

Vayishlach 5763

Riddle: Many tefillos are arranged according to אל"ף בי"ת; for example, אשרי יושבי, אנעים זמירות, ביתך, קל אדון על כל המעשים, and so on. But is there anywhere a תפילה that is arranged according to the אל"ף בי"ת backwards?

תכנת שבת כו'

What a strange arrangement? Why should the composers of the תפילה have chosen such a strange pattern?

Fascinating answer from ישמח משה, in name of בעש"ט. But to understand his answer, we need to preface a few ideas.

Last week, we read how יעקב left his fathers home to set out to חרן. And his departure is signified with the word ויצא. That word signifies his first step into a hostile world, which will be far different than the אהל of יצחק and רבקה in which he grew up.

There is a very cryptic statement from the 17th century מקובל R' Nosson Shapiro, the מגלה עמוקות, that ויצא stands for: וירא יעקב צורת אלף. Yaakov stepped out into the world with a vision of an אלף before his eyes.

On the other hand, this week we read how עשיו, Yaakov's nemesis, comes to meet him accompanied by 400 men. And the מגלה עמוקות writes that these 400 men represent the 400 forces of טומאה that surrounded עשיו. You will remember that 400 is represented by the letter ת'.

So, putting these two ideas together, we have יעקב setting out into the world with a vision of the letter אלף, and עשיו setting out against him with a cohort of טומאה representing the letter ת'.

Another riddle:

Where is there a פסוק containing five consecutive words, all starting with the letter אל"ף?

אמר אויב ארדוף אשיג אחלק שלל.

The תולדות יעקב יוסף quotes the בעש"ט as having seen a tremendous significance in this. The אל"ף בי"ת, he said, are not simply phonetic symbols. They are the instruments with which הקב"ה created the world. (The גמרא speaks of the אותיות). And their structure mirrors the structure of creation.

בריאה proceeds in stages - עשרה מאמרות. With every stage, more tangible, physical, and הקב"ה more hidden. מלאכים, for example, created early in process, and live on a plane in which הקב"ה is relatively revealed. We, who were created at very end of process, live on a plane in which He is very hidden, to the extent that כפירה is possible. But even at this, lowest stage, He is present, it's just that he's hidden.

Beneath all the layers of בריאה that separate us, He is present and active. If we look beneath the surface, deeply enough, we find Him.

Seforim express this idea by saying that each level of creation is a לבוש, a garment. A garment hides the person who wears it, but he is always present inside and the garment moves only by his will. Every subsequent level is another לבוש, within which the previous לבוש is contained, and so on until the end of the process.

The same structure is in the א"ב. א is one. ב is two. Two, of course, includes one; it contains one. One is inside of two - twice. So ב contains two א's. And ג contains ב and א, or three א. All the way to ת, which is four hundred, or four hundred א's. And thus א represents the first step, the beginning, in which the הקב"ה is most revealed. And therefore we find that our rabbis in the Midrash refer to the הקב"ה as אלוהי של עולם, the א of the world. The next step is ב, which is a לבוש, in which the א is contained, and by which it is hidden. And so on until ת, which represent the end of the process, the point of maximum hidden-ness, a world in which the הקב"ה is completely hidden.

Every צרה that כלל ישראל experiences is a הסתר, a moment when the הקב"ה seems distant, even absent. The very first צרה that the Jewish people experienced as a nation, after their exodus from מצרים, was when פרעה and his army set out after them. With that step פרעה seemed to have undone the whole גאולה and set us back on the path to slavery and death. אמר אויב ארדוף אשיג אחלק שלל, the enemy said I will chase after them, I will catch them, I will divide their spoil. What terrible, frightening words. And yet, ultimately, we discovered that it was the הקב"ה Himself who had instigated פרעה, who had set him up for his greatest fall.

And therefore, said the בעש"ט, those very words, that seemed so threatening, began each with אל"ף. To teach us that in them, in the צרה itself, hidden within, was אלוהי של עולם, the א of the world.

And our greatest defense against צרה, whenever it comes, our bulwark and our comfort, is to recognize that presence.

And so when יעקב set out from the tents of Torah into a hostile and dangerous world, when he took that first step of ויצא יעקב, he took with him, said the מגלה עמוקות, a vision. וירא יעקב צורת אלף - ויצא. He took with him a vision and a faith that whatever would befall him, whatever trials he would face, he would see in it צורת אלף, the source, the guiding hand of אלוהי של עולם.

And in this week's פרשה, opposing יעקב comes עשיו with 400 men, representing, said the מגלה עמוקות, four hundred forces of טומאה. Why 400? Because 400 is ת, and just as יעקב saw in everything א צורת א, עשיו saw in everything ת צורת ת. He sees a world that is at the other extreme from אלוהי של עולם, a world in which אלוהי של עולם is unimaginably distant, a world in which nothing exists but the physical, and man, therefore, is an animal.

At that fateful meeting two visions contested. The vision of יעקב who saw in everything - even in the difficult passages of life - the living hand of אלוהי של עולם,

and the vision of עשׂי, with his 400 men, whose vision lay at the other extreme, who saw a world completely divorced and alienated from the רבשי״ע.

And those two visions have contested ever since.

And now I can tell you what the ישמח משה said about תכנת שבת. What does this תפילה go from ת backward to א. During the week, he said, the world seems mundane, and life seems to flow from א to ת, away from אלוֹפו של עולם, who lies way back at the beginning of creation. But on שבת we bring the world back. On שבת we reverse the process, by bringing ourselves and the physical world with us back to its beginning. And so on Shabbos we move from ת to א, going back to the source, origin and fount of the world, back to אלוֹפו של עולם.

And that is really the mission of a Jew. We are, after all, still on that long journey that יעקב began when he set out so long ago - ויצא יעקב. And the vision that animated him still animates us - וירא יעקב צורת אלף. In every trial and in every challenge he saw - and we see - one thing, אלוֹפו של עולם at work.

And opposed to him - opposed to us - there is still עשׂי and what he represents, with his ארבע מאות איש, with his vision, a vision of a ת, a world that is far removed from אלוֹפו של עולם, a world that is random and empty of meaning, in which life is cold and brutal.

But if we have sufficient faith and vision we will see that even in the actions and plotting of our enemies, even as they say אמר אויב ארדוף אשיג אחלק שלל, there is always אלוֹפו של עולם, hastening our enemies to their destruction and the world to its goal.

And so we continue our journey. And each שבת we renew that vision. Each שבת is a milestone on that journey, from ת to א, תכנת שבת רצית קרבנותיה, back to אלוֹפו של עולם, whom we will encounter clearly at the end of the journey, when ואמר ביום ההוא הנה, אלקינו זה קוינו לו ויושיענו, we will say on that day, here, this is our G-d, we trusted in Him and He has redeemed us, בב״א.