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A Seed of Eternity

The Jewish Perspective on How to Respect the Seed of Life

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

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Dedicated by **David** and **Eda Schottenstein**  
in the loving memory of  
Rabbi **Gavriel Noach** and **Rivki Holtzberg**  
and all of the **Mumbai Kedoshim**

And in the loving memory of a young soul  
**Alta Shula Swerdlov**  
daughter of Rabbi **Yossi** and **Hindel Swerdlov**

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1. Class Description
2. Sources
3. Questions and Exercises

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### 1. Class Description:

There is a fascinating conversation recorded in the Talmud. Two Talmudic sages are dining together, when one asks the other to share an idea. The response? “Never talk while you eat, lest you choke on the food!” After the meal, he obliges to his colleague’s request, and makes a radical statement: “Jacob, our father, never died!”

But wait. The conversation grows stranger. The sage continues: “Whoever mentions the name of the famous Biblical harlot Rachav, experiences an immediate seminal emission.”

And then, before they depart, he asks his colleague to bless him. The sage engages in a long metaphor as an introduction to the final blessing: May your children be like you.

What are we to make of this conversation? What is the logic behind the sequence of their dialogue? This class will show how this Talmudic episode reveals the Jewish perspective on the seed of life, the essence of life, and how Judaism looks at man’s drive to reproduce. Is it merely, as Darwin wants us to believe, a drive fueled by self-propagation, or is there something holier and infinitely more powerful in the act of reproduction?

## 2. Sources:

## מקורות:

| <u>1. Talmud Taanis</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <u>1. תלמוד תענית</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <p>R. Nachman and R. Yitzchak were sitting at a meal and R. Nachman said to R. Yitzchak: Let the Master say something! He replied: So said R. Yochanan: One should not converse at meals lest the windpipe precedes the food-pipe and his life will thereby be endangered.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <p>רב נחמן ור' יצחק הוו יתבי בסעודתא. א"ל רב נחמן לר' יצחק לימא מר מילתא! אמר ליה הכי א"ר יוחנן אין מסיחין בסעודה שמא יקדים קנה לושט ויבא לידי סכנה.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p>After they finished the meal he [R. Yitzchak] said: So said R. Yochanan: Jacob our patriarch did not die. [R. Nachman] objected: Was it then for naught that he was bewailed, embalmed, and buried? R. Yitzchak replied: I derive this from a scriptural verse, as it is said, (Jeremiah 30:10) 'Therefore says the Lord, do not be afraid <u>My servant Jacob</u>, and do not be dismayed, <u>O Israel</u>, - for lo, I will save you from afar and your seed from the land of their captivity.' The verse likens him [Jacob] to his seed [Israel]; just as his seed is alive, so he too is alive.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>בתר דסעוד אמר ליה הכי א"ר יוחנן, יעקב אבינו לא מת. אמר ליה, וכי בכדי ספדו ספדנייא וחנטו חנטייא וקברו קברייא? אמר ליה, מקרא אני דורש שנאמר (ירמיהו ל, י) "וואתה אל תירא עבדי יעקב נאם ה' ואל תחת ישראל כי הנני מושיעך מרחוק ואת זרעך מארץ שביס", מקיש הוא לזרעו, מה זרעו בחיים אף הוא בחיים.</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>R. Yitzchak said: Whosoever repeats [the name] Rachav, Rachav, becomes immediately subject to an onset of issue. Thereupon R. Nachman said to him: I have repeated it and was not affected? R. Yitzchak replied: I speak only of one who knew her and recognized her.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>א"ר יצחק כל האומר רחב רחב מיד נקרי. א"ל רב נחמן אנא אמינא ולא איכפת לי. א"ל כי קאמינא ביודעה ובמכירה.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p>When they were about to part, [R. Nachman] said: Pray Master, bless me! He [R. Yitzchak] replied: Let me tell you a parable — To what may this be compared? To a man who was journeying in the desert; he was hungry, weary and thirsty and he lighted upon a tree, the fruits of which were sweet, its shade pleasant, and a stream of water flowing beneath it; he ate of its fruits, drank of the water, and rested under its shade. When he was about to continue his journey, he said: O Tree, O Tree, with what shall I bless you? Shall I say to you, 'May your fruits be sweet'? They are already sweet! That your shade be pleasant? It is already pleasant! That a stream of water may flow beneath you? Lo, a stream of water flows already beneath you! Therefore [I say], 'May it be God's will that all the shoots taken from you be just like you'.</p> | <p>כי הוו מיפטרי מהדדי א"ל ליברכן מר, אמר ליה אמשול לך משל למה הדבר דומה? לאדם שהיה הולך במדבר והיה רעב ועיף וצמא ומצא אילן שפירותיו מתוקין וצילו נאה ואמת המים עוברת תחתיו אכל מפירותיו ושתה ממימיו וישב בצילו, וכשביקש לילך אמר אילן אילן במה אברכך? אם אומר לך שיהו פירותיך מתוקין הרי פירותיך מתוקין, שיהא צילך נאה הרי צילך נאה, שתהא אמת המים עוברת תחתך הרי אמת המים עוברת תחתך, אלא יהי רצון שכל נטיעות שנוטעין ממך יהיו כמותך.</p> |
| <p>So also with you, [R. Nachman]. With what shall I bless you? With Torah? You already possess Torah! With riches? You possess riches! With children? You already have children! Therefore [I only say], 'May it be God's will that your offspring be just like you'!</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>אף אתה במה אברכך? אם בתורה הרי תורה, אם בעושר הרי עושר, אם בבנים הרי בנים, אלא יהי רצון שיהו צאצאי מעידך כמותך!</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

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| <p><b><u>2. Vayechi</u></b><br/>49:3</p> <p>Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength and the first of my might. [You should have been] superior in rank and superior in power.</p> <p><b><u>Rashi</u></b><br/><i>And the first of my might:</i> That is, his first drop [of semen], for he had never experienced a nocturnal emission.</p>                                                                                            | <p><b><u>2. ויחי</u></b><br/>מט, ג</p> <p>רְאוּבֵן בְּכָרִי אֶתָּה כַּחֲזִי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי יִתֵּר שְׂאֵת וְיִתֵּר עָז</p> <p><b><u>רש"י:</u></b> וראשית אוני: היא טפה ראשונה שלו, שלא ראה קרי מימיו.</p>                              |
| <p><b><u>3. Maimonides</u></b><br/>Laws of Deyot, 4:19</p> <p>Semen is the power of one's body, its vitality, and the light of his eyes. The more one expends, the more his body and his strength diminish, and his vitality is lost. This is what Solomon says in his wisdom (Proverbs 31:3), "Do not surrender your inner might to women!"</p>                                                                                       | <p><b><u>3. רמב"ם</u></b><br/>הלכות דיעות, פרק ד הלכה יט</p> <p>שכבת זרע היא כח הגוף וחיייו ומאור העינים וכל שתצא ביותר הגוף כלה וכחו כלה וחיייו אובדים הוא שאמר שלמה בחכמתו (משלי לא, ג) אל תתן לנשים חילך.</p>                         |
| <p><b><u>4. Talmud Megillah</u></b><br/>15a</p> <p>Our Rabbis taught: The four most beautiful women in the world were Sarah, Abigail, Rachav, and Esther.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p><b><u>4. תלמוד מגילה</u></b><br/>טו, א</p> <p>תנו רבנן, ארבע נשים יפיפיות היו בעולם, שרה ואביגיל רחב ואסתר.</p>                                                                                                                       |
| <p><b><u>5. Talmud Zevachim</u></b><br/>116a</p> <p>The Master taught: There was not one officer or prince who did not have relations with Rachav, the harlot. They said: She was ten years old when the Jews left Egypt, and she was a harlot during all forty years they spent in the desert. When she was fifty years old she converted and said, 'May my sins be forgiven in the merit of the rope, the window, and the flax.'</p> | <p><b><u>5. תלמוד זבחים</u></b><br/>קטז, א</p> <p>דאמר מר אין לך כל שר ונגיד שלא בא על רחב הזונה. אמרו בת יי שנים היתה כשיצאו ישראל ממצרים וזנתה מ' שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר. אחר נ' שנה נתגיירה אמרה יהא מחול לי בשכר חבל חלון ופשתים.</p>  |
| <p><b><u>6. Talmud Pesachim</u></b><br/>56a</p> <p>Jacob wished to reveal to his sons what would be at 'the end of days', whereupon the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, departed from him. He said: 'Perhaps—Heaven forefend—there is one unfit among my children, like Abraham, from whom there issued Ishmael, or like my father Isaac, from whom there issued Esau!'</p>                                                            | <p><b><u>6. תלמוד פסחים</u></b><br/>נו, א</p> <p>ביקש יעקב לגלות לבניו קץ הימין ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה. אמר, שמא חס ושלוש יש במטתי פסול כאברהם שיצא ממנו ישמעאל ואבי יצחק שיצא ממנו עשו?</p> <p>אמרו לו בניו שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד!</p> |

His sons answered him, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One! Just as there is only One in your heart, so too is there only One in our heart.' In that moment our father Jacob opened [his mouth] and exclaimed, 'Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.'

**Vayikra Rabbah**

**36:5**

From Abraham came out Ishmael and all the sons of Keturah; from Isaac came out Esau and all the chiefs of Edom; But Jacob's bed was perfect and all of his sons were righteous.

אמרו כשם שאין בלבך אלא אחד כך אין בלבנו אלא אחד. באותה שעה פתח יעקב אבינו ואמר ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד.

**ויקרא רבה**

ל, ה

אברהם יצא ממנו ישמעאל וכל בני קטורה, יצחק יצא ממנו עשו וכל אלופי אדום, אבל יעקב מטתו שלימה כל בניו צדיקים.

**מקורות להשיעור:**

מפרשים לתענית ה, ב

שיחת כ"ק אדמו"ר מליובאוויטש, כ"ף מנחם אב ה'תשל"א

B"H

### 3. Questions and Exercises

1. What is the logic behind the sequence of the four statements made by Rabbi Yitzchak to Rabbi Nachman?
2. What is the meaning of the statement, "Jacob our father did not die."
3. Who was Rachav? Why does mentioning her name twice have such a powerful impact?
4. Why does Judaism strongly oppose the wasteful emission of seed?
5. Why were Jacob's children permitted to follow his coffin, notwithstanding the Kabbalistic caution against this?
6. What was the deeper meaning of the blessing of Rabbi Yitzchak to Rabbi Nachman that "Your children should be like you" ?