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The Torah in Our Church

By Yosef Juarez



I was born in Honduras, 23 years ago, the oldest of four children. I lived in a neighborhood with all my cousins, on a street named after my mother's ancestors. We attended a church that is non-denominational, but with a strong evangelical bent. When I was three years old, I fell from the second story of my house and dropped head-first onto the concrete, fracturing my skull. I was rushed to the hospital and wasn't moving at all, just gazing off into the distance.

The situation was very grave. But then something strange happened. The next day, it was as if nothing had happened. The doctor ordered new x-rays, and there was no sign of any damage – no fracture, not even a scratch.

Due to this, our family grew as religious Christians, and throughout my life I was focused on the service of G-d.

When I was eight years old, we moved to America, which offered better financial opportunities. We settled in a suburb of Houston and looked around for a good church to attend, but nothing seemed as good as what we had back in Honduras.

Our old church was based in Honduras, but has branches in U.S. cities that have a sizable Central American and Hispanic population. So together with one other family, we requested that the church send us a minister. They sent us a man named Hector Flores, who at the time was still training to be a minister. And that's how our Houston church started – in one room in a house.

Fascinated with the Holy Temple

Minister Flores was fascinated with the Holy Temple, and its predecessor the Tabernacle (Mishkan). He had access to books and resources, and he started teaching Torah ideas that were in a Christian setting. We would spend months and months delving into aspects of the Torah.

The church membership grew steadily, as we were very outreach-oriented. The city was divided up into districts and groups, and we would literally go out into the streets and preach to people. During high school, I studied in my church's discipleship program, where they train young people in leadership skills and how to preach. We'd bring people into the church and provide them with family counseling and programs for all ages. It functioned very much like a family. And we would train the new members to reach out and bring more people to church.

Of course, people who came to our church for the first time would wonder why we were discussing Jewish topics, and not preaching so much about the typical teachings of Jesus. But Minister Flores continued on his path, and the church eventually split into two congregations. We got our own building and bought land to expand.

Hebrew Songs

One of the customs of our church was something Minister Flores called "festivals of consecration." These were patterned after the festivals in the Torah, where people would bring large donations to fund the church activities. From there it was constant small steps toward Torah: the obligation to tithe, where we'd give 10 percent of our income to church activities. After a while our festivals got assigned Jewish names, like Purim and Shavuot, corresponding to the Jewish holiday they fell close to.

This was definitely not consistent with mainstream Christianity. And the closer we got to Torah, the more some congregants became uncomfortable and started to drop out. It was a filtering process.

The minister didn't want to tear down Christianity without offering us an alternative.

Unbeknownst to us, behind the scenes, Minister Flores was going through an intense personal transition. After much research, he discovered many inconsistencies and contradictions in the New Testament, making the tenets of Christianity untenable.

Slowly Got Us Closer and Closer to Judaism

Minister Flores started secretly going to a rabbi, to pester him with questions. Then he'd come back and teach us, slowly getting us closer and closer to Judaism.

Soon after, Minister Flores made the decision to convert to Judaism. But he struggled to find a way to tell us, as he didn't want to tear down Christianity without being able to offer us an alternative. So, he kept teaching Torah, but in a way that was as subtle as possible. He gradually peeled away the things that were wrong and got us closer to Torah. Our church started replacing Jesus' name with Jewish, Hebrew names of G-d, and the songs became Hebrew songs. We began to incorporate real Jewish traditions into our festivals, and we even got a Torah scroll for the church.

At that point we resembled more of a Jews for Jesus group, in the sense that we were Christians with a lot of Jewish traditions. The difference, of course, was that we were moving in the direction toward authentic Judaism, not the other way around.

During this process, our biggest resource for information was Aish.com, and its Spanish sister site. At one point the church printed out reams of Aish.com articles on all the holidays, and gave a binder of these articles to each family.

Some of the church members became resistant to all these changes, and a number of people dropped out. There were occasional confrontations where people would question the minister, "How far are you going with all this?" And he would simply answer, "As far as the Torah takes us."

Revelation

About six months after Minister Flores made the private decision to convert, my mother had been at a Jewish bookstore and bought the book, "The Real Messiah" by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. This book lays out all the evidence for why Jews don't believe in Jesus, in a very scholarly and convincing way. We found that a lot of Christian teachings were based on mistranslations or taking biblical verses out of context.

So, my mother suspected there was more to this "Torah teaching" than the minister had been letting on.

Every Sunday after services, the entire congregation would go together to the park. One Sunday, my mother confronted the minister: "You know more than you're telling us, don't you." He would never lie or deny such a direct question, so he saw

this was the right time to reveal his plan to convert. That Sunday, we all stayed at the park for hours and hours, discussing and explaining, until long after dark.

Many Others Took the Choice of Becoming Bnei Noach

At that point, about 100 people wanted to keep studying with the possibility of conversion. But many others took the choice of becoming Bnei Noach, following the seven pillars of human civilization that the Torah presents for non-Jews to observe. Minister Flores explained that any human being who faithfully observes these laws earns a proper place in heaven, and this was an appealing alternative for many church members.

My mother, however, wanted to stick with the group who was interested in conversion. So, we kept on learning, and eventually our group decided to attend Shabbat services. So, one Saturday morning our entire congregation showed up at the United Orthodox Synagogues. It was a bit of a shock to the community, because such a huge influx upset the social balance. But the leader of the synagogue, Rabbi Joseph Radinsky, was like an angel to us; his kindness and sincerity is clear to anyone who knows him.

When they saw things were serious, the Houston community sent a Spanish-speaking rabbi, Jose Gomez, to help each family clarify the right path. (He himself had converted 10 years earlier in Houston along with his entire family – parents, siblings, aunts and uncles.) As expected, all of this caused a real stir in the Christian community in Houston.

First in the Family

Minister Flores was amongst the first to convert, and since then many of our church members have converted, while others are in the process. My own conversion was finalized a year ago, and my mother and siblings are still in the process. I chose the name "Yosef" because in the Bible, Joseph was the first of his family to go down to Egypt. He established himself and was able to help bring the rest of his family along. My mother says that in our path to conversion, I have been sent ahead as our family's "Yosef."

After my conversion, I came to Israel and was really amazed. I saw a variety of Jews, and a whole different side of Judaism. There was something special about everything. I even found myself taking pictures of grass and rocks! I felt truly Jewish for the first time.

I cannot wait to share the learning with friends and family back home. I started doing research into my roots, because I knew that this awakening to Judaism comes from a very deep place. I found out that on a voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus reached the Bay Islands on the coast of Honduras, which became part of the Spanish empire. Jews undoubtedly came to Honduras at

this time, on the heels of the Spanish Inquisition when many Jews "converted to Christianity" but secretly remained Jewish. I'm anxious to find out more about my ancestors, but it's very hard to track.

So where am I today? I am studying at the Aish Yeshiva in the Old City of Jerusalem and I love it. I'm so enthusiastic about everything that I learn, and cannot wait to share it with all my friends and family back home. At this point, my plans for the future are pretty open. I want to continue to study Torah, finish my undergraduate degree, and see what opportunities develop.

But one thing I know for sure: I am committed to reaching out to my fellow Jews. If I was fortunate enough to discover this gold mine of spiritual wealth and fulfillment, then those who were born Jewish surely must be given that opportunity. And who knows – just as Aish.com spurred my Jewish growth, maybe this article will be the spark that someone else has been waiting for.

Reprinted from this week's website of aish.com

The Importance of Not Learning From the Non-Jewish Culture

From the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt"l



In this week's Torah portion, Re'ei, the Jewish people are commanded to maintain their own code of behavior and not learn from the nations that inhabited the Land of Israel before its conquest. The Torah states: "Take heed that you not be snared by following them."

A Jew must never ask, "How do these gentiles worship their gods, that I may do the same?" "You must not do this before the L-rd your G-d...But hearken to the voice of the L-rd your G-d, to keep all His commandments...to do that which is right in the eyes of the L-rd your G-d."

The Warning of Moses to Not Learn from Idol Worshippers

Moses warned the Jews against imitating the idol worshippers' conduct. Non-Jews have their own culture and customs, he explained. It is forbidden for a Jew to learn from their behavior!

From a numerical standpoint, of course, Jews are the most insignificant of all the nations. Nonetheless, their conduct is entirely unique. In fact, when it comes to "life style" and day-to-day existence, Jews have nothing in common with the non-Jewish world.

Some Jews might mistakenly think that the key to earning the respect and admiration of gentiles is by copying their behavior. Yet the opposite is true! It is only when Jews proudly maintain their Judaism and faith in G-d that they merit not only the respect of their gentile neighbors, but their support and assistance as well.

G-d Chose the Jews from Among the Nations

G-d placed the Jewish people among the nations so that others may see and learn from their uncompromising faith. Jews always remember that "You have chosen us from among the nations" and conduct themselves according to His will, as revealed in the Torah.

The singular conduct of the Jews also serves as a living example to the gentiles, demonstrating that it is indeed possible to adhere to the Seven Noahide laws that apply to all mankind.

The Jewish people have lived according to the Torah's laws for over 3,000 years. Yet despite its age, the Torah is equally relevant to our present day and age, imparting all who follow in its ways with renewed strength and vitality.

When Jews keep G-d's laws and refuse to mimic the surrounding nations, they merit a multitude of G-d's blessings: long life and good years, tranquility and peace, physical health and true nachas. The gentile nations not only hold them in high esteem, but lend their assistance to yeshivot, Talmud Torahs, and facilities for the elderly.

Reprinted from the Parshat Eikev 5760/2000 edition of L'Chaim. (Adapted from Hitva'aduvot 5745.)

Rav Avigdor Miller on Clean Jewish Homes



QUESTION: Should religious Jews be careful to have neat and clean homes?

ANSWER: Now pay attention to what I'm going to tell you now. This subject you must understand as follows – but don't be prejudiced by what I'm going to tell you in the beginning. There was an Ilse Kuch. Ilse Kuch, *y'mach sh'mah*, was a famous Nazi woman. And in the concentration camps she used to walk around with a whip and she would beat the dying inmates. She was called The Beast of Buchenwald. If you want a picture of one of the lowest characters in history, that's it.

Now at her trial, there were Germans who spoke up for Ilse Kuch and defended her. And what did they say in her defense? They said that her kitchen is spotless! And I believe it; I'm sure it was. So, keep that in mind while I give you the answer now because that was the introduction to the answer.

Now, if you're going to have a Jewish house, it means you're going to have children. And if you have children, it means one, two, three, four, five, six; various ages. And in a house full of children, it's not *near* impossible, it's *impossible* to have a spic and span house.

If you're one of these women, one of these modern orthodox women who want to live a selfish life, so you'll have one baby and then you'll

practice “spacing.” Until this baby is already an old man, and then you’ll have another one. So maybe that woman will succeed in having a nice clean house.

But if you’re not doing any spacing, if you’re trying to raise a Jewish generation, it’s impossible to expect such a thing. It’s only in these castles of selfishness, where people live only for themselves, so the house is nice and clean – because there is nobody there to make it dirty. That’s number one.

A House of Love and Warmth

And the second thing is this. I was once in a Jewish house in Boro Park. And it was a house of love and warmth. Any wayfarer who would knock on the door at night and say, “I have no place to sleep,” they wouldn’t ask any questions. “Come in, there’s place here to sleep.”

Now, if you have a fancy home, so you’ll think, “Maybe this man is filthy; maybe he’s a bearer of bedbugs.” How can you let him sleep on your nice bed? You’ll let him into your bathroom?! He’ll contaminate your nice toilet seat. It’s hard for a nice ba’al habus to let a stranger into his fancy and clean home. So, he says, “Go someplace else; go to the rabbi. Go to this one or go to that one.” He sends him away to the rabbi.

And now, a third thing; something else. If you’re poor, if you don’t invest a lot of money into your house, it’s going to be shabby. Now, don’t tell me this fairy tale, ‘poor but clean.’ A shabby house is shabby! The linoleum is worn through! And if the linoleum is worn through and there’s a big hole in the linoleum, don’t tell me that you get down on your knees three times a day and scrub out the hole. Dust accumulates in that hole and that’s it. There’s a nail sticking out where the linoleum used to be. It’s impossible!

The House of Rav Aharon Kotler

I once walked into the house of Rav Aharon Kotler, zichrono l’vracha. Now, I’m not an expert on a neat house, so I’m not judging its neatness. But it was a poor house, a very poor house. And because of that, Rav Aaron rose in my eyes all the way up. I saw that he didn’t take the money from the Yeshiva and spend it on expensive things. He lived poorly. He lived very poorly. He gave the money to the boys in the Yeshiva who were hungry. There were poor boys who needed it.

So, if you want to have a spic and span home, that means that you’ll invest in this world instead of the next world. Instead of charity, you’re buying things for yourself, for the house, expensive things. Don’t bother telling me fairy tales. It means expensive! It means investing a lot of money, besides for investing a lot of time.

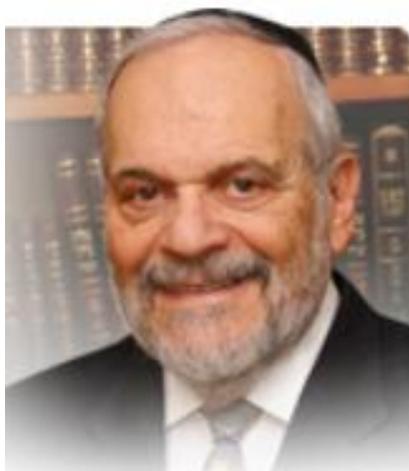
So along came some goy with a new Torah that cleanliness is next to you know what. And the Jews swallow this bait and they repeat the same thing. You

know, people who say “Cleanliness is next to G-dliness” they are the people who hold that G-dliness is meaningless. It’s a hundred percent rule.

And so, there are different ways of looking at this subject. But one thing is certain; if you have a lot of children spilling out all over the place, and you have a guest sprawled on the sofa, and you’re trying with a broom and a brush to do the best that you can, so your house is the neatest and cleanest house that could be.

Excerpted from a recent email of Toras Avigdor based on Rabbi Avigdor Miller’s Tape #132 from his classic Thursday night lectures.

Rabbi Berel Wein on Parshat Re’eh 5783



In this week’s parsha the Torah continues with the theme that runs through the previous parshiyot of Dvarim, that we are always faced with stark choices in life – either blessings or curses, good or evil. The words of the Torah seemingly offer little option for middle ground on these basic issues of belief and behavior. Yet, we are all aware that the events in life are rarely, if ever, all or nothing, one hundred percent blessing or curse. In fact, Jewish tradition and teachings instruct us that hidden in tragedy there is always a glimmer of hope and goodness, and that all joy and happiness contains within it the taste of the bittersweet.

Jewish philosophy and theology has taught us that evil somehow has a place in G-d’s good and benign world. We are faced with the problem of why the Torah addresses these matters without nuance, in such a harsh way which seemingly brooks no compromise, without a hint of a middle ground. After all, the Torah is not a

debating society where one is forced to take an extreme uncompromising stand in order to focus the issue being discussed more sharply and definitively.

Many rabbinic scholars of previous generations have maintained that it is only in our imperfect, post Temple period that we are to search for good in evil and temper our joy with feelings of seriousness and even sadness. But in an idyllic world, where the Divine Spirit is a palpable entity, the choices are really stark and the divisions are 100 percent to zero. Far be it from me to not accept the opinion of these great scholars of Israel.

The Importance of Corrective Lenses

However, I wish to interject a somewhat different thought into this matter. This parsha begins with the word *re'eih* – see. As all of us are well aware, there are stages in life that we can see well only with the aid of corrective lenses. Without that correction, we can easily make grave mistakes trying to read and see what appears before us. If we have to read small print, such as looking up a number in the Jerusalem telephone directly – it is almost impossible without the aid of corrective lenses. Well, this situation is not limited to the physical world, of just our actual eyesight, but it applies equally to our spiritual world of Torah observance and personal morality.

The Importance of Jew's Observance Of Torah and Commandments

Many times, we think we are behaving righteously when we are in fact behaving badly because we are not seeing the matter correctly. We are not wearing our corrective lenses, with the benefit of halacha, history, good common sense and a Jewish value system that should govern our lives. Without this advantage, we see blessings and curses, good and evil, blurry, and undefined before our eyes. The Torah wishes us to see clearly - to instinctively be able to recognize what is the blessing in our life and what is not. The Torah itself has been kind enough to provide us with the necessary corrective lenses to see clearly and accurately. These lenses consist of observance of Torah and its commandments and loyalty to Jewish values and traditions.

Shabat shalom

Reprinted from the current website of rabbiwein.com

Leading by Example: Reb Shmuel at Prayer

By Rabbi Sholom B. Lipskar



Sami (Shmuel) Rohr center with Rabbi Sholom B. Lipskar

It was a remarkable sight that remains engraved on my mind forever.

One Shabbat morning, as sheets of torrential rain battered Miami and its surroundings, I spied the figure of a man walking briskly to our synagogue, water dripping from every part of his body. His suit, hat and shirt were so drenched that they visibly stuck to his skin.

Despite this discomfort, the man wore a smile that expressed both calm and reverence, the content expression of someone whose life had meaning and purpose. His clothes may have been soaked, but he carried himself with an elegance that reminded me of a painting by a great artist.

The man I saw was the legendary Sami Rohr, of blessed memory.

As a very successful and astute investor, Mr. Rohr partnered with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of righteous memory, and his system of international

emissaries to establish centers in hundreds of communities across the world, with a special concentration in the former Soviet Union. His passion for saving the spirit of the Jewish people, bringing them home to their holy source, had multifaceted expressions.

Sponsored Many Torah Books in Multiple Languages

He loved Torah scholarship, as represented in the many books that he underwrote in multiple languages, culminating with the Rohr Edition of the Talmudic Encyclopedia in memory of his beloved wife, Señora Charlotte, whose royal presence we also merited to have for close to three decades. He loved literature. He loved more than anything else Jewish education, hence the schools and scholarships and programs. And on and on.

I would often tell him what a great merit and honor it was to have such an august figure in our community. His response was always the same: "Ay, Rabbi Lipskar, you know better." What humility was embedded in his greatness!

On that drenched Shabbat morning, as he strode briskly toward the entrance of the synagogue he helped envision and build, I ran to meet him, ushering him inside. A large puddle quickly formed around his feet, and I beseeched him to utilize our beautiful *mikvah* (which was beautiful largely because of his generosity in furnishing it for others) to dry himself off, so that he would be more comfortable, and at least not catch cold in the air conditioning.

Prayer is an Opportunity to Meet with G-d

True to his German-Jewish punctiliousness, Mr. Rohr still made it into the sanctuary in time before the prayer service began. For Reb Shmuel, prayer meant a meeting with G-d, an appointment not to be delayed under any circumstance. Humbly present to implore his Father in Heaven, Mr. Rohr's presence carried a distinctive dignity that rubbed off on others.

It was inspiring to behold the glow that illuminated his face when his children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren would come to sit near him during prayer times. To watch him pray was to observe a true servant of God. His eyes would never leave his prayerbook, as he absorbed himself fully in his personal connection to Almighty G-d.

The serenity and submission with which Reb Shmuel prayed was twinned with the ebullience and pure *nachas* with which his eyes twinkled every Friday evening when he'd be surrounded by all his grandchildren, each of whom delivered their own words of Torah at his Shabbat table.

And those same prayers uttered with such devotion underpinned the vision and responsibility with which he conducted his philanthropic activities.

In addition to his shining example of complete engagement during prayer, Mr. Rohr was a true Torah scholar who greatly respected learning and enjoyed studying the most complex concepts of Torah. Though he humbly never portrayed himself as an expert on Torah and shied away from teaching Torah publicly, after learning a particularly spirited talk from the Rebbe about the necessity to teach others, he agreed to give a weekly class on the Torah portion in memory of his recently departed father.

His style of teaching combined deep analysis and exegesis and he left no stone unturned, researching multiple commentaries in his preparation for each class. We all came to describe his weekly lecture as “warm, brilliant and very accessible,” even to students who were not Torah scholars. No surprise that many of his regular attendees were inspired to become *baalei teshuvah*.



Reflecting the depth and sensitivity of his exalted soul, Mr. Rohr had for years refrained from meeting the Rebbe in private audience or on the “dollar line.” He simply could not bear the thought of taking even a moment of the Rebbe’s precious time, especially for personal requests.

After his immersive year of teaching, however, he was so overwhelmed with gratitude for the satisfaction and pleasure he had derived from the Rebbe's directive to help others learn, he felt compelled to come express his thanks to the Rebbe in person. He told the Rebbe, "In my entire life I haven't learned as much as I do now, because I have to prepare for the class!" Referring to Reb Shmuel's increased learning, the Rebbe replied: "That's a very good thing."

Cherished the Moment He Had with the Rebbe

The moments that he spent with the Rebbe were deeply cherished by Reb Shmuel, and he would repeat how the Rebbe was the most important person he ever met.

Indeed, his insightfulness and panoramic perspective made him a most sought-after advisor. Though he was an extremely busy person, with every minute of his day accounted for, he was always available for personal advice. On many occasions when I took an exercise walk before sunrise on the ocean, I passed Mr. Rohr's residence and noticed that his lights were already on.

My wife, Chani, and I will be eternally grateful to this dearest personal friend, confidant and advisor for his wise counsel during pivotal junctures in the development and growth of our community, starting from our very first *minyan* in Bal Harbour so many years ago. His insight, encouragement and generosity were pivotal to making our community the vibrant center that it is today.

While his outstanding philanthropic vision and investment is beyond the scope of most of us to emulate, his traits of humility, deep care for each individual, complete devotion to Hashem and His Torah, are among the many things that his life represented that we can learn from and incorporate in our lives.

An Object Lesson in True Ahavat Yisroel

The attention he gave to everyone that approached him, from the most elderly and important, to the youngest and most simple was an object lesson in true *ahavat Yisrael*.

Like the educator that he was, not only did Mr. Rohr teach volumes by example, he also had a few favorite axioms which he cherished and by which he lived.

These bon mots included:

Unzere iz die beste, obber tzu besser iz nishto kein shiur – We need to be grateful for what we have and consider it to be the best, but we need to know that there is no limit to our responsibility to better even our best.

Vaiter! We must be dynamic, always moving forward and upward.

Ordnung muz zein – To achieve success in any facet of life, it is imperative that it be structured, organized and orderly.

L'chatchila ariber un ariber! – Translated roughly as “over over-the-top,” Reb Shmuel loved the energy implicit in this saying of the Rebbe Maharash, the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe, as it was oft-repeated and expounded upon by our own Rebbe. Don't get bogged down doing battle with negativity, the phrase teaches. Instead, jump above it all and keep reaching higher and higher. When focused in this manner, nothing is out of reach and even ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things!

Mit gezundt un menuchah - his favorite blessing, which has become our 'official' Shul greeting, wishing each person health and serenity.

When I picture Mr. Rohr's Shabbat morning walk in the heavy rain, all of these axioms converge. And if, as our Sages teach us, rain is a blessing, then he and all of us were quite literally showered with blessings – on that day and on each day of his life.

May the memory and life of Reb Shmuel ben Yehoshua Eliyahu continue to be a shining example to all of us.

Rabbi Sholom B. Lipskar is an emissary for the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he founded the Landow Yeshiva Center in Miami Beach in 1969, and in 1981 he founded both The Shul of Bal Harbour in Surfside, Florida and the Aleph Institute and the Educational Academy for the Elderly. He may be reached directly at sholom@aol.com

Reprinted from the Parshat Eikev 5783 email of Chabad.Org website.

Thoughts that Count for Our Parsha

When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the L-rd your G-d (Deut. 8:10)

A Jew doesn't pray to G-d only in difficult circumstances, when he is poor and hungry. Even in the best of times, when he has "eaten and is full," he should remember that it is G-d Who has given him all these blessings and that he should thank Him accordingly. (Lev Simcha)

A blessing for obeying the commandments of the L-rd your G-d and a curse, if you will not obey the commandments (Deut. 11:27-28)

The Torah's language is significant and precise: G-d promises to bless the Jews for obeying His commandments, yet threatens to curse them "if" they will not

obey. The blessing is assured; the curse is only conditional. In fact, all Jews will return to G-d in the End of Days and receive His blessing. (Panim Yafot)

And you shall bind up the money in your hand (Deut. 14:25)

The Torah commands the Jew to "bind up" his money and rule over it, and not the other way around. In other words, his monetary affairs must never exert such an influence over him that he becomes subservient. (Rabbi Meir of Premishlan)

It states in Psalms (51:16): "*Save me from bloodshed ('damim'), O G-d, G-d of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.*" In Hebrew, the word "damim" also means money; King David was thus praying that he never make the mistake of considering money to be G-d. (Rabbi Moshe of Kovrin)

Reprinted from the Parshat Eikev 5760/2000 edition of L'Chaim.



Courtesy YIVO – 1926 photo of unemployed Jewish seamstress at her sewing machine in Bialystok, Poland.