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**PARSHAS TOLDOS**

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***The Meat and Matzah of Jewish Priorities***

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# Toldos

## The Meat and Matzah of Jewish Priorities

Good Shabbos!

In 1993, then-Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel Yisrael Meir Lau visited the Jewish community of Cuba.

Rabbi Lau was greeted at the airport by Cuban government officials, and then transported to his lodgings in Fidel Castro's black car. On the second day of his visit, Rabbi Lau met with Fidel Castro himself at Castro's palace in Havana, capital of Cuba. They spoke for over three hours.

Among other things, Fidel Castro wanted to ask the Chief Rabbi a question that had bothered him for a long time.

"It says in the Bible that 600,000 Jews left Egypt, and I know that elsewhere in the Bible, it says that only 70 Jews went down to Egypt," Castro began. "How can it be that in the course of 400 years, 70 people turned into 600,000 people? Can such a thing really happen?"

So Rabbi Lau answered him: In the first chapter of Shmos (Exodus), it states, "And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed, and they increased and grew strong by a great many, and the land filled with them." And the Sages explain, Rabbi Lau went on, that during that era, there was an abundance of sextuplets.

But Castro wasn't convinced. "Six babies from one belly?!" he asked, not believing such a thing. He waved his hand in doubt. "Can there be such a thing? Sextuplets?!"

Rabbi Lau informed him that his own son recently became the proud father of triplets and that if there could be such a thing as triplets today, who says that in ancient days there couldn't be such a thing as sextuplets? Rabbi Lau added that a set of quintuplets had been born in Israel just a few years earlier.

Fidel Castro was stunned. He seemed to be hearing of triplets and quintuplets for the first time in his life. He refused to let go of the subject. "You have triplets in your family?!" he asked.

Well, Rebbetzin Lau (proud Jewish grandmother that she was) opened her purse and pulled out a photo of her triplet grandkids and showed it to Fidel Castro. The man was mesmerized by the portrait, and for a long few moments, he couldn't take his eyes off it. He cupped it in both hands and repeatedly murmured, "Amazing! Three from one womb. And they're so beautiful! Each one! Interesting that they're not identical."

But when he finally handed back the photo, he was still bothered by the mathematical problem that consumed him. He took a pad and started scribbling out figures to prove to himself what the Bible says. His logic went as follows: The 70 original Jews who went down to Egypt formed 35 couples. Since each couple had six children, he multiplied 35 by 6, giving him 210. He then multiplied that first generation, then a second, a third, and so on, each by the number 6. (We might assume that he also divided 210 by 2, assuming as he might have that those 210 people formed 105 couples, and then multiplied 105 by 6, and so on.)

However, after a few minutes he looked overwhelmed and told Rabbi Lau that the numbers weren't lining up. He explained to the rabbi that he had counted a generation as 20 years, not the widely accepted 30 years—but that even if one gets married at age 20 and builds a family, even if 400 years would thus mean 20 generations multiplied by 6, you still wouldn't end up with the number of 600,000.

So Rabbi Lau suggested that he try again, but Fidel Castro still got tripped up by the numbers. At one point Rabbi Lau asked him why he didn't use a calculator.

"A calculator?!" Castro replied. "You mean the thing with buttons that you push with your fingers?! I belong to the generation that uses its head, not its fingers, to think! But still, Grand Rabino, the math isn't working for me."

When Rabbi Lau saw that Fidel Castro was serious about solving the mathematical mystery, he said: "To put you at ease, allow me to show you another verse from the same book." Rabbi Lau then showed him the verse that states, "And a mixed multitude also went up with them."

At that, Fidel Castro breathed a sigh of relief—as if an old burden was finally dropped.

Rabbi Lau then decided to use the conversation about the Exodus to make a special request. "We're now in February," he said. "In another two months, Jews around the entire world will be celebrating the Passover holiday. If you're familiar with the Exodus from Egypt, with the 600,000 Jews who came from 70, you certainly know that Jews are not allowed to eat bread on Passover. For seven days, they have to eat matzah only. Could you please allow the Jewish community of Cuba to import matzos?"

Well, Fidel Castro replied by bursting out, "Not from them!" He jabbed a finger in the direction of the American contingent. But Rabbi Lau then suggested that they simply bring in matzos from Venezuela or Mexico. To that, Fidel Castro immediately agreed and expressed interest in the quantity—ultimately seeing to it that no Jew in Cuba lacked matzah over Passover.

Seeing that their cooperation seemed to be going so well, Rabbi Lau went on to another request: the possibility of importing kosher meat to Cuba. Rabbi Lau likewise assured Castro that no import would be brought in from America. He explained to the dictator of Cuba that since there were no rabbis or kosher butchers in Cuba, and since Judaism is

very particular about the kosher laws, forbidding Jews to eat non-kosher meat, it was likely that Cuba's Jews were being forced to violate their own religion, or not eat meat at all.

At that point, however, Fidel Castro lost his calm, and the rage he was known for returned in full force. His famous rebel's face came back, and in a thundering voice he bellowed, "I have been fighting against the horror of anti-Semitism in my country for decades—and you want to turn my people into anti-Semites?! I don't have bread to feed my people! We give everyone a maximum of 150 grams of bread every day—and you want me to give Cuba's Jews meat?! Is that what you mean?! They will hate them! They will be jealous of them! They will pillage their homes! My people don't have food! And in this situation you want to import kosher meat for the Jews?! Grand Rabino! If we do that, it will bring about the anti-Semitism that I have always fought!"

Rabbi Lau tried to remind Castro that he had just authorized the import of matzos for Passover—but Castro had his mind made up. "Matzos are food?! Matzos are religious items! Not food! But to bring in meat for the Jews?! No way!" (Al Tishlach Yadcha El HaNa'ar, pg. 309.)

So: Matzos? Yes. Meat? No.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Toldos, the real "story" is in Chapter 27: Yaakov's "theft" of Eisav's blessings.

And everyone has heard the story: Yitzchok summons Eisav and asks him to whip up delicacies so that he'll bless him before he dies; Rivkah overhears that and gets the idea of "outsmarting" Eisav by disguising Yaakov as Eisav so Yaakov gets Eisav's blessings; and that's what actually happens.

Now, the blessings that Yitzchok gave Yaakov begin with the words, "And the Lord shall give to you of the dew of the heavens and the fats of the earth." That's the first blessing. After that we read, "Be superior to your brother"—meaning, that Yaakov would be Eisav's master.

Well, no sooner does Yaakov sneak out of his father's room than Eisav comes in the other door—only to discover that his brother stole his blessings.

So we read how Yitzchak apparently attempts to console his son Eisav: "What shall I do, my son?" He tells Eisav how he already gave the blessings to Yaakov and that now it's too late. But Eisav holds out, saying, "Did you not store away a blessing for me?" You don't have anything for me? Yitzchak replies that he's already made Yaakov the master, leaving Eisav with nothing. But Eisav still insists, saying "Is there but one blessing to you, Father? Bless me, too, Father!" And the verse ends, "And Eisav raised his voice and wept."

Well, it was only after Eisav burst out weeping that Yitzchak blessed him with the following: “Your dwelling place shall be of the fats of the earth and of the dew of the heavens above.”

Well, the question here now is rather obvious: Isn't that basically the exact same blessing that Yitzchak gave Yaakov? So how now can Yitzchak give the same blessing to Eisav?

So if you hit upon that question, you're in good company: Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman, the great Spanish Jewish leader also known by the acronym Ramban, perceived this question. So according to the Ramban, Yitzchak was essentially saying, “There's enough for both of you”—there's enough blessing for both my sons.

However, when we look at the precise wording of the verses in question, we discover that yes, Yitzchak gives Eisav the very same blessing that he gave Yaakov—just in the reverse order. To Yaakov, Yitzchak said “from the dew of the heavens” first and then “from the fats of the earth”—but to Eisav he first said “from the fats of the earth” and then “the dew of the heavens.”

Now, the Rebbe explained many times (Sichos Kodesh 5739, pg. 246) that “heavens” symbolize the lofty and the spiritual, while “the earth” symbolizes the physical and material. When a person contemplates G-d, he or she looks up. In contrast, when a person contemplates this world, he or she looks down.

So when Yitzchak blessed his son Eisav, he put “the fats of the earth” before “the dew of the heavens”—because to the secular mainstream, as symbolized by Eisav, the physical and the material are most important.

But when Yitzchak blessed Yaakov, who symbolizes the Jewish Nation, he prefaced the earth with the heavens—he prefaced the material with the spiritual.

Yitzchak was essentially telling the Jewish Nation for all time that to the Jew, the order of priority begins with “the dew of the heavens,” with the spiritual, and only then with “the fats of the earth,” the material.

For many generations, there has been a Jewish custom that on Motzoei Shabbos, immediately after the Havdalah ceremony, a special prayer is said that asks G-d for a good week.

This prayer begins with the very words of the blessing with which Yitzchak blessed Yaakov: V'Yitain l'cha... May the L-rd give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fats of the earth.

So on Saturday night, when a Jew transitions from the sanctity of the Shabbos to the mundanity of the weekdays, this prayer is there to remind him or her of what a Jew's

priorities are meant to be. First come the “dew of the heavens”—first come spiritual matters like Torah and mitzvos. Only then do we come to the “fats of the earth”—dealing with the material and physical needs of life.

And even Fidel Castro understood that.

Meat is just meat. It’s food. But matzah? That’s a mitzvah!

So the lesson, my friends, is simple: Let us always put Torah and mitzvos first. Let us always put the spiritual first. And by doing so, we help make this world into the true People’s Paradise, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!