

Kehillah #51



THE PERTINENT PARASHA

The Special Nature of Jewish Unity

Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer | Rav of Kehillat Ohr Chadash, Ramot, Jerusalem

What is the central theme of *Parashas Vayigash* – the *parasha* that completes *sefer Bereishis*, except for the blessings of *Vayechi*? A glance at the *haftara* reading reveals the core: the unity of the Jewish people.

The *haftara* records Hashem's instruction to Yechezkel to take two twigs, one engraved with the name Yehuda and the other with Yosef. Yechezkel was to bring them together, so that they become one. Thus, the Jewish people will become one nation, no longer divided into distinct kingdoms (*Yechezkel* 37:22).

This is how we reach our final destiny: "And I will form a covenant of peace for them [...] and I will place My Sanctuary in their midst forever" (*Yechezkel* 37:26).

As *Bereishis* reaches its conclusion, ending our national tale in its primordial family version, the message is unity. The brothers, divided by hatred and tragedy, are united again. In their unity, their

father Yaakov "lives" once more (*Bereishis* 44:27). But why is this unity so crucial? Why must *Bereishis* finish on this note, and why is it essential for realizing our national destiny?

The answer is that ever since Yaakov and Esav emerged as twins, two strands have existed among the Jewish nation. One strand, the thread that continues the legacy of Yaakov as "a tent dweller," is that of Yosef. The second, however, which fulfills the hunter role of Esav, is that of Yehuda.

The division of labor between tent and field is between defining who we are, as we do at home, and realizing that definition in the harsh reality of

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THE PERTINENT PARASHA



the world – in the field. Both are part and parcel of the Jewish mission, yet they must be carried by different figures.

We need to ensure that the modern version of Yehuda – the political leadership of the Jewish people, Israel, and its institutions – is aligned with the essence of the Jewish nation.

Yosef, the great visionary, a man of dreams who never strayed from the ideal, embodied the first. As the son of Rachel, he continued Yaakov's essence, and even fathered tribes. In the words of Yaakov's blessing, he shepherds our national legacy. His leadership, which hardly popularized him among his brothers, was "top down."

Yehuda, and later King David, whose fallibilities were integral to their leadership from within the people – "Yehuda, your brothers shall acknowledge you" (*Bereishis* 49:8) – captured the second. They provide our "hunting skills," the national instruments by which our core is fully realized in the field.

To achieve unity, Yehuda must be willing to sacrifice himself on behalf of Binyamin – the second son of Rachel and an extension of Yosef. The practical aspect of the nation, that of Yehuda and the sons of Leah, must be subdued to the essence carried by the sons of Rachel.

After Yehuda demonstrated his willingness to endure Egyptian slavery to procure Binyamin's release, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers and declares reunification: "And now, you did not send me here, but G-d, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt" (*Bereishis* 45:8). All was forgiven. Unity was restored.

As the bells of war toll incessantly toward our national destiny, we need to ensure our own unity. A crucial step toward this is ensuring that the modern version of Yehuda – the political leadership of the Jewish people, Israel, and its institutions – is aligned with the essence of the Jewish nation.

There are times when we shy away from field labor; stepping outside the tent is never without risk. Today, it is a holy duty, a privilege on which we cannot afford to pass.

"Then the nations will know that I am Hashem Who sanctifies Israel, when My Sanctuary will be among them forever."




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Don't Hog the Blanket!

Rabbi Yaacov Haber – Rav of Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Ramat Beit Shemesh

This Friday we commemorate the Tenth of Teves, the day on which Nebuchadnetzar began his occupation of Jerusalem. At the time, all the Jews had been living in Eretz Yisrael for 850 years. The Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem, built by Shlomo Hamelech, was 410 years old. Generations of Jews had never considered living anywhere else but in Eretz Yisrael. That was our home. We had been there since the time of Yehoshua. Jerusalem was a given – until the Babylonians entered it.

The Midrash (*pesicha* of *Eicha Rabba*) offers an analogy to the mood of the times: “The twelve families of Israel were divided. They were like two people sharing a new blanket during the bitter winter. One kept pulling the blanket toward himself and the other kept pulling the blanket toward himself. Finally the blanket ripped in half and became useless.”

I became frightened when I read this midrash. Eretz Yisrael to us is like a “new blanket.” It was given to us by G-d for protection against the bitter winter of *galus* that we have been experiencing for centuries. As we took shelter under this cozy,

warm cover we began to pull. The blanket can tear in half.

I'd like to share a bit of Kabbala. In this week's *parasha* the Torah informs us that right before Yosef revealed himself to his brothers he could no longer control himself. He told all the Egyptian aides to leave the room. He needed to be alone with his brothers. The *Zohar* teaches that this was a moment of *Yichud Elyon*. In the heavens the souls of Yosef and his brothers needed to be reunited. But in order for that to happen, the reunification had to take place in this world as well. And in order for there to be a complete bonding between the brothers, no one aside from them could be present in the room. They needed to be alone.

The *Zohar* compares this state of aloneness to the *Kohen Gadol* entering the Holy of Holies. No other man was allowed in the *Kodesh Hakodashim* when the *Kohen Gadol* stood there before G-d. If someone else would be present, even an angel, the bonding between the *Kohen Gadol* and G-d would be incomplete. Bonding requires privacy.





Hashkafically Speaking



Why did the bonding between the brothers need to take place at this exact moment? Because the name of Hashem is composed of the combined letters of the names of all the sons of Yaakov. As long as *machlokes* and estrangement separated them, the name of Hashem could not be whole. The balance between G-d's name of justice and His name of mercy could not be achieved. The survival of the Jewish people would be imperiled. At this moment, just before the sojourn of the Jewish people in Egypt, where they would endure a long and difficult exile, Hashem's name and therefore the Jewish people had to be complete.

Hashem's name, which represents His relationship with us, is directly affected by the unity of all of Israel. The Jewish people have to be alone with each other and bonded with each other so that there can be protection from above. Otherwise the blanket rips in half.

What should we do on the Tenth of Teves? Israel is at war and is standing at a dangerous crossroads. What does G-d have planned for us? What can bring peace?

It is important for all of us to understand that in order for there to be peace with our enemies,

there must first be peace between us. During these trying times, let us all encourage peacefulness. Let's attend *shiurim* that teach peace, give *tzedaka* to organizations that promote peace, and speak words that will bond the families of Israel together. If there is

As long as *machlokes* and estrangement separated the sons of Yaakov, the name of Hashem could not be whole.

someone you don't get along with, make a special effort at reconciliation. We need to create a *Yichud Elyon*. Don't do anything divisive. Don't hog the blanket.

May Hashem spread His holy and warm canopy of peace upon us and upon all of Israel.

This devar Torah is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Mazal Tov bas Eliyahu, whose yahrtzeit is this week. May she be an advocate for our people and our family before Hashem. May her memory be a blessing.



Makkas Medina

Rabbi Asher Meir | Torah and Policy Researcher

In our *parasha*, Pharaoh adopts Yosef's suggestion and stores up huge quantities of grain in the years of plenty. The Torah tells us that in return for selling the grain to Egyptian farmers, Yosef acquired on Pharaoh's behalf most of the agricultural lands in Egypt, and established a rule of "a fifth to Pharaoh" (*Bereishis* 47:25).

This form of tenancy, where the tenant farmer is entitled to a fixed proportion of the produce, is called sharecropping in English; in the Talmud it is called *kabbala* (receiving) (see Mishna *Bava Metzia*, chapter 9 in several places). The sharecropping arrangement was widespread until fairly recently, and a number of chapters of the *Shulchan Aruch* are dedicated to its laws (*Choshen Mishpat* 320-330). In recent generations the arrangement is less popular, and comparatively few Jews work the land as farmers, but these halachos retain their relevance and are routinely applied to contemporary partnership arrangements.

One concept discussed widely regarding sharecropping is *makkas medina* - literally, a regional disaster. The halachic significance is as follows. A responsible agent

generally accepts liability for any loss that is directly related to his particular situation: his own acts and the unique property he is responsible for. But the owner bears responsibility for losses that are widespread. Often the question is framed as whose bad luck was involved (*Bava Basra* 98a). If a loss encompasses an entire region, then the bad luck is not solely that of the individual tenant or worker.

The Mishna gives two examples: Someone who steals someone's field (often this is just a case of a sincere mistake in title) has to make good the entire loss if the field is damaged or seized. But if there is a *makkas medina* - all the fields in the region were damaged or seized - he is exempt (*Bava Kamma* 10:5). A lessee whose crop is ruined by pests or bad weather is still obligated to pay the entire lease payment of produce. But if there is a *makkas medina* - all crops in the region were ruined by pests or bad weather - he is exempt. (Secular law has similar provisions, such as force majeure, national disaster, or "an act of God.")

The *Pischei Teshuva* (*Choshen Mishpat* 321) discusses a contractor who paid the Jewish community





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for the right to collect the *shechita* fee. An outbreak of disease in local livestock meant that few animals were slaughtered, and the contractors had virtually no revenue. The Chasam Sofer (*Chosen Mishpat* 161) rules that this is a *makkas medina* and the contractors may terminate the agreement going forward. Conversely, the *Pischei Teshuva* cites the *Pri Tevua* (34), which concludes that if soldiers loot the countryside occasionally, this is not a *makkas medina* but rather a loss “dependent on luck,” which as we saw the Gemara (*Bava Basra* 98a) imposes on the agent.

Many of the rulings regarding *makkas medina* relate to war. The Maharam Rotenburg (responsum 388) discusses a tenant who fled his rented dwelling due to wartime and wants the landlord to return the rent for the time of his absence. The landlord points out that he made the dwelling available the whole time. The Maharam rules that since this was a *makkas medina*, the landlord has to share the responsibility and return half the rent. A similar conclusion appears in the Chasam Sofer (*Sefer Hazikaron*, p. 37) regarding salaries. Rav Elyashiv (He’aros HaGrish, *Bava Metzia* 77a) rules that in the Gulf War the schools were not obligated to pay the teachers for days missed, even though the teachers were willing to come to teach, because

the canceled classes are a *makkas medina*.

For the average person or community, war is indeed a *makkas medina* – something completely beyond their ability to predict and control.

Rav Aharon Velkin (*Zekan Aharon* II:143) was asked about a *shochet* who was drafted into the army and demanded his salary, claiming that this is not individual negligence but rather a *makkas medina*. Rav Velkin, however, concluded that since only some people were drafted, this is a consequence of individual luck and not a *makkas medina*, so the community does not have to pay him.

For the average person or community, war is indeed a *makkas medina* – something completely beyond their ability to predict and control. But for the leaders of a country, war preparations must be an integral part of decision making. According to many commentators, Yosef was acutely aware of the need to promote peace by being adequately prepared for war. The Torah tells us that as a result of





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Yosef's advice, Pharaoh *chimesh* the land of Egypt (41:34). Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky in *Emes LeYaakov* suggests that since a well-provisioned country is a ready target for invaders, Yosef "advised to prepare a large army," where the root *ches-mem-shin* is evidently used in the modern meaning of "to arm." A few verses later (41:40), Pharaoh instructs Yosef that his people should *yishak* according to Yosef's instructions.

The Ibn Ezra relates this word to the root *nun-shin-kuf*, meaning "arms," and suggests that Yosef was *naggid hachayil*, leader of the army. The Torah itself shows that Yosef is alert to the possibility that supposed grain customers are in fact foreign spies (42:9). According to these commentators, Yosef's unique leadership abilities extended beyond economic policy to astute military policy as well.



PARASHA AND PARNASSAH

How to Ask Someone What They Do for a Living

Rabbi Tzvi Broker – Career Coach and Director of Pilzno Work Inspired

When meeting someone for the first time, one of the first questions commonly asked is "What do you do for a living?" Is this a Jewish way to greet someone?

In this week's *parasha*, Yosef prepares his brothers for meeting Pharaoh. He says, "And when it comes to pass that Pharaoh calls you and asks, 'What is your occupation?' you shall say, 'Your servants have been owners of livestock from our youth until

now, both we and our ancestors.'"

Indeed, when Pharaoh meets them this was his initial question. The Torah says, "And from among his brothers he took five men, and he presented them before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to his brothers, 'What is your occupation?' And they said to Pharaoh, 'Your servants are shepherds, both we and our forefathers.'"

What's the significance of this and what does it mean about our own





PARASHA AND PARNASSAH

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conversation icebreakers?

When meeting someone for the first time, it's natural to try to understand who we're speaking to and to ask questions that help give us a reference point. Many people spend a significant part of their days involved in their jobs. The question is how much this defines who they are. We can suggest that in Pharaoh's mind one's profession defined one's value. It was therefore natural for him to greet Yosef's brothers by inquiring about their profession.

What about ourselves? As Jews, what we do professionally need not define who we are. If so, trying to understand who a person is by asking about their profession is off target. I still recall the questions Rav Moshe Weinberger asked me when I met him for the first time. Instead of asking what I did for a living he asked, "Besides being a husband and father, how do you spend your time?" I was inspired by this sensitive way of inquiring about my work that didn't come with the assumption that my job defined my essence.

At the same time, the Torah's outlook doesn't dismiss a person identifying with their profession completely. We have previously discussed a teaching in Avos

DeRabbi Nasan (1:10) that says: "Praiseworthy is work because each professional is proud of his work. As we see that a scribe walks out with his quill in his ear, the tailor with his sewing pin in his coat, and so is the case with all professionals in their expertise."

In this teaching, work is praised specifically because one's work is an expression of self to the extent that one displays this through a unique professional uniform. How can this be understood in light of what was discussed above?

The answer is that it's all about context. The message of the midrash is that *one's profession is not just something superficial that he does*. It would be a mistake to think that feeling good about one's professional identity goes against Torah values. At the same time, we need to ensure that we don't fall into cultural thinking that one's profession fully identifies who one is.

Finding this balance requires self-awareness and sensitivity. In conversations with new acquaintances, when and how we ask about their profession can be a great starting point for fine-tuning our mindsets about the connection between what we do and who we are.



Taking Interest

Gratitude and Ribbis

Rabbi Shloimy Muller

Talmid of Rav Pinchas Vind *shlita*, founder of the Beis Horaah L'Inyanei Ribbis

Last week we raised the issue of the borrower thanking his lender for the loan. As we mentioned, this isn't an easy halacha to keep. As Yidden, we intuitively wish to express our very real feelings of gratitude.

There's an interesting story about Rav Shimon Schwab, *zt"l*, that addresses this point. As a *bachur* he traveled from Frankfurt to learn in Yeshivas Mir. Before returning home for a visit, he borrowed money from the *mashgiach*, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, to cover his traveling expenses. When he returned to yeshiva, he went to the *mashgiach*, repaid his debt, and thanked him. Rav Yerucham sternly told him off for this breach of halacha.

A year passed, and once again young Shimon borrowed from and repaid Rav Yerucham. This time, however, he remained quiet. As he walked away, Rav Yerucham admonished him. "Where is your gratitude to someone who helped you?" he asked.

"Well, what I should do?" the *bachur* replied. "When I thanked you, you told me that it's forbidden to do that, and now, when I remain quiet, you say that I should thank you?"

"Although it is forbidden to thank your lender verbally, having good *middos* requires that you be filled

with *hakaras hatov* within," Rav Yerucham explained. "But when I looked into your eyes, I did not see this in you."

Feeling real gratitude within but being careful not to express it verbally is the way one can have *hakaras hatov* toward his lender and still not transgress any halachos.

The prohibition against thanking and praising the lender is known as *ribbis devarim*, which simply means giving interest with words. This includes any non-monetary-valued benefits. For example, the borrower who previously ignored his lender may not begin greeting him and going over to him to say good Shabbos and mazel tov. However, if the loan served simply as an opportunity for the borrower to get to know the lender, and he now greets him like any other acquaintance of his, it would be fine, because his greetings are not meant to express gratitude for the loan.

This prohibition against *ribbis devarim* is limited only to the duration of the loan. Once the loan has been fully repaid, the borrower can bestow non-monetary benefits on his lender as long as he does not say that he is doing this in appreciation for the loan.



Missing the Point

Rebbetzin Ilana Cowland

Relationships Coach and author of *The Moderately Anxious Everybody*

We are all reeling this week. All death is painful. But somehow the circumstances of the death of three escaped hostages is an even more bitter pill to swallow.

Sometimes, when I don't understand a mitzvah in the Torah, I try to imagine how the world would have looked without it. It has helped me make sense of things over the years. I do that, too, when I hear something extremely painful. It doesn't always work for me. I asked Hashem this week why He couldn't have given us back those three hostages. Why was it necessary? For them, for their families, for the soldiers who have sacrificed so much these past two months, for the morale of the nation?

These are not questions to be answered in this world. They probably shouldn't be asked either. But it's hard not to equate what did happen in the *parasha* with what did not happen in Gaza. In the *parasha*, brothers recognized each other, and blessing ensued. In Gaza, brothers did not recognize each other, and tragedy followed. The Torah is whispering to us.

And so when I comforted myself by

It's hard not to equate what did happen in the *parasha* with what did not happen in Gaza.

imagining a different outcome – one of victory and joy – I also pictured the narrative. Hostages escaped. Israeli army rescued them. The ground incursion a victory. Job well done the government.

Here We Go Again

Everyone mentioned but G-d Himself. Here we go again. The Jews missing the whole point. Many

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people are struggling with October 7 and the judgment that we were dealt. I don't see it like that. The atrocities and monstrosities were the ugly hand of Hamas. We must learn to blame humans for lack of humanity.

But what I do see – and it makes me shudder – is not what G-d did for us but rather what He didn't do for us. 1948. 1967. Miracle. Protection. *Siyata diShmaya*. October 7? G-d painfully turned His face from us. It

The descendants of Yishmael are our greatest enemy because they were born from prayer, and prayer became their legacy,

was the one day of turning away. And when His face turned, He found His *chesed* facing our enemy.

As Rabbi Frand once said, they are our greatest enemy because they were born from prayer, and prayer became their legacy. They are the

only enemy, Yishmael, that has the name of Hashem. On October 7, the revolting brother was the benefactor of the *chesed* that Hashem retracted from us. Our October 7 was their Six-Day War victory, may Hashem have mercy.

So why would our beloved Hashem turn His back on us if not that we turned our back on Him first? We have become so used to miracles and kindness that we have disconnected them from their source. "Thanks, Dad," says the child living off his father's credit card. "But I've got enough money now. I don't need you. I don't want you. I'm not interested in relationship with you." How many years can that go on before the credit card gets disconnected, and the child comes crawling back to his father.

The Deserving Child

Except that we are not even crawling back. Imagine the pain of Hashem. That judgment dictated that the deserving child this time was Yishmael and not Yisrael! The loathsome child has never turned his back on G-d while the blessed favored child has taken G-d for granted.

And here we are. Still pretending that we will be fine on our own. That





Hashem, we know You want us to turn back to You. All of us. Please help us know how to make that happen.

victory will be ours because we are Am Yisrael. But that only means something when we associate being Am Yisrael with being Am Hashem. When will we learn? What will it take?

We had three hostages in front of us – but without the blessing that Hashem bestowed on Yosef for brothers to know brothers that we read in that very *parasha*. Without Hashem's blessing, what could have been a moment of tremendous joy became a day of bitter tragedy.

So Much to Lose

We have to make a move to earn Hashem back. We are not ready to have the *chesed* back yet. Until we recognize that the *chesed* is from Hashem, we are not ready for it. And we can't afford to take our sweet time about it. Time is not sweet when we have so much to lose.

Hashem, we know You want us to

turn back to You. All of us. Please help us know how to make that happen. Please help those of us who see You, and share You with those of us who don't. Please give us the insights and ideas necessary to help turn Am Yisrael back to You. Help us be a *kiddush Hashem*. Help us bring about a movement of spiritual awakening. Help us partner with You in the *teshuvah* that Eretz Yisrael needs. Do with us *chesed* and let us recognize Your hand.

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Rebuke and the Chocolate Bar

Josh and Tammy Kruger

The Story

Rivka and Karen, high school classmates from Chicago, had been excited for months. Almost every day they chatted about camp. They almost screamed with glee when they found out that they had been placed in the same bunk together.

It was now the first day of camp. They had just arrived with the other campers and were greeted by the camp staff with a special barbecue dinner. After eating their fill of delicious hot dogs and hamburgers, the girls returned to their bunk to prepare for their night activity – a hike in the woods. Rivka began searching for her flashlight and her hooded sweatshirt. As she dressed, she glanced out the back window and was surprised to see Karen outside eating a chocolate bar – a dairy chocolate bar.

Rivka took a moment to think. Perhaps Karen was eating a parve version of a chocolate bar? No. Rivka often bought the exact same

chocolate bar with her allowance money, and there definitely wasn't a parve version. Perhaps Karen did not wait as long as Rivka between meat and milk? No, that also wasn't possible. They had just finished their last hamburgers 15 minutes ago. Rivka had visited Karen's home frequently and knew that the family waited over five hours between meat and milk. It seemed that there was no other possibility other than the fact that Karen had knowingly committed an *aveira*.

Rivka thought to herself, "What should I do? Perhaps I should speak to Karen about it. She is my friend, and a friend shouldn't let another friend make mistakes. On the other hand, she will probably become embarrassed if I discuss it with her. Embarrassing another person can also be an *aveira*. She may even become angry with me and stop being my friend!"

What should Rivka do?





Discussion

Q: What is the connection between our story and the *parasha*?

A: The answer is *tochacha*, which means to tell someone when they have done something wrong. Yosef gave his brothers *tochacha* about the wrong way that they had treated him when they betrayed him and sent him to Egypt as a slave.

Q: Can you think of two reasons why it is important to give someone *tochacha*?

A: (1) If we care about fellow Jews, then we shouldn't let them do something that is dangerous. When someone commits an *aveira*, it causes great danger to their *neshama*. Just as we would surely stop a friend from stepping too close to a tall cliff, we should try to stop our friend from committing an *aveira*. This relates to the commandment of *lo taamod al dam re'acha* – standing on another's blood – *Minchas Chinuch* 239:6.

(2) Hashem judges us as a nation together. When another Jew commits an *aveira*, all Jews suffer the punishment. In *Tanna Debei Eliyahu Rabba* (ch. 11) a *mashal* is given that all Jews are on a ship together. If someone makes a hole in his room, then the water that

rushes in will sink the whole ship, and everyone will be in danger.

Q: When should we not give someone *tochacha*?

A: If we know for certain that the person will not listen to our advice, then we should not give *tochacha*. They will not change their ways and will keep performing the *aveira* intentionally (*Mishna Berura* 608:3; *Teshuvos Rashi* 40). In our generation, where so many Jews have been raised without a religious education, it may be better for them to sin accidentally rather than sin knowing that it is wrong (*Mishna Berura, Bei'ur Halacha, s.v. mochin*). We have to be careful in such situations and should ask the advice of a *rav*.

Q: If we do give someone *tochacha*, can you think of how it needs to be done?

A: We have to be careful to minimize any embarrassment (*Rambam, Hilchos De'os* 6:7). It should be done in a private place. We must speak in a gentle, friendly way without being angry or condescending. If someone is worried that they may not be able to do this properly, then it is better not to do *tochacha* at all (*Rav Chaim of Volozhin, Keser Rosh* 143).





Back to Our Story



Rivka did not say anything to Karen immediately. Instead, she took time to think about the situation carefully and to prepare her words carefully. She waited for the right time when they were alone together.

"Karen, you are a great friend, and I think you are a wonderful person. But I'm a bit confused because, by chance, I saw you eating what looked like a dairy chocolate bar right after our meat dinner."

"You're right," confessed Karen with a blush. "I had a moment of weakness. I had been craving that delicious chocolate bar

all day long, and I guess I just gave in to my *yetzer hara*."

Rivka patted Karen on the shoulder. "Well, I certainly have given in to my *yetzer hara* in the past as well. I think we need to help each other, as good friends, to fight against our urges. Let's promise, *bli neder*, that the next time either of us has the urge to do something wrong, we'll tell each other about it so we can help each other resist the temptation."

"Deal," smiled Karen.

"Great," said Rivka. "Now let's go back to our bunk and share a very tasty *parve* treat that I've been saving for just the right moment."



Written in collaboration with Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer, le'ilui nishmas Frumit bat Yosef, Edith Nusbaum, a"h.

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