

Siyum Daf Yomi – Masechet Yevamos – Shabbat Chukat 5782 – Jesse Hefter

Introduction

I want to start by thanking the *Seudat Shlishit Setup Team* for taking care of getting the Seudah ready this evening. Your efforts do not go unnoticed.

Second, I want to personally thank Ahron for organizing and arranging so much of what makes this Kehilla operate on a day-to-day basis.

Third, I want to take this opportunity to give a special Mazel Tov to the Feder and Ginsburg families on the engagement of their children and wish them continued nachas from the future Choson and Kallah and all the members of their families.

Fourth, I owe deep gratitude to the students of my Daf Yomi shiur at the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts whom I have had the privilege of teaching for the last 20-odd years.

Finally, I want to give a Yasher Koach to all those here this evening who have also finished the Masechta this week as part of the 14th Daf Yomi cycle. I sincerely believe that Rabbi Meir Shapiro, who proposed the start of Daf Yomi Talmud learning in 1923, could not have imagined the sheer magnitude of hours of learning today across the world. It is simply astounding!

The central theme of Yevamos

For the last 121 days, ending this past Thursday, thousands upon thousands of people from around the world, women and men, young and old representing so many segments of our Jewish community have been wrestling with what arguably is one of the hardest and complex masechtot in Shas.

What is the central theme of this masechta? When one strips away all the complexity of allowable and forbidden sexual relations, how to handle arranged marriages of minors, the laws of converts and conversion, cases of deserted wives, and many other related and unrelated topics, we can summarize the masechta this way: we learn about taking care of people when they are vulnerable and how important a value this is within Judaism. It may only be 6 pesukim in Devarim but what a lesson the Torah teaches us!

Fulfillment of a Torah mitzva, that of building a family, is disrupted in the unlikely event that a couple is childless and the husband dies. In Talmudic times, such events may have been more frequent than we think, in particular due to health issues, significantly shorter life spans, injuries, and, perhaps, physical incidents with aggressive non-Jewish neighbors. Other scenarios include a husband taking an overseas voyage for commercial purposes which, in those days, carried great danger in many ways or participation as a soldier in military operations. In either of these two latter cases, it was possible that the husband might never return home.

When we become aware of or witness the death of the husband, his widow is immediately linked to her brother-in-law or brothers-in-law in a special way called zikah. In general, the brother-in-law or one of the brothers-in-law has two options. Option one is to consummate his relationship with his sister-in-law, an act which, under any other circumstances, is strictly prohibited by the Torah, punishable by Karet, or alternatively, option two is to permanently sever the linkage between himself and his sister-in-law through Chalitzah, a fascinating ritual that allows the proto-couple to atone for essentially ending the life-cycle of the deceased husband.

In the first option, that of consummating the marriage with the widow, the brother-in-law can now assist his deceased brother in carrying out a major mission in life, that of having children, P'ru U'revu. Further, by having that child within the greater family, the deceased husband's legacy, his family's values, philosophy of life, and connection are continued, as it were, from the grave. The Torah sees this continuity as a sacred mission, as a completion of what started but was, unfortunately, interrupted. Essentially, it is taking care of someone when they are vulnerable.

The final teachings of the Masechta

The final perek of the Masechta deals, among other related topics, with whether the single testimony of a wife or other witness can allow her to marry her brother-in-law. For example, the husband and wife go on a cruise together and some time later, she appears at her home port and reports to her local court that her husband died while they were away. Can she marry her brother-in-law based on her sole testimony?

Another topic centers on the extent to which we can report that we know that a corpse that was found was, in fact, the wife's husband. How long after death can we still discern the face of the deceased and recognize him as the husband? What if he fell into a lake and washes up on the shore? Does prolonged

immersion in the water significantly alter his appearance? The Gemara analyzes and dissects each of these cases to determine, under what circumstances, the wife can or cannot remarry.

The final Mishna relates the following story.

מתני' אמרו לו: מעשה בבני לוי שהלכו לצוער עיר התמרים, וחלה אחד מהם, והביאוהו בפונדק. ובחזרתם אמרו לפונדקית: "איה חברנו?" נומית להם: "מת, וקברתי", והשיאו את אשתו. ולא תהא כהנת כפונדקית?

אמר להו: לכשתהא כפונדקית — נאמנת. הפונדקית הוציאה להם מקלו ותרמילו וספר תורה שהיה בידו.

The Gemara inquires as to why Rabbi Akiva said that a Jewish woman could be believed if she was as convincing as this innkeeper. The Mishna told us that the innkeeper brought supporting evidence to support her claim. The Chachamim claim that, if this innkeeper could be deemed credible, a regular Jewish woman should, as well, be credible.

The Gemara suggests, per Rav Kahana, that the woman was not Jewish and she was believed as she was speaking to them under the concept of *maysiach lfi tumo* – offhandedly, not really for the purpose of testimony. So therefore, we believe her.

Asks the Gemara – but how could *Maslat* apply? The other Rabbis queried her about the whereabouts of their friend whom they had left there. Wasn't she answering a direct query? How could this be *Maslat*?

The Gemara answers that, when the innkeeper saw them returning to the inn, she started crying. Then, they asked her – where is our friend and she responded with- he died, and I buried him. So, since she cried before she started her account of what happened, we assume that her report falls under the category of *maslat* and she is believed.

The Gemara then relates several cases where a person claims to have been together with a stranger who, while they are together, fell sick and died. The analysis now centers about how deeply we must interrogate the witness in order to determine whether the widow qualifies for *Yibum*.

The crux of the discussion is whether testimony about marital status requires *drisha v'chakira* or not. According to Rabbi Akiva, since there is payment of the *kesuba* for the wife to take when her husband dies, the marriage does take on a monetary legal status and does not require standard *drisha v'chakira*. Why not? Since if we used such methods routinely, people might be more hesitant to loan money.

Rabbi Tarfon argues that the proffered testimony will allow a previously married woman to marry anyone in the world, and if her previously husband is actually still alive, her next relationship would be considered adultery, which is a capital offense – thus, according to him, it would require drisha v'chakira.

The maseches ends with a famous teaching, found in three other mesechtot (together with Berakhot, Nazir, Yevamos, and Kritot – spelling out the word Banayich).

אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי חנינא: תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, שנאמר: "וְכָל בְּנֵי אֱדוּמִים לְמוֹדֵי ה' וְרַב שְׁלוֹם בְּנֵיךְ".

Briefly, Torah teachers and Torah learners bring peace to the world. And a huge part of bringing peace to this world is to take care of others. In Yevamos, we learn about how to take care of the widow.

This Seudat Shlishit is being sponsored to mark the continued improvement of my Eishis Chayil, Brenda, Brocha bat BatSheva, who is still recovering from a very serious illness. From the moment I called 9-1-1 the afternoon of Shabbos Behar and through the next 19 days she was in the hospital, I can honestly say that “ayney Hashem Elokecha Bah”, HKBH was watching over her.

From the Tehillim said every day by the staff and talmidos in Bais Yakov, where she directs student support services, to the Mi SheBairach tefillos we made here in this shul, Brenda saw both improvements and unanticipated setbacks. Yet, at every step, the eyes of masked nurses and the eyes of masked doctors watched over her every step of the way.

A Siyum, briefly

As we are mesayem Masheches Yevamos, we celebrate the culmination of many hours of learning, we celebrate many opportunities for reflection afforded by our studies, and we celebrate community.

The Hebrew word Siyum, I think, has a mysterious morphology that I want to propose to you.

The word, Siyum, can be written in three letters, Samech, Yud, and Mem, although, we generally see the word with a vav as well. The Yud and Vav are two of the four letters of Shem HaShem, The Yud represents the small, tiny, contracted spirit of God that is everywhere at the same time. The Vav represents connection, chibur and represents the connection, in God’s name, to God’s world, that is us. Of course, it is no surprise that the Vav is just an extended Yud. God reaches down, as it were, and connects.

What about the first and last letters? They are each closed, rounded letters and I propose to you that they are like two eyes, looking out from the word right back at you.

Maybe the word Siyum is meant to tell us that, as we were looking at the words of the Torah SheB'al Peh, the words of the Torah Sheb'al Peh were looking right back at us – making us think, reflect, and envision.

May our learning, our focus, and our connections continue to grow and may we return to you, Maseches Yevamos, once again in the future.

Hadran Alach Ha-Ishah Basra U'slika lah Maseches Yevamos