook? And further, what is the meaning here of the enigmatic phrase “floating in the air,” a phrase usually employed literally: floating between heaven and earth?

A use as illuminating as it is obscure of the same phrase can be found in the description of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion's martyrdom by the Romans, as recorded in *Masekhet Semahot* (8:12). While he was being burned alive, his *sefer Torah* was being burned along with him. As his daughter wept for this incredible disgrace and tragedy he consoled her saying, “... and if it is for the *sefer Torah* that you weep; behold, this *Torah* is fire, and fire cannot consume fire. Behold, the words that are written are floating in the air, and the fire is only able to consume the parchment.” As in the Mishnah, the phrase “floating in the air” is used figuratively. More surprisingly, in this case the ability of *Torah* to float in the air carries a positive

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implication rather than the seemingly negative one found in Hagigah.

At one level, the ability of words of Torah to float in the air represents their transience. This is the uniqueness of the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah exists in the moment and does not linger. It has no point of attachment and, like a runaway balloon, must be grabbed immediately or the opportunity will be lost. This makes the study of Torah exciting and precious.

For Rabbi Haninah, however, the transience of a floating Torah is less important than its durability. At times of great rupture, it has always been the flexibility and adaptability of the Oral Torah that allowed the Jewish people to move forward. Even watching physical destruction, we can take solace in knowing that the spoken word, floating, will carry on, embodied in the human experience.

The halakhah that exemplifies this adaptability is hatarat nedarim, quintessentially defined as floating midair. It is a Rabbinic innovation, needed to avoid serious violations of the laws of vows. It provides an opportunity for unbinding the bound, reversing the irreversible. In this way, hatarat nedarim can serve as a paradigm for the Torah's dynamic ability to respond to life lived in the moment, even if such a notion can seem scary or risky at times. The Rabbinic ability to invoke such a mechanism – even if no explicit source can be found – shows just how essential the ability to adapt, to float in the air, is to the success of the halakhic system.

About Rabbi Feigelson:

From his work with Hillel International to his service to Chicago Jewish Day School, Rabbi Joshua Feigelson is an active leader in Jewish education.

To read about how Joshua is helping to shape the future of Jewish education and Jewish youth, see our weekly email newsletter. If you do not receive our newsletter but would like to, please email us at sleee@yct Torah.org.

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