

Insights into Halacha

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Understanding URCHATZ Comprehending KARPAS

Have you ever wondered why, during the annual Pesach Seder, when we dip the Karpas vegetables in salt-water to symbolize our ancestor's tears while enslaved at the hands of the cruel Egyptians, we precede it by washing our hands (URCHATZ)? Isn't hand-washing exclusively reserved for prior to 'breaking bread'? And furthermore, why is this only performed at the Seder? Is there a specific message this action is meant to portray?

All About the Children

The answer to these questions might depend on a difference of understanding. The Gemara in Pesachim (114b) asks why at the Pesach Seder we perform two dippings, i.e. Karpas into saltwater and later the Maror into Charoset. The Gemara succinctly answers **KI HEICHI DILEHAVAI HEKEIRA L'TINOKOT**, in order that there should a distinction for children'. Both Rashi and his grandson, the Rashbam, as well as the Roke'ach, explain the Gemara's intent, that this act is performed in order so that the children should ask why we are

performing this unusual and uncommon action on Leil HaSeder, as this action serves as a **HEKEIRA TOVA**, an excellent distinction. This is one of the ways we ensure that the Seder Night's Mitzva of **V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA**, retelling the story of our ancestors' exile, enslavement, and ultimate redemption and Exodus from Egypt, is properly performed.

*Meaning, the children will ask "Why is this night different than all other nights?" - a.k.a. 'The Ma Nishtana' - and we respond with "Avadim Hayinu" and the retelling of our nation's origins. This is in line with the Torah's referring to the Seder as **KI YISHALCHA BINCHA** - when your children will ask, **V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA** - you will tell your child - meaning, recite the Haggada. Interestingly, the Mishna's version of the Ma Nishtana regarding dipping (Pesachim 116a) is slightly different from ours, as it asks that we generally dip once and not twice, as in the Mishnaic period it was common to dip during a meal. However, by the Gemara's time this was no longer prevalent so it amends the Mishna's version of Ma Nishtana to **AFILU PA'AM ECHAT**, that we generally do not dip at all during a Seuda. Either way, we can ask, well, if this is the question that children ask, then what is the actual answer that dipping shows? The Bach, and later cited by the Pri Megadim, cites three diverse reasons:*

1) That we are showing Derech Cheirut, that free men dip before a Seuda to whet the appetite.

2) It serves as a small taste, as the Seder's Seuda is much later, after Haggada and (first part of) Hallel, so we should not sit so long without eating anything.

3) Citing the Maharal MiPrague, that the first dipping before the Seuda shows that the second dipping by Maror, is performed exclusively for the Seder Night's special Mitzva of eating Maror; otherwise, as many people dip during their meals, it would not appear out of the ordinary. The Taz offers an alternate approach, that the fact that the first dipping is performed prior to the Seuda shows that it is not actually performed as part of the Seuda, so too, it proves that the second one, Maror is also not performed as part of the Seuda but rather for its unique Mitzva. On the other hand, the Pri Chodosh raises the point that everyone knows that there is a different Mitzva of dipping and eating Maror that is performed much later on in the Seder, well after the 'answer' of AVADIM HAYINU. He therefore suggests that perhaps the main purpose of Karpas is for the children to ask questions, irrelevant of the answer or whether it actually answers that exact question. Once the children realize early on in the Seder that there are actions out of the ordinary being performed on Leil HaSeder, they will

notice and ask the purpose of all of them, and thus enable the Mitzva of V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA to be performed in the optimal manner.

But a question remains. Which exact action is the one that is meant to evoke the children's questions? The answer may surprise you. Bartenura and Tur specify that it is not the seemingly odd act of hand-washing for vegetables that is peculiar, but rather the timing of the dipping. They assert that it is unusual to dip food items at the beginning of a seuda. Most other days we also dip, but in the middle of the meal. In other words, the only change we do to evoke children's questions is to perform the dipping right then.

What then of the seemingly atypical hand-washing just for vegetables? Isn't that an uncharacteristic change from the ordinary? 'No', they would respond, 'one certainly would have to wash his hands before dipping his vegetables.'

Drip and Dip

But in order to properly understand this, we must first digress to a different Gemara in Pesachim (115a). Rabbi Elazar teaches in the name of Rav Oshia "any food item that is dipped in a liquid (DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH) requires hand-washing before eating." On this statement, Rashi and Tosafos (among others)

differ as to the correct understanding of his intent.

Rashi and the Rashbam maintain that this ruling is still applicable nowadays, as it is similar to the requirement to wash before eating bread, while Tosafos is of the opinion that this law is only relevant during the times of the Beit HaMikdash, as it is conditional to Tahara, Ritual Purity, which in this day and age, is unfortunately non-applicable. Although the Maharam MiRottenberg, and several later poskim are of the opinion that one may indeed rely on the lenient view, it should be noted that the majority of halachic authorities including the Rambam, Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Rama, Vilna Gaon, Chayei Adam, Shulchan Aruch Harav, Ben Ish Chai, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Mishnah Berurah, Kaf Hachaim and Chazon Ish, hold that even nowadays one should do his utmost to be vigilant with this and wash hands before eating a food item dipped in liquid.

The lenient opinion is taken into account, however, and that is the reason why according to the majority of poskim, this washing is performed without the prerequisite blessing, as opposed to the washing before eating bread. This is due to the halachic dictum of SAFEIK BRACHA L'HAKEL, meaning that in a case of doubt regarding the topic of brachot, we follow the lenient approach and do not make the blessing, to avoid the

possibility of making a blessing in vain.

This all ties in to our Seder. In fact this, explains the Tur and Avudraham, and echoed by later authorities, is the reason why we wash URCHATZ prior to dipping the Karpas into saltwater. As this action is classified as a DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, it requires hand-washing before eating. Although the Rambam, Tur and Avudraham, as well as the Levush and the Vilna Gaon, aver that URCHATZ actually necessitates a bracha of Netilat Yadayim, conversely, the vast majority of poskim conclude that we do not make a Netilat Yadayim at this Seder hand-washing, but rather exclusively at RACHTZA immediately prior to Motzi-Matza. This is indeed the common custom.

The Chida's Chiddush

The Chida, in his Simchat HaRegel commentary on the Haggada, explains that this is the background, as well as the reason for the added VAV by URCHATZ at the Seder, as it is the only one of the Seder Simanim that starts with that conjunction. We find a parallel by the bracha that our patriarch Yitzchak Avinu bestowed on his son Yaakov, V'YITEIN L'CHA – 'And Hashem should give you...' According to Chazal and cited by Rashi, the extra conjunctive VAV means YITEIN YACHZOR V'YITEIN – that Hashem should continually and

constantly give.

Likewise, the Chida explains the extra VAV in URCHATZ. The Baal Haggada is transmitting a message to us. Just as during the Seder we all wash before dipping a vegetable in salt water, that extra VAV is telling us - RACHATZ YACHZOR V'RACHATZ - that we should continue to wash our hands, anytime we want to eat a food dipped in liquid, year round.

The Chatam Sofer and his son-in-law, the Chatan Sofer, write in a similar vein in their Haggada, that URCHATZ is meant to serve as a tochacha (rebuke) and yearly reminder to those who are lackadaisical with the observance of this halacha, in order to remind everyone that this applies year round as well. Indeed, the Taz actually writes similarly, and concludes that at least during the Aseret Y'mei T'shuva one should be stringent. The Ben Ish Chai remarks comparably when discussing Urchatz, that praiseworthy is one who is careful with this hand-washing year round.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l adds that the VAV is connecting URCHATZ to KADESH - meaning KADESH URCHATZ - (as a command) that we should be M'kadeish ourselves and continue to wash for food items dipped in liquid - even if we were previously generally not stringent with this all year round.

The Medium is the Message

Yet, it is important to note that other poskim take an alternate view. Rav Yaakov Reisher in his Chok Yaakov argues that since the great Maharam MiRottenberg, as well as the Lechem Chamudos and Magen Avraham among other poskim, ruled leniently with washing before eating a food item dipped in liquid following Tosafot's precedent, and most people do not follow the opinion mandating it nowadays, this simply cannot be the reason why we perform Urchatz at the Seder.

Rather, he explains that the Gemara's intent with stating that Urchatz is performed in order that there should be a distinction for children to ask, is that the hand-washing itself for eating dipped vegetables is what is out of the ordinary, not the timing of the washing. According to this understanding, it is the Urchatz itself that is essentially the "heker", highlighting that something different from the norm is occurring, to enable children to ask what is different on Seder night. Meaning, although most do not wash before eating a dipped item year round, at the Seder we do; and that is the atypical action we do to arouse the interest of the children.

Not a DA'AT YACHID (lone dissenting opinion), this understanding of Urchatz is also given by the Abarbanel, both the Chayei Adam and

Aruch HaShulchan seem to favor this explanation, and it is cited by the Mishna Berura in his Shaar Hatziyun as well.

Alternate Views

On the other hand, the Levush understands Urchatz somewhat differently. He explains that the dipping of Karpas at the Pesach Seder is due to Chovat (or in some editions Chibas) HaRegel, extra obligation or devotion for the Yom Tov.' Ergo, the hand-washing is specifically performed at the Seder, as due to its inherent holiness, 'we go the extra mile' to strive for an increase in purity, as opposed to year round, when in his opinion, it would not be mandated.

The Levush understands Urchatz differently from the other two main opinions. He explains that since the dipping of Karpas at the Pesach Seder is due to CHO VAT HAREGEL and is considered a Tevila shel Mitzva, we should therefore strive for an increase in purity and that is why the hand-washing is performed, even though the rest of the year it is deemed non-mandatory; quite the opposite of the Chida's and Chatam Sofer's understanding. Rav Shmuel Avigdor zt"l, although he implies that it should thus apply equally to every Yom Tov, due to the dictum of CHAYAV L'TAHEIR ATZMAN L'REGEL)...

VAYAGEID MOSHE, the renowned

classic sefer on the Haggada, after citing several authorities who discuss the extra intrinsic Kedusha of Leil HaSeder, writes that perhaps this can be seen by the VAV in Urchatz. He explains (in the exact opposite approach of the Chida's) that the VAV is connecting 'Urchatz' to 'Kadeish' - meaning 'Kadeish Urchatz' - (as a command) that specifically at the Seder, due to the added inherent Kedusha of Leil HaSeder, we should sanctify ourselves by washing before dipping our vegetables - even though we would not need to the rest of the year.

This author feels it is important to note that not every Posek or commentary tie the unique conjunctive VAV in Urchatz with the halachos of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH. For example, in the Shem M'Shmuel's Haggada... He asks why the order at the Seder is KADEISH URCHATZ and not the other way around. Generally speaking, we 'wash' in order to properly prepare ourselves for KADEISH - sanctifying ourselves. To borrow the phrase "Why is this night different than all other nights?" The Avnei Nezer explains that during Yetziat Mitzrayim our ancestors were redeemed even though they were technically not worthy of Geula at the time. Similarly, at the Seder we are able to tap into the inherent spirituality of the day and 'jump' and reach higher levels of Kedusha than we ordinarily could, even without proper

preparation. An entirely different, yet halachic explanation for this interesting turn of phrase is given by Rav Chaim Kanievsky zt"l. Rav Chaim explains that the conjunctive VAV in Urchatz is connected to Kadeish to teach us that washing for Karpas must take place soon after Kiddush, in order to ensure that the Kiddush is considered Kiddush B'Makom Seuda, as Karpas is the beginning of the actual Seuda.

An alternate, yet somewhat similar, interpretation is offered by the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin zt"l, venerated Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin.

The Seder reminds us of the eating of the Korban Pesach that took place when the Beit HaMikdash stood. Therefore, we follow the same halachic requirements at the Seder that were in place during the Temple era. Everyone agrees that at the time of the Beit HaMikdash there was an obligation to wash hands for dipped food items, and therefore, at the Pesach Seder we do so as well, regardless of whether or not we actually fulfill this year round.

Rav Yishmael HaKohen maintains an analogous distinction. He explains that earlier generations were indeed stringent with Ritual Purity and hence certainly washed their hands before dipping vegetables. Since MINHAG AVOSEINU B'YADEINU, we

follow in our ancestors' footsteps by performing the Seder as accurately as possible as they did. Hence, our mandated washing Urchatz at the Seder irrespective of our actions the rest of the year.

A slightly similar, yet novel explanation is given in the Zichron Nifla'ot Haggada. He explains that generally speaking, people are lenient year-round with this pre-dipping hand-washing following Tosafot's understanding, that this washing is intrinsically only relevant during the times of the Beit HaMikdash, as it is conditional to Taharot, Ritual Purity. Yet, he explains, when the Beit HaMikdash will be rebuilt, we will also be required to offer and eat the Korban Pesach on Seder Night, in addition to our obligation of eating a DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH. As such, if we would not be makpid on washing beforehand at the Seder, people may not realize the import of the new situation and not wash before dipping the Karpas. However, at that point, with the Beit HaMikdash standing, the intricacies of Ritual Purity will once again be 'back in play'. As such, if one would eat his dipped Karpas without the Urchatz pre-wash, he will have made himself pasul (invalidated) from being able to eat Kodshim, including the Korban Pesach. Hence, explains the Zichron Nifla'ot, although year-round such washing may be currently deemed

unnecessary, it is nonetheless mandated on Leil HaSeder.

Another idea, cited by the Rama in his Darchei Moshe, is that the Haggada is akin to a T'fila, that we relate thanks and praise to Hashem for everything he has done for our ancestors and us. Therefore, immediately prior to the recital of the Haggada we wash our hands in preparation without a bracha similar to the requirement before davening.

One more interesting explanation, suggested by Rav Reuven Margolius, is that this washing is performed at the very beginning of the Seder night DERECH CHEIRUT, to show that we are doing so as free people and nobility, who are accustomed to washing their hands prior to eating even a small amount. This is opposed to slaves, who do not have the rights or ability for such extravagance, but rather 'eat their bread with sweat'. This nobility reasoning would seem to fit well with the minhag many perform of 'serving' the Baal HaBayit for Urchatz, by bringing him a wash basin and washing his hands.

This was the minhag of the Chasam Sofer (cited in his Haggada pg. 43) in order to show DERECH CHEIRUT and aristocracy. Rav Moshe Feinstein was noheig this way as well.

Divergences of Dipping

Interestingly, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank

zt"l, the former Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim, opines that the dispute among Rishonim whether only the head of the household is supposed to wash Urchatz or if everyone at the Seder does as well (the most common custom) might be dependent on this debate of why the hand-washing at the Seder was instituted.

Although there does not seem to be a direct dispute regarding whether everyone at the Seder or just the head of the household wash for Karpas, it is implied by their specific writings. For example, the Rambam when discussing the customs of the Seder, uses plural for almost all of the minhagim, except for Urchatz, which he uses the singular, implying that in his opinion only the one leading the Seder need to wash. On the other hand, from the way the Ritva, Maharil, Abudraham, and the Mordechai; discuss the topic, it is clear that they are of the opinion that everyone should be washing.

According to the majority opinion that Urchartz was enacted due to the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, then everyone would be mandated to wash.

However, according to the opinions that this hand-washing is only performed on Pesach at the Seder, it is possible that only the head of the household need wash Urchatz, as that should be deemed sufficient enough to arouse the interest and

subsequent questions of the children.

Practically, as mentioned previously, the most common custom is that everyone washes Urchatz. Yet, a notable minority minhag, performed mainly by many of Germanic/Dutch origin, as well as Sanz, Lelov, and Satmar Chassidim, is that only the head of the household wash. So it is remarkable that this modern divergence of minhagim might actually depend on how Poskim understood the brief statement of the Gemara regarding children's questions.

An additional possible rationale for leniency that not everyone wash, even though all are dipping and eating the vegetable, is that it is unclear in halacha if hand-washing is indeed mandated for eating less than a kazayit of a vegetable. Although, as mentioned previously, the Shulchan Aruch's conclusion is to wash Urchatz and eat less than a kazayit of Karpas, nonetheless the earlier Tashbetz maintains that hand-washing is unnecessary when eating less than a kazayit. Indeed, the Mishna Berura cites both sides of this debate, ultimately concluding TZARICH IYUN L'DINA (it needs to be examined better to determine what should be done).

Finger Food?

Another interesting machloket that might depend on which heker the Gemara intended is how to dip the

Karpas into the saltwater. If the reason Urchatz was mandated is due to the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, then it stands to reason that if one used a fork or other utensil to dip and not actually getting one's fingers wet, then many poskim would hold that hand-washing is technically not required. On the other hand, if the washing prior to dipping is considered the unusual action of Seder night, then we should wash for Karpas regardless of utensil.

Practically, although there are contemporary authorities, including Rav Moshe Sternbuch and Rav Nissim Karelitz, who maintain preference for dipping the Karpas by hand in order that it should satisfy all opinions, nonetheless, due to the other understandings of Urchatz's role, many poskim rule that even if one used a fork for the dipping, we should still perform the hand-washing prior. Just another insight into the seemingly simple and straightforward, yet remarkable Urchatz.

How Do You Karpas?

Now that we explained the "Why" and "How" of Karpas, this leaves the "What", as in which vegetable should be used. It is interesting that the Mishna in Pesachim did not tell us a specific vegetable, with the Gemara explaining that if stuck, we may even use the Maror for Karpas as well.

Although Rashi, Rambam, and Tur tell us that any vegetable may be used for Karpas, and conversely the Maharil, Arizal, and seemingly the Shulchan Aruch, understanding Karpas to be referring to a specific vegetable with that name,[37] yet, many s'farim cite PETROZIL or PETRESHKA (presumably parsley, as PETROZILIYA is called in modern Hebrew) as the vegetable of choice, with the Aruch HaShulchan commenting that “we don't know what it is.”

See for example, Maharil, Magen Avraham, Chok Yaakov, Elyah Rabba, Chayei Adam, the Chavat Daat, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, and Aruch HaShulchan. Rav Akiva Eiger points to the Yerushalmi, cited by the Tosafot Yom Tov, that states that KARPAS SHEBINEHAROT” is Petrosilinen. The Aruch cites this as well in his definition of Karpas. Taamei HaMinhagim writes that in Arabic, Petrosilin are called Karpas.

Other popular options used over the generations include onions, radishes, scallions, and even cucumbers.

All of these vegetables are cited by various Poskim through the ages, including the Chayei Adam, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, and Aruch Hashulchan (ibid.). The idea of using cucumbers for Karpas seems to be more recent, as Rav Shlomo Zalman

Auerbach is quoted as sometimes using cucumbers maintaining a preference for it; yet, if my memory serves me correctly, Rav Dovid Feinstein is quoted in the ArtScroll Kol Dodi Haggada as maintaining a preference for green vegetables for Karpas, and hence specifically “not using cucumbers.”

The main point is that its proper bracha be BOREI PRI HA'ADAMA, so that it should exempt repeating this bracha again when it is time for Maror.

Hence one should also have kavana when making the HaAdama on Karpas, that it should cover Maror as well. If one did not have this specific kavana by Karpas, he still would not repeat HaAdama when eating Maror.

Strictly Celery

However, it seems that the two most prevalent vegetables, at least nowadays, are celery and potatoes. Celery is considered an excellent choice, as the Chatam Sofer relates, his rebbi, Rav Nosson Adler did much research in tracking down the Maharil's elusive Karpas vegetable, and his findings were that it is none other than celery. The Chatam Sofer writes that therefore that is what he used as well, for Karpas. The Machatzit HaShekel writes similarly, that he was told by a “Great Man” (presumably Rav Adler) that after much research in Medical

books, Karpas is truly none other than celery. The word he uses to identify it – IPIYA or IPUCH, is also cited as such in earlier s'farim, including the Bartenura in classifying “Karpas.”

Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, in his annual Luach Eretz Yisrael, writes that in Eretz Yisrael the “Mehadrin” use “Karpas” that is known by its Arabic name. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach fills us in that he was referring to celery. The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch cites a preference for celery as well, and this is the minhag of many, including the Mareh Yechezkel, and later, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer.

Pontificating a Perchance for Potatoes

The other common “Karpas”, perhaps the most common, is potatoes. Cited by the Aruch HaShulchan and Misgeret HaShulchan, it is the minhag in Belz, Skver, and Spinka, and many Gedolim, including Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch, were known to use potatoes as Karpas.

Yet, there are those, including chassidim of Sanz, Bobov, and Kamarna who will not use potatoes for Karpas. This can be traced back to the famed Yismach Moshe, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum, rebbi of the Divrei

Chaim of Sanz... who writes that he used to use potatoes for Karpas, but then heard that the great Rav Naftali of Ropschitz made a Shehakol bracha on it (and hence would not be fitting for Karpas). He writes that he found that the Aruch, Rav Nosson MiRomi, when referring to the proper bracha of mushrooms and other food items that do not actually get their nourishment from the earth and consequentially their bracha is Shehakol, translates them as TARTUFFEL. Not familiar with the archaic word, the Yismach Moshe maintained that the Aruch must have been referring to KARTUFFEL, colloquially known as the potato.

Although there are different rationales for this, this idea is also found in several other s'farim, and there are prominent authorities who therefore made a Shehakol on potatoes. On the other hand, the facts do not seem to corroborate that potatoes should be classified in the same category of mushrooms, as potatoes not only grow and root in the ground, but they also get their nourishment from the ground, as opposed to mushrooms and their ilk. Several contemporary authorities point out that it is highly unlikely, if not outright impossible, for the Aruch, who lived in Europe in the eleventh century, to have been referring to “Kartuffel” (potatoes) as the proper translation for mush-

rooms, as tubers were unknown on that continent until almost five hundred years later!

In fact, according to the Tiferet Yisrael, this act of Sir Francis Drake's, of introducing potatoes to the European continent, merited him to be classified as one of the Chasidei Umos Ha'Olam, as over the centuries potatoes have saved countless lives from starvation.

Moreover, in modern Italian, "tartufo" still translates as "truffle", the prized underground fungus, and not a potato. Therefore, the vast majority of authorities rule that the proper blessing on the potato is indeed Borei Pri HaAdama, and hence, it is still the preference for many as "Karpas."

Ed. note: Tartuffel/Kartuffel aside, potato has two strikes against it - it isn't a fresh green vegetable that reminds us Springtime, during which we emerged from Egypt, and it is cooked rather than raw (which might be a problem). Yet potatoes do not strike out, but rather hit safely (and maybe knock in a couple of runs) because of family minhag. Many of the countries of origin of Ashkenazim had nothing available for the Seder besides potatoes and onions. Potatoes was the most used veggie for Karpas, and even with the availability of celery and parsley - many families still use boiled potato for Karpas.

Urchatz Everyday!

Back to Urchatz, the Chida, in his Simchat HaRegel Haggada, continues that although many are aware of the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, they do not realize that it even applies to something as ubiquitous as dipping cake into coffee!

...the Chazon Ish and Steipler Gaon were known to be very stringent with this halacha, and always washing before dipping cake into tea, eating washed fruit, and even fruit taken from the fridge that is slightly damp.

One might contend that the connection between vegetables in saltwater to tea biscuits in coffee seems tenuous, but actually, according to the majority of authorities, from a halachic perspective they are remarkably similar.

So the next time you get that dunkin' urge, it might be prudent to be conscientious by following the Haggada's hidden exhortation, and head to the sink before diving in to your cup-of-joe.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot & sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

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Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere."

Ed. note: The footnotes are extensive and that I only included a few of them. Interested parties should find Rabbi Spitz's article online.