



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת בשלח  
י שבט תשפ"ה

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From the Chabura **New Topic!**  
By: Adam Friedmann

### Technology and the Jew: Tongs

Last week, we completed our study of the third chapter of *Hilchot Keriat Shema*. Before moving on to the fourth chapter, we decided to take a break and interject something completely different: technology and Judaism. We will spend the next several weeks exploring this topic, touching on both philosophy and halacha. We'll try to flesh out at least one take on a general Jewish view of technology. We'll also deal with specific hot topics including AI and the business models that fuel some of today's massively successful tech companies. We hope you enjoy it. These ideas are being formulated in real time and are still in flux. We would love to hear your feedback at [contact@essenceofjudaism.com](mailto:contact@essenceofjudaism.com).

Let's get started.

We live in a profoundly technological era. Silicon Valley and Israel's own "Silicon Wadi" are constantly pushing us towards life-altering automations, innovations, and gadgets. What is the Jewish perspective on this frenzy of activity? Is it a worthwhile, even vital pursuit? Is it a waste of time? Or worse, is it dangerous or even evil?

The Tosefta (*Chagiga* 1:11) describes the relative scriptural foundations for different areas of halacha. Regarding the laws of Shabbat, the *Chagim*, and *me'ila*, it says that they are like "mountains suspended by a single hair". This means to say that even though the Talmud includes lots of halachot in each of these areas, the actual basis for these laws in the text of the Torah is very limited. They are "mountains" of laws suspended by thin textual "hairs".

Responding to this statement, Rabbi Yehoshua makes the following comment: "Tongs are fashioned using tongs, [but] the first tongs, how were they made? They must have been created." Rabbi Yehoshua is referring to tongs that blacksmiths used to secure red hot metal as they hammered it on an anvil to fashion tools. Tongs are also metal tools and to make a pair you likewise needed to hold the metal in place with a pre-existing pair of tongs. If this is true, Rabbi Yehoshua wonders, how was the

first pair made, when another did not yet exist? The answer: it must have been created by G-d.

Rabbi Yehoshua's statement is jarring. It's unclear how empirically reasonable it is. We can easily imagine many ways to produce tongs without using other tongs. More confusing than this, however, is what Rabbi Yehoshua is trying to say in the context of the Tosefta.

When faced with the statement about the tongs (this time attributed to Rabbi Yehuda), the Talmud Bavli (*Pesachim* 54a) is fixated on the empirical question. It notes that it's possible to create the halves of a pair of tongs using a mould and then attach them. Thus there is no reason to posit a heavenly pair of tongs. The Bavli doesn't pursue the issue any further.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Eruvin* 14:1) focuses instead on the meaning of Rabbi Yehoshua's statement in context. Rabbi Chanina asks Rabbi Mana what the latter makes of this statement. Rabbi Mana answers that just as a pair of tongs can be used to fashion endless other pairs, so too one instance of *shevut* in the laws of Shabbat can be used to create many others. This explanation indicates that Rabbi Yehoshua's statement teaches a lesson about the nature of the laws of Shabbat. The fact that the laws of Shabbat are based on very few *pesukim* should not alarm us, because those laws are not extracted hermeneutically from the text. Rather, the Torah introduced the concept of *shevut* and by doing so empowered the Jewish people to create further laws.

Rabbi Mana's explanation implies that Rabbi Yehoshua's statement about tongs is really aimed at teaching us about the laws of Shabbat. It's not a lesson about the tongs and what they represent. However, in other contexts, the tongs are mentioned on their own. For example, the Mishna (*Avot* 5:6) tells us that tongs to use in making other tongs, were one of the things created at the end of the sixth day of creation. This indicates that Rabbi Yehoshua's statement works in both directions. As much as it teaches about the laws of Shabbat, it also teaches us about the tongs. What is that lesson?

The tongs symbolize technological innovation; humanity's ability to create tools to alter its environment. Rabbi Yehoshua is teaching us that just as G-d empowered the Jewish people to create the laws of *shevut*, so too he empowered humanity to create technology. The capacity for humanity to change the world with technology is enormous, but it's also morally neutral. What we create and how we use those creations depends on us.

This, then, can be a Jewish view on technological innovation. It's a G-d-given power that's neither fundamentally good or evil. What follows from this is that at the foundation of any technology is an ethical question. What's motivating the creation of this new innovation? How will it be used to alter people's lives? We'll consider the question of the motivation behind technological change next week.

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life By: Dovid Campbell

### Berachot 9:1—The Power of Place

This week's mishnah begins the ninth and final chapter of tractate *Berachot*, focusing on the specific instances and circumstances in which one is required to bless Hashem. By underscoring the unique sense of attention and appreciation that these circumstances demand, the conclusion of *Berachot* asks us to imbue mundane reality with something of the divine. In the words of R. Dr. Yakov Nagen, it is these last few mishnayot that “can shed light on the general question of His place in the world.”

Our mishnah presents two specific blessings: one recited upon witnessing a place where a miracle was performed for the Jewish people, and one upon witnessing a place where idolatry was uprooted from the Land of Israel. Regarding the former, the commentators list the specific locations of these miracles, based on the Gemara. They include locations of powerful, dramatic events—such as the splitting of the Red Sea or the fall of the walls of Jericho—but also less glamorous spots—such as the stone Moshe sat on during the war with Amalek or the pillar of salt that was once Lot's wife. These latter locations feel quite minor with respect to the former, and it is somewhat surprising to see them included in the same list. What is the common thread that binds them together?

The *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael* commentary explains that “places where miracles were performed for Israel are places where Jewish history unfolded, and places where the hand of God was revealed.” In other words, these are pivotal moments in the Jewish narrative; instances where everything changed. But it is human nature to recall the spectacular and forget the subtle. One could hardly forget the epic battle with Amalek, but who would necessarily remember the humble rock upon which Moshe sat, miraculously directing the course of the battle? The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an unforgettable apocalyptic event, but how many would reflect on the parallel lesson of Lot's wife, who never truly separated herself from Sodom's worldview, even after she had been rescued? By placing these events alongside Jewish history's more cinematic moments, Chazal remind us that the unfolding of our history is often more nuanced and complex than we imagine.

Our mishnah also encourages us to reflect on the resonating power of place and its ability to connect us to history. Even if one could identify the precise rock upon which Moshe sat, they would witness only a rock—no heavenly aura, no chorus of angels designating the place. What makes the rock an object of blessing is our awareness of its role in our ongoing story. Much like when we revisit a childhood home or an almost-forgotten playground from our youth, a place has the power to awaken us to the trajectory of our life's journey. The blessing of our mishnah reminds us to be forever mindful of this reality.

## Sforno on the Parsha By: Nochum Spiegel

### Sea Sick

In parshat Vaera we discussed Sforno's explanation that the first nine plagues functioned to motivate the Egyptians to *teshuva*. It is now through *makkat bechorot* and the events at the Yam Suf that the execution of punishment occurs.

When referring back to the calamities which befell Egypt as a means of warning the Jews of future reward and punishment, the *pasuk* states, "If you surely listen to the voice of Hashem, your God... all the (*machalah*) diseases that I put upon Egypt I will not put upon you, for I am Hashem your healer" (*Shemot* 15:26). Additionally, in *Sefer Devarim*, when mentioning blessings and curses pronounced upon Bnei Yisrael, reference is made to the removal of "all sickness and all the evil diseases (*mod'vei*) of Egypt, which you know" (7:15) and conversely, "He will bring upon you all the diseases (*mod'vei*) of Egypt which you were afraid of" (28:60). What exactly is being referenced here? If the ten plagues, only *shechin* (boils) could be described as a direct physical ailment, and that is mentioned separately as one of the curses (28:27). Where in the *pesukim* do we see these illnesses and that Bnei Yisrael feared them?

Sforno directs us back to our *parsha* for a solution. When describing the destruction unleashed at Yam Suf, the *pasuk* says (*Shemot* 14:24) that Hashem was *Vayabam* to the army of Egypt. While this is commonly translated as a form of shock, panic, or confusion, Sforno looks to the Prophets for a more precise definition. When the *Aron Habrit* was captured by the Philistines, G-d's wrath was quick to follow: "The hand of Hashem was against the city with a very great *mehuma*; and He smote the men of the city, both small and great, and hemorrhoids broke out upon them" (1 *Shmuel* 5:9). We see that the term *Mehuma* connotes physical illness; so too, the *vayabam* directed against the Egyptians consisted of various forms of severe physical afflictions.

Sforno now explains the following *pasuk* in line with his *peshat*. "And Israel saw **the great hand** that Hashem had wrought against Egypt, and the people **feared Hashem**" (*Shemot* 14:31). The "great hand" represents the host of diseases unleashed upon Egypt which led the Jews, witnesses to this controlled chaos, to develop another level of fear of Hashem. Even absent public miraculous displays, His control extends to manipulating the unseen forces regulating the internal parts of man and can be applied in both the realms of reward and punishment.

For I am Hashem your healer (15:26) - the purpose of the *mitzvot* is to heal man from the spiritual illness of being drawn after physical desires and destructive ideas and conceptions. Following a regimen of *Torah* and *Mitzvot*, man separates himself from the practice of the nations and identifies himself with G-d, achieving holiness and eternal existence (Sforno 15:26).