

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

Mazel-Tov to Rafi Singer and Miriam Kamin Singer on their wedding on Wednesday. Mazel-Tov also to proud parents, Hyam & Naomi Singer and Rabbi Aaron & Rochel Kamin. Rafi Singer is a brother of Rabbi Yehoshua Singer of Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD, a major supporter of the Potomac Torah Study Center.

Consider a donation to the Chabad of the University of Delaware, victim of arson by anti-Semites who burned the Chabad building in late August. UDFireRelief.com or 262 S College Ave, Newark, DE 19711.

We always read Nitzavim the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. Immediately following the frightening tochacha in Ki Tavo, Moshe starts his fourth speech to the generation about to enter the land. Moshe says that the people are finally open to accepting a direct relationship with Hashem. The speech continues in Nitzavim as Moshe renews the covenant from Har Sinai for the new generation – but also for all future generations.

Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Dov Linzer contrasts the tochacha in Vayikra with the one in Devarim. In Vayikra, the emphasis on is brief and general (Vayikra 26:40-45). The former slaves were still too new to the concept of a relationship with God. After the curses in Vayikra, B'Nai Yisrael had to repent their sins and obtain forgiveness. However, their relationship with God was too new and not deep enough for a focus on teshuvah. The people had to learn to accept a direct relationship with God before they could return to such a relationship, so the concept of teshuvah carries a feeling of a distant future event.

Adam Rishon sinned in Gan Eden by eating from God's special tree, and as a result God banished Adam, Chava, their children, and future generations from Gan Eden. The closest B'Nai Yisrael could approach to God was the Mishkan, and in particular the Kohen Gadol's annual visit to the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, when the smoke of his korban would mix with the cloud of God's glory. For other Jews, the Torah became the Etz Chaim (Tree of Life), the replacement for God's other special tree in Gan Eden. The land of Israel, and in particular the place that God selected for His presence (the Temple Mount), was to become the locus of the replacement Tree of Life for B'Nai Yisrael as the generation entered the land.

Nearly forty years after the first tochacha, as the second generation prepares to enter the land, Moshe raises the issue of teshuvah numerous times in Sefer Devarim. God warns Moshe that the people would turn away from God after entering the land. Moshe writes Haazinu, a final song that the people could recite as a way to return to God in the future. The focus on teshuvah is so important that it is perhaps the major theme of Sefer Devarim.

Moshe warns the people against sinners (29:18 ff.) A sinner might reason that God would not destroy a righteous generation if one or a few people sinned. (This reasoning is the concept in economics of a “free rider.” If everyone else obeys, then God will not destroy everyone because of that one person’s sins.) Rabbi David Fohrman observes that this reasoning is the opposite of Avraham’s argument to God about saving the people of Sodom. God should not destroy an entire city if there are ten or more righteous people, because the ten might be able to influence the sinners to repent. This argument does not work in reverse, as Moshe explains (29:19-28). Avraham’s example was that God would bless Avraham, and Avraham would influence other nations to follow his example of moral behavior. Once the other nations repent, God would bless them too. Thus Avraham’s blessings would go out to other nations. The sinner infers that the righteous of his generation would save him. However, Moshe warns that the sinners would induce God to punish them and the land, and God would drive the Jews from Israel. This process would not end until the Jews perform genuine teshuvah, return God to their hearts, and follow both the mitzvot and the voice of Hashem (intent as well as strict letter of the law, as the prophets remind the people so often) (ch. 30). Once the people perform genuine teshuvah, God will bring back His blessings and return the Jews to Israel.

Rabbi Yehoshua Singer (below) relates a story from the Midrash to explain that the strength of the Jewish people reaches a maximum when we stand together like reeds, united in focus, working together, as we were for the covenants at Har Sinai and at the beginning of Nitzavim. His beautiful prayer for the coming year is that we can use the time of pandemic to come together with God, like reeds, and make the most of what hopefully will be a time of unity. My Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, devoted a substantial portion of his messages to the lesson of caring for the disadvantaged members of society – widows, orphans, aged, converts. This message is implicit in the concept of teshuvah and an important lesson as we prepare to meet our creator during the upcoming High Holy Days. If we remember and live the messages of Rabbi Singer and Rabbi Cahan, we can make the new year one of blessing. Kativa V’Chatima Tovah!

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Nossan ben Pessel, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers. Note: Beth Sholom has additional names, including coronavirus victims, on a Tehillim list.

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Parshas Netzavim: Heartspeak

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1998

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

Teshuva. It is the word of the hour, and there is no better time for the Torah to talk about it than the week before Rosh Hashanah. It means repentance. It means not only taking heart but even changing heart! And this week the Torah tells us that the requirements are not as difficult as one would perceive. “It is not in heaven or across the sea. Rather it is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform” (Deuteronomy 30:12-15).

The Ibn Ezra comments on the three aspects of commitment that the Torah alludes to — the mouth, the heart and the performance. In practical terms, there are commandments of the heart, there are those that entail speech, and there are those that require action.

But on a simple level, the Torah seems to discuss a process that involves commitment before action. It takes the heart and the mouth to make the commitment before the action is performed. Thus the Torah tells us, “it is very near to you – in

your mouth and in your heart – to perform.” The sequence of events, however, seems reversed. The Torah puts the mouth before the heart. Shouldn’t the Torah have written, “It is very near to you – in your heart and in your mouth- to perform”? Doesn’t one have to have wholehearted feeling before making verbal pledges? Why would the Torah tell us that it is close to your mouth and your heart?

In the years before the establishment of the State of Israel, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the Tzadik of Jerusalem, would visit the inmates of the British-controlled Jerusalem prison on every Shabbos. Though most of the Jewish prisoners were not observant, they would quickly don kippot before the revered Rabbi would greet them. Then they would join in the Shabbos morning prayer service that Reb Aryeh organized and they would read along with the rabbi, as if they were observant Jews.

The entire scene agitated one particularly nasty fellow named Yaakov. He would try in every way to irritate the gentle Rabbi. Each Shabbos, he would purposely light up a cigarette in Reb Aryeh’s face in order to disturb him. Reb Aryeh was never fazed. One Shabbos, Yaakov stormed into the makeshift synagogue and snapped at the aged Rabbi.

“Why do you waste your time with these liars and fakes? They are no more observant than I am. They only put the kippah on their heads when you come here. Furthermore, they only pray and open their lips to G-d when you are here. Otherwise they have no feeling in their hearts!”

Reb Aryeh turned to Yaakov and rebuked him with a firm but gentle voice. “Why do you slander these souls. They come to pray every single week. I do not look at their heads but rather in their hearts. And when I hear the prayers coming from their lips, I know that their hearts are following as well.”

It was not long before Yaakov became a steady member of the prayer group.

The Torah may be hinting at a powerful message. It may be telling us that even though our hearts have not arrived as yet, it is still important to use our lips to communicate the commitments and pray the prayers of the Jewish People. The Torah is not far away. It is close and easy for your mouth. The books are available. The siddur is understandable and translated. It is very near to your lips. All you have to do is talk the talk – sincerely. Soon enough, you will walk the walk with the same sincerity as well.

Dedicated in memory of our beloved father and grandfather Fishel Yitzchok Ben Shmuel Zisblatt, from his family

Good Shabbos!

Sacrifices, Teshuva and Our Relationship with God

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2011, 2020

Parshat Nitzavim always falls immediately before Rosh HaShana, and appropriately so. For it is in this parasha that the Torah speaks at great length about the power of teshuva: “And you will return to the Lord your God and obey God’s voice... you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” (Devarim 30:2). This process of teshuva comes, in the Torah’s narrative, after the terrible curses described in the previous parasha, have befallen the nation: “And it will be when all these things befall you, the blessing and the curse...” (verse 1) that you will then repent and return. And your returning – vi’shavta (the root of the word teshuva) – to God will be met with God’s return to you: “And God will return your captivity... and God will return.” (verse 3).

This parasha of teshuva, then, is actually the closing of last week’s parasha of blessings and curses. The Torah there ends its catalogue of curses rather abruptly, “... and you will sell yourselves there to your enemies as slave men and slave women, and no one shall buy you.” (Devarim 28:29). That’s it. You will be in the land of your enemies, afflicted and with no hope, more worthless than slaves. Where is the hope? Will God abandon us there? To this, Nitzavim responds – if you repent, God will return you to the Land of Israel, and you will once again prosper. You will no longer be “cursed... in the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land,” (Devarim 28:17), but rather “... God will bring increase... to the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your cattle, and the fruit of your land,” (Devarim 30:9). And in response to the devastating prophecy that: “Just as God has rejoiced over you to do good to you and to increase you, so will God make your enemies

rejoice to wipe you out and destroy you," (Devarim 28:63), our parsha echoes back: "For God will once more rejoice over you to do good, just as God has rejoiced over your fathers." (Devarim 30:9).

It is instructive to compare this narrative of Sin-Curse-Teshuva-Return-Blessing to the parallel one that closed the book of Vayikra. There, the Torah also speaks about sinning and being cursed by God. However, the resolution there is not repentance and return, but rather confession and of God's commitment to the covenant. Consider: we are told near the end of those curses, "And they shall confess their sins and the sins of their fathers, in their trespass that they have trespassed against me, and even that they have walked contrary to (or haphazardly with) me" (Vayikra 26:40). It sounds like the people have repented, and all should be well and good. But then we read in the next verse: "Even I will walk with them contrarily, and I will bring them into the land of their enemies. Perhaps then will their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they accept the punishment of their sin."

The people – although they have confessed – have not really changed their ways, and have not really humbled their hearts to God. And, even at the end, this goal seems elusive. For we are never told that this change takes place, but only: "... I will not cast them away or despise them to utterly destroy them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God." (verse 44). It is not our repentance that saves us, but rather God's commitment to uphold the covenant and to keep the relationship that God has with us as a People.

Why does one narrative include teshuva, and hence a complete return – both of us to God and God to us – whereas in the other narrative this is absent? A couple of possibilities present themselves. On the one hand is merely describing two different scenarios. Sometimes a person – or a nation – will not return fully, and only do a pro forma act of confession, and sometimes a person – or a nation – will do true teshuva, and God will respond in kind to these separate cases – in the first, a maintaining of the structure of the relationship, without its substance, and in the second, a true reestablishing of the relationship, with its full depth.

This answer is fine as far as it goes, but it fails to note another relevant point, and that is the absence of the entire phenomenon of teshuva from the book of Vayikra. For while Vayikra deals at great length with the atonement of sin, it never uses the phrase of shavta or teshuva, nor does it deal with it as a concept. Sins are atoned for through sacrifices and the associated act of confession: "And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that he has sinned in that thing, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the Lord..." (Vayikra 5:5-6). This is also true at the communal level and regarding the Service of Yom Kippur: "And Aaron shall bring the bull of the sin offering, which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself....". And again, "And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel..." (Vayikra 16:11 and 21). The emphasis here is more on the rituals and acts that achieve atonement, but not on the inner work of remorse, changing of one's ways, and returning to God. That – the process of teshuva, only explicitly appears in the Torah at the end of Devarim, in this week's parasha. Why is that?

I believe that the answer lies in how Israel's relationship with God developed over time. Turning for a moment to a halakhic take on our parsha, the Talmud of the Land of Israel expounds on the verse: "And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and he will do you good, and multiply you above your fathers" (Devarim 30:5), in the following way:

Your fathers were exempt [from tithes when they entered the Land of Israel] and became obligated [after the land was sanctified through being conquered and settled], so you were exempt [when you returned in the time of Ezra] and became obligated [when you settled the land].

Your fathers did not have the yoke of foreign government on them. You – however – are obligated [and the land has sanctity] even though you are under the yoke of a foreign government. (Shevi'it 6:1).

That is to say, your return to the land is greater in the Second Commonwealth than the First Commonwealth, since the land is imbued with and retains its sanctity even though you have no political power. This idea is extended by Rambam (Laws of the Chosen House 6:16) to explain why the sanctity of the Land of Israel exists even after the destruction of the Second Temple, which was not the case after the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash. The difference, says Rambam, is that the first sanctity was connected to our political power, and disappeared when that ended. The second sanctity, however, existed despite the lack of political power, and thus is perseveres even when we are driven from the land.

Rav Soloveitchik further elaborated on this point, and spoke to the nature of Israel's relationship to the land. In the First Commonwealth the connection was formed based on real-world and material benefits: political power, and a land filled with blessings – a land of milk and honey. When this stopped being the case, the relationship ended. In the Second Commonwealth, however, life was better outside of the Land of Israel, and many Jews therefore did not return. Those who did return understood that the connection to the Land was much deeper than surface and material benefits. It was a connection that transcended material concerns, and because it transcended such concerns, it persisted throughout all hardship, and could exist even when they were no longer on the land. This relationship, however, could not happen at the beginning. A relationship of this depth had to grow over time. The people had to suffer hardship, and remain steadfast in their commitment to the Land, for the relationship to acquire this depth and this permanence.

What Rav Soloveitchik has said so beautifully in regards to the relationship to the land, can also be said in regards to Israel's relationship to God. This relationship was initially formed on the basis of real-world, material benefit. God had redeemed them from Egypt and provided for them in the desert. And, as we see, when the people suffered privation, they turned away from God and looked to return to Egypt.

With such a relationship, when things go wrong, a true returning cannot take place, because a relationship of true depth has yet to be established. The most that can be hoped for is a verbal acknowledgement that one has done wrong, and an act that symbolizes the need to fix what has been broken. This is the verbal confession and the sacrifice. It is like a recently married couple that got married because of they were physically attracted to one another, but has yet to develop a deep, lasting relationship. When one of them does something to hurt the other, it cannot be solved by refocusing on the relationship and what truly matters, for the relationship is not there yet. At this stage, it can only be solved by an admission of wrongdoing, and an act – flowers, a vacation, etc. – that serves to make things better. The real danger here is that one of the parties will get up and walk away from the marriage. For things to get better, they first have to be committed to stay in. Hence, when the relationship with God was at this state, the people were only "walking with God haphazardly" as was God with the people. What kept things going was a commitment to stay in and work on the relationship. God is committed to the covenant.

If the couple, then, keeps in the marriage and keeps on working on the relationship, it can be transformative. The relationship will grow deeper, and after the marriage has hit some bumps and even serious hardships and nonetheless survived, the relationship will become deep and lasting. The entire dynamics will then change. With such a relationship, although statements and symbolic acts are important, the true way one corrects wrong and hurtful acts is by returning to what really matters, returning to the deep connection to other and to the unwavering commitment to one another, not just to the marriage. And when this happens, the relationship will grow even deeper.

And so it is with our relationship with God. If we have kept fast to the relationship even when it has hit bumps, if we are committed not only when things are good, but even – perhaps even more so – when things are bad, if we understand that the relationship is not about surface acts but about deep connection, then our relationship will be deep, substantive, and lasting. If this is – or can be – our relationship with God, then when we sin, and when we return and do teshuva with true depth and sincerity, our relationship, having suffered and persevered, will only grow deeper and stronger.

Shabbat Shalom!

Your Best Rosh Hashana

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2020 Teach 613

We were sitting around at a Chasuna a few years ago, reminiscing about our early married years, when one of my friends, today a noted personality in the Jewish world, motioned that he had something to share.

We turned attentively to him, and he began.

"It happened when I was still learning in Eretz Yisroel a few years after our marriage. We were blessed with three children, and, as Rosh Hashana approached, my wife told me that this year she did not want to 'go it alone.' She wanted to share meals and childcare with her sister who lived a 40-minute walk away, in an adjacent neighborhood. I readily agreed, and we mapped out the logistics of how I would daven in my Yeshiva (of course), and also walk with my wife and children to

my brother and sister-in-law's house. The timing was tight. My Yeshiva started early and ended late. Walking my family across town was not the simplest plan, even on a regular Shabbos. But we decided that this was the best plan to accommodate everyone.

"Yom Tov went well for my wife and the children. My brother and sister in law were thrilled, and the cousins had a great time together. But as for me, my davening suffered. I was pulled in all directions, and the usual Rosh Hashana serenity eluded me. I was sure that my lack of Kavana (intent in prayer) would be recognized in Heaven, and I dreaded what would be.

"Interestingly, what followed was the most blessed year of my life. It seemed like Heaven was very pleased, as that year was an exceptionally good year, affording me unusual opportunities which culminated with my being offered my first full time position just days before the next Rosh Hashana. I was overwhelmed with gratitude, but also a bit confused. Hadn't my Kavana been worse this year, than ever before? Wouldn't one expect that to translate to less blessing, not more?"

"As the years have gone by, I have matured in my thinking of Yom Hadin (Day of Judgement) and I have come to realize that Hashem takes a lot more into account than just the Kavana. Apparently my consideration for my wife, and both of us staying calm throughout each transition from house to house, was held as a merit in our favor. Perhaps, my sacrificing my idyllic picture of Rosh Hashana for a life-reality that included my family responsibilities granted me the ability to have my brief moments of heartfelt prayer answered so generously."

I was deeply touched by his story, and by his mature interpretation of Hashem's benevolence. I have remembered his story well. But recently, as we have been preparing for the upcoming most unusual Rosh Hashana, I have felt like pointing and saying, "Here it is again." The opportunity of a lifetime.

In the shadow of COVID, we prepare for Rosh Hashana, watching the infection numbers fluctuate, and recognizing our responsibility to both protect, and provide for, the community in a responsible way. Masks, physical spacing, and shortening exposure time are the obvious changes. But additional changes include the extra effort we all need to make to get along. Without the ready smile, without the effusive greeting and warm handshake, with tensions about seating arrangements in Shul, we need to continuously find ways to show our Ahavas Yisroel (love for each other). For many, the loss of a Makom Kavuah (regular place to pray) is nothing short of traumatic. There is so much to be considerate of, so many areas in which we need to bring forth extra effort. Our setting for this year's prayers may be shorter and a bit awkward. But in a profound way, the full picture is so much more robust. This is a Rosh Hashana of the full-life picture. This is a Rosh Hashana of opportunity.

In the Nisaneh Tokef prayer, we say explicitly that on this day of Rosh Hashana it is decided "Who will live and who will die... who through plague." Who would have thought that last Rosh Hashana the decision and ruling on a pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands in a matter of months, was up for consideration?

This year, with renewed awareness, we approach Rosh Hashana realizing in a greater way the gift of Rosh Hashana, and the gift of our knowing its potential. Rosh Hashana this year will not fit the description of idyllic. But with the right values and focus, we can make it the best Rosh Hashana ever.

I take this opportunity to wish you and yours a meaningful Rosh Hashana and a blessed new year. Whether you will be davening at home, in shul, or in a tent, may the unusual nature of this Rosh Hashana enable us to soar to new heights in our relationships with others and with Hashem.

With heartfelt blessings,

Standing Before the Almighty: Thoughts on Parashat Nitsavim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

"You are all standing today before the Lord your God..." (Devarim 29:9)

Moses reminds the entire people of Israel that they are each standing before God. Whether one is the head of a tribe or a water-carrier, all are ultimately judged by God. Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh, the great 16th century mystic and commentator,

notes that we humans do not know how to evaluate each other properly--this is only known by God. There are people who may seem important to us--but who are deficient in the eyes of God. There are people who may seem insignificant to us--but who are highly regarded by the Almighty.

Not only may we be deceived in our evaluation of others, we also may be deceived in our evaluation of our own selves. We may either over-exaggerate our virtues or underestimate our good qualities. If we remind ourselves that we are standing before God, we can hope to come to a truer understanding of ourselves and others.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, offered a poignant insight into the season of holy days we are about to observe. A dominant symbol of Rosh HaShana is the Shofar. The law is that a Shofar must be bent. The moral lesson is that we, too, should bow ourselves in penitence and contrition. We come before the Almighty, humbly asking forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings. Indeed, the theme of the period between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur is repentance.

Shortly after Yom Kippur, we observe the Festival of Succoth. A dominant symbol of that holiday is the Lulav. According to halakha, a Lulav must have a straight spine--if it is bent over, then it is not valid for the performance of the mitzvah. The Lulav reminds us that we must stand tall, that there are times when contrition and meekness are not appropriate. We must conduct ourselves with principled commitment to our ideas and ideals, being straight and upright in our words and deeds.

Rabbi Halevy notes that we each need to learn from the Shofar and the Lulav. We need the humility symbolized by the Shofar, and the strength symbolized by the Lulav. We need to balance these qualities to reach a realistic and proper approach to life.

As we enter the holy day season, it is important for us to remember that we each stand before the Almighty, who Alone knows the essence of who we are. The ultimate Arbiter of the value of our lives is the One to whom we are answerable. There is no point in pretending to be what we aren't, or in posturing to make ourselves more important in the eyes of others--God always knows the Truth about who we are.

So let us come before the Almighty with honesty and humility, bent over like the Shofar. Let us note our errors and weaknesses, and let us resolve to do better with our lives. But let us also come before the Almighty as a Lulav--upright and straight, strong in our commitment to the teachings of Torah. Let us neither over-estimate--nor under-estimate--who we are, and what our lives mean.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals wishes our members and friends a happy and healthy New Year--and many years to come. Tizku leShanim Rabbot.

* Jewishideas.org. **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic.** The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.

Parshas Netzavim-Vayeilech

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

As we prepare for the High Holidays this year under the strain of physical separation, we seek ways to find some level of meaningful connection. The High Holidays, immediately followed by Sukkos, is a time when we are usually making arrangements for sharing and celebrating with family and friends. The void this year, as some wonder if and how they can even participate in services, is one that we all feel and seek to fill.

In Moshe's opening words in this week's parsha, the Medrash finds a message which indicates that these connections are even more important than we may realize. Engaging in efforts to connect and join together at this time can not only alleviate our struggle but may even be a powerful merit for the coming year.

The parsha opens with the words “You are standing here today, all of you” (Devarim 29:9). The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni (980) explains that these words are meant as two phrases, with the second explaining the first. “You are standing here today”. When is this true? “All of you” - when you are bound together as one. The Medrash gives a parable to explain. When a bundle of reeds is taken as one, the bundle is difficult to break. If one reed is taken by itself, even a baby can break it. The Medrash is telling us that the merit which will determine whether we stand or fall as a nation is the merit of being bound together as one. As we seek ways to connect, we must realize that whatever level of connection we achieve is itself of great significance.

Yet as we think back to previous years, it may seem that our struggle to connect did not begin with the current pandemic. As we were fully joining and enjoying live human company last year, did we truly enjoy every person we saw? Did we truly seek to be bound with everyone else in the community? Perhaps there may have been some whom we took for granted, offering a short nod or a handshake and moving on, barely noticing each other. If we are to seek the merit of being bound together, we must ask ourselves what does it mean to be bound together, and how do we develop a connection of that depth?

I believe it is this question which the Medrash is addressing with the parable of the reeds. The reeds lean on each other and thereby combine the strength of every small reed together into one collective force. The collective force enables the reeds to withstand far greater pressures than any reed can withstand alone.

The Medrash is telling us to apply this concept to our human connections. If we want to withstand the test of time and remain standing firm as G-d’s nation, we must learn to lean on each other and combine our individual strengths and merits into one collective force. We must recognize that though each reed may seem insignificant, each of us alone is also insignificant. It is only when we bind together that our collective merit can protect us. No one is so great that they can stand alone, and no one is too small to add to the whole.

The Medrash continues this message with the second half of the passuk. Moshe lists those standing today and says “the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every Jewish individual”. The Medrash explains that this too is meant to be understood as two phrases. Although, G-d has appointed for us “the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers”, we are still all of equal merit before G-d “every Jewish individual”. We each have our own role and purpose in G-d’s world, and each role is equally cherished by G-d.

As we seek to connect, the Medrash is teaching us to focus on the unique role and strength that each individual has. Everyone has their place in the whole, and everyone’s place is important to G-d. After these last several months it is easy to look past our own strengths and realize how much we need each other. As we focus on that need, we can appreciate the role of every individual and how everyone has their own unique strengths. The more we appreciate each other, the more we can learn from each other and compromise to work together as G-d’s nation, the greater our merit will be for this coming year. May it be a year of blessing.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Dvar Torah: [place holder]
by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

[Rabbi Rube hopes to return with a Dvar Torah soon]

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL

Canon Law: A Source for Jewish History?
By Ilana Ben-Ezra, Ph. D. *

I am often asked what appears to be a rather logical question to an illogical circumstance: Why is an observant young Jewish woman studying medieval canon law? In my doctoral studies in the Judaic Studies and History Departments at New York University, I focus on medieval Jewish-Christian relations through law, specifically examining the ways that canon law treats and presents Jews.

Canon law is the Catholic equivalent of halakha: It is the law that guides Roman Catholic practice. However, unlike halakha, in which differing rabbinic opinions can present competing rulings and perspectives on a matter, canon law recognizes papal authority as a final arbitrator and standardizer of legal disputes and questions. Thus, by studying the canon law code, which the pope sanctioned, it is possible to learn about the Church's position on the Jews, as well as to gain an additional perspective on the complex factors impacting Christian views on Jews as real people with differing religious practices, as opposed to as a theoretical competing and threatening alternative religion.

It is important to recognize the difference between these two Christian approaches to Jews and Judaism in order to understand relations between the faith groups and the difference between ideas of intolerance and actual practiced intolerance. Further, by studying Christian attitudes toward and relations with Jews—and the medieval era as a whole—it is possible to better understand the atmosphere in which many rabbinic authorities on whom modern Judaism continues to rely—authorities such as the Rambam, Ramban, Rosh, Rashba, Rabbenu Asher, Rabbenu Gershom, and others—made their legal rulings.

Because our modern observance of Judaism is based on the rulings, understandings, and perspectives of our predecessors, it is important to examine and understand how halakha and minhagim have developed in tandem with socioeconomic and political pressures, as well as shifting religious priorities and outlooks. Appreciating how Jewish practices have resulted from a centuries-old dance between religion, personal spirituality and growth, the contemporaneous society, the past, and community priorities enables a greater appreciation for modern observance, as well as an understanding of how extra-legal pressures have impacted halakhic developments.

For example, Rabbenu Gershom—the highly influential eleventh-century Ashkenazic scholar—ruled in a responsum that rabbinic authorities should permit Jews to do business with Christians on Christian holidays because it had become standard communal practice; a prohibition would be ignored for economic reasons. He supported his position by citing Rabbi Yohanan's lenient opinion from the Talmud that outside of Israel, non-Jews are not considered idolaters, and therefore there is no concern that the eleventh-century Jews would be supporting idolatry by engaging with Christians commercially during their holidays.^[1] The sensitivity that he displayed toward his contemporaneous community's needs and practices is an example of halakha developing in response to socioeconomic conditions and practices.

Understanding the historical realities that contributed to contemporary Jewish life, traditions, and law deepens our connection to modern Judaism by demonstrating how halakha has continued evolving on the basis of prior scholarship and Jewish communal needs. History highlights the sensitive side, relevance, and communally in touch nature of halakha and Jewish leadership.

Examining historical relations between Christians and Jews enables a fuller appreciation of how Jews could and did act as members of Jewish communities and broader Christian societies in Western Europe. It reveals how Jews related to and lived amongst a majority culture and religion that differed from themselves and to examine how our predecessors navigated life as Jews amongst non-Jews, balancing economic necessities, social realities, and cultural pressures with their continued Jewish observance. Understanding that Jews engaged with Christians culturally, politically, economically, and socially shows that Jews throughout history have balanced interacting with non-Jews surrounding them, their ideas, and practices with their own religious and cultural norms. The Rambam participated in contemporaneous philosophical debates, Avraham ibn Ezra composed poetry influenced by Muslim peers, Shemuel haNagid wielded tremendous political power, and Isaac of Norwich was a leading English financier in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It would be incorrect to believe that all Jews maintained full halakhic lifestyles, but halakhic observance was important in some fashion to some percentage of the community, though we can never know exactly what percentage.

For example, completed in 1234, Pope Gregory IX's (d. 1241) *Liber Extra*, which compiled and organized prior ecclesiastical court cases in order to standardize rulings brought to ecclesiastical courts, includes rulings related to Jews and their proper function in Christian society. Although there is a whole chapter dedicated to Jews' place in Christian society, Jews also appear scattered throughout the book. These other appearances are perhaps more interesting because they are less concerned with Jews as a religious group and more interested in how to manage Jews as individual people. Jews emerge in the code as real individuals, biblical and historical ideas, and religious others. A study of how Jews emerge as ideas and realities in the code—which I hope to complete for my dissertation—will shed further light on Jewish life in medieval Christendom, and Jews' place in medieval ecclesiastical thought.

Studying Jews in canon law cases, such as those in the *Liber Extra*, further enhances our knowledge of Jews' daily lives

and their realities. For example, there is an assumption that most Jews in medieval Europe worked as moneylenders, in banking, or perhaps as artisans. Agriculture is not normally associated with medieval Jews. However, the Liber Extra records that in the mid-twelfth century the bishop of Montpellier, in Southern France, asked Pope Alexander III about whether or not Jewish farmers owed tithes to the Church, as Christian farmers did. The pope responded, "You should force them with everything in your district to pay tithes or renounce their possessions as punishment, lest, by chance, they should succeed to trick the church through their law." The question itself enhances our knowledge of Jewish history by demonstrating that Jews, at least around Montpellier, did farm. Further, the pope's answer evidences concern that Jews may have attempted to use Jewish law, which ecclesiastical and secular authorities allowed to govern communal Jewish life, to evade paying tithes. His worry highlights part of the ecclesiastical concern that Jews' observances and laws might threaten Christians in Christendom and their success. As a result—and also no doubt because of financial concerns—he warns the bishop about the possibility of Jewish law superseding their obligations within Christendom and ignoring Christian practices. Thus, Christian ideas about Jews and their proper place in Christendom emerge from this case, as well as evidence of Jewish daily life. [2]

Although the modern and medieval Jewish conditions vastly differ, our past offers examples for how to live as Jews engaged with the non-Jewish world. So, when I am asked why I, an observant Jew, study medieval canon law and the Jews, I answer that it is not about the canon law—though that too is important and fascinating—but it is about understanding and appreciating the cultural and socioeconomic milieu in which Judaism has evolved. It is important for us twenty-first century Jews to realize that for centuries our ancestors were engaged members of the non-Jewish world around them and simultaneously members of the Jewish community. Studying the past from a perspective other than our own sheds light on what outside forces and pressures have influenced the development of Judaism and on how relations between the different faith groups were possible and occurred. When we branch out from the at times all-encompassing world of Jewish texts, we gain a deeper sense of how and why Judaism and Jewishness evolved. In order to fully appreciate modern Judaism, we must grapple with our past in all its complexities, examining every angle and dimension—including canon law.

Footnotes:

[1] Shlomo Eidelberg, ed., *תשובה רבנו גרשום מאור הגולה* (New York, 1955), no. 21, pp. 75–77.

[2] X 3.30.16.

* Jewishideas.org. Core Curriculum Postdoctoral Fellow in History and Judaic Studies at NYU. This article appeared in issue 28 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. **Ed. Note:** How Jews should interact with non-Jews in a world in which we are a small minority is a frequent topic of discussion. Here is an intelligent perspective from an Orthodox Jewish scholar.

Rav Kook Torah **Nitzavim: Two Levels of Teshuvah**

The Torah portion of Nitzavim is always read before Rosh Hashanah, a fitting time to speak about reflection and repentance. Often we have a strong desire to make changes in our lives. We may want to be better parents, better spouses, and better people. We aspire to greater spirituality in our lives, to devote more time to Torah study, to be more thoughtful in our interpersonal relationships. And yet, circumstances may make such resolutions very difficult to keep. Our goals may seem unattainable, and our personality faults beyond correction.

National Teshuvah

The Torah describes the national teshuvah (repentence) of the Jewish people as they return to their homeland and their faith:

"Among the nations where the Lord your God has banished you, you will reflect on the situation. Then you will return up to the Lord your God.... He will gather you from among the nations... and bring you to the land that your ancestors possessed."

“God will remove the barriers from your hearts... and you will repent and obey God, keeping all of His commandments.... For you will return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.”
(Deut. 30:1-10)

Twice, the verse states that “you will return to God.” Is there a purpose to this repetition? A careful reading reveals a slight discrepancy between the two phrases.

After reflection in the exile, the Jewish people will return to the land of their fathers. Here the text says, “you will return up to God,” using the Hebrew word ‘עַל’ ('ad').

After returning to the Land of Israel and God removes the barriers of their hearts, they will learn to fully love God and keep His commandments. This time the Torah says, “you will return to God,” using the preposition ‘אֶל’ ('el').

Two Stages of Teshuvah

How are these two types of national return different? What is the difference between 'ad' and 'el'?

The first teshuvah is the physical return to their homeland, to their language, and to their national essence. This is returning “up to God” — approaching, but not fully attaining. Thus the Torah uses the preposition 'ad,' indicating a state of “up to, but not included in the category” (a Talmudic expression, ‘בְּכָל עַד וְלֹא עַד’). This is a genuine yet incomplete repentance, obscured by many veils.

After this initial return, the Jewish people will merit Divine assistance that “will remove the barriers from your hearts.” This will enable the people to achieve the second stage of return, a full, complete teshuvah, all the way “to God.” This is an all-embracing return to God “with all your heart and soul.”

Thoughts of Teshuvah

It is important to recognize and appreciate these different levels of teshuvah. This lesson is also true on a personal level. We should value even partial efforts to change and improve. The Sages praised even hirhurei teshuvah, the mere desire to improve (Pesikta Rabbati 44). Perhaps we are unable to fulfill our spiritual ambitions to the extent we like. Nonetheless, we should view our desire to change and improve as tools that purify and sanctify, leading us on our way to attaining complete spiritual elevation.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 339-341. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I p. 335; Orot HaTeshuvah 17:2.)

Why Judaism? (Nitzavim 5775) © 2015

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Former UK Chief Rabbi,*

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and God.

Their parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, “We will do and obey all that God has declared” (Ex. 24:7). But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation and all future generations will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, “God made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound.” That is why Moses says:

It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today. (Deut. 29:13-14)

“Whoever is not here” cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means “generations not yet born.” That is why the Talmud says: we are all mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai, “foresworn from Sinai.”[1]

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A bat or bar mitzvah is not a "confirmation". It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today," meaning all future generations.

But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today's parsha. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born.[2] However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since God's covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to God?[3]

But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us, can we give our consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: Why be Jewish? What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before? Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, "Why be Jewish?" did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

In fifteenth century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its Kristallnacht in 1391, and from then on until the expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*.[4] But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19).

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.[5] We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients with their belief in fate, fortune, moira, ananke, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature, did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says No. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct – what Freud took to be the mark of civilisation? Can you practise self-control – according to the

"marshmallow test", the surest sign of future success in life?^[6] To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives. "We have to be free", said Isaac Bashevis Singer, "we have no choice!"

Choose life. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with God, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find God down here on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks, not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

It does not deny pleasure. Judaism is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find God not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study and acts of kindness, in community, hospitality and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on whom God has set his image and likeness. We are the people God has chosen to be His partners in the work of creation. We are the nation God married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people God called on to be His witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth.

We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because God values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that "Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath ... but also with those who are not with us today." His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much greater than ourselves we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life.

Footnotes:

[1] Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a.

[2] Shavuot 39a.

[3] Isaac Arama, Akedat Yitzhak, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim.

[4] Published in Britain as Radical then, Radical now.

* <https://rabbisacks.org/why-judaism-nitzavim-5775/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

4 Powerful Insights From the Rebbe -- Nitzavim-Vayelech

Compiled by Mordechai Rubin* © Chabad 2020

The Individual and the Community

Parshat Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. The Torah addresses every Jew in these words, "You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: Your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, even all the men of Israel... from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water."

This is something of a contradiction. The verse begins "You are all standing"—without making any distinctions. But immediately afterwards, it proceeds to detail the different classes of Jew separately. Why, did it need to do so, when the phrase "all of you" already encompasses them all?

It did so in order to make a fundamental point: that on the one hand, there must be unity amongst Jews; and, at the same time, each has his unique contribution to make, his own individual mission.

But, if there have to be distinctions amongst Jews, how can there be true unity amongst them?

The verse supplies its own answer: "You are standing today, all of you before the L-rd your G-d." It is as Jews stand before G-d in the full recognition that He is the author of their powers and the ground of their being, that they are one. With the assurance implicit in these words, each Jew, comes to the coronation of G-d on Rosh Hashanah, the acceptance of His sovereignty and the proclamation of His kingship over Israel, and over the entire world.

The Strength to be Successful

This week's Torah reading begins: "You are all standing today." "Today" refers to Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgment. The Torah is telling the Jews that they "are standing," triumphant in judgment. This is the blessing for the month of Tishrei, and in a larger sense, the blessing for the entire year.

More particularly, the word *nitzavim* — the core of the blessing given by G-d — does not only mean "standing." We find the term: *nitzav melech*, "the deputy serving as king." the use of the term *nitzavim* indicates that G-d blesses us to stand with the strength and confidence possessed by a king's deputy.

This blessing enables us to proceed through each new year with unflinching power; no challenges will budge us from our commitment to the Torah and its mitzvos. On the contrary, we will proceed from strength to strength in our endeavor to spread G-dly light throughout the world.

When a person identifies with G-d — the G-dly core within his own being and the mission of revealing G-dliness in the world at large — he discovers indomitable resources of strength. This enables him to overcome all obstacles and appreciate the bountiful good with which G-d has endowed the world.

Every Moment Counted

Today my days and years were fulfilled; on this day I was born, and on this day I shall die . . . This is to teach us that G-d fulfills the years of the righteous to the day and to the month, as it is written (Exodus 23:26): "I shall fulfill the number of your days."

Rashi, *ibid.*; Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a

A year is more than a quantity of time: it is a cycle, a sequence of transitions that runs its course only to repeat itself again and again. On the spiritual plane, each year brings a repeat of the various spiritual influences unleashed by the festivals (freedom on Passover, joy on Sukkot, etc.) from their fixed position on the Jewish calendar.

Thus, the Hebrew word for "year," *shannah*, means both "change" and "repetition." For the year is an embodiment of the entire range of transformations that constitute the human experience. Each year of our lives only repeats this cycle, though on the higher level to which a year's worth of maturity and achievement have elevated us. In other words, one can

say that we all live for one year, and then relive our lives for as many times as we are enabled, each time on a more elevated level, like a spiral which repeats the same path with each revolution, but on a higher plane.

Therein lies the significance of a life that is "fulfilled" in the sense that it consists of complete calendar years. Moses was born on the seventh of Adar and passed away on the same date, as was the case with a number of other tzaddikim (perfectly righteous individuals).

A Personal Torah Scroll

This week's Torah reading contains the final positive commandment in the Torah, the mitzvah to write a Torah scroll. Each individual is obligated to write a Torah scroll for himself.

This commandment raises a question. Over the course of Jewish history, we do not find many individuals writing Torah scrolls. Why has the mitzvah not been given adequate focus?

The resolution to this question depends on the conception of Jewish community. When a community undertakes an objective, it is considered as if all the members of the community are involved in that activity.

Jewish communities throughout the world have always had Torah scrolls written for them. When commissioning these scrolls, the intent is that every member of the community be considered a part owner of the scroll, and that it therefore be considered as if each member of the community himself has commissioned the writing of the scroll, in this way, the entire community fulfil their obligation.

The mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll was given to the Jewish people - and fulfilled by Moshe Rabbeinu - directly before our people's entry into Eretz Yisrael. Our Rabbis have taught that the fulfillment of this mitzvah is one of the preparatory steps leading to the conclusion of exile and to the advent of the era when we will again enter Eretz Yisrael, and fulfill all the mitzvos in the most complete manner.

An Insight by the Rebbe on Parshat Nitzavim: The Pact

By Rabbi Baruch Shalom Davidson*

The Pact

You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d: the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel; your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp, your woodcutters and your water-drawers, so that you may enter the covenant of Hashem your G-d. (Devarim 29:9-11)

Every year we read Parshat Nitzavim on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. The implication is that Parshat Nitzavim addresses the themes of Rosh Hashanah, and reading it enables us to experience the holiday properly.

In the first verses we read that the entire Jewish nation assembled to enter a covenant with G-d. The Torah mentions specifically that from the leaders to the water-drawers, all of Israel stood united as one -- "all of you."

What is the purpose of a covenant? If two friends are concerned that their relationship might sour at some point, they may enter into a covenant -- a pact to remain loyal to each other forever, even if future events or discoveries about one another cause them to lose favor in each other's eyes.

This, essentially, is the theme of Rosh Hashanah: a renewal of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. On Rosh Hashanah, when our love for G-d is strong (after our heartfelt teshuvah during the month of Elul), we commit ourselves to G-d unconditionally. We pray that G-d will enter this covenant with us, committing Himself to us unconditionally, even if later in the year our love may not be as obvious.

The covenant of Rosh Hashanah requires, however, that all members of the Jewish nation unite as one, just as the Jewish people did -- men, women and children, from the elders to the converts -- in Parshat Nitzavim. For in order to evoke G-d's unconditional commitment to us, we too must behave in a manner that transcends any reason or conditions.

We do this by showing our sincere love and respect for all our fellow Jews, despite our understandable differences.

– **Lightposts** **

* **An Insight from the Rebbe.**

** *Lightpoints - From the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on the Weekly Torah Portion*, by Rabbi Baruch Shalom Davidson

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Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech

5780 B”H

Covenant and Conversation Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

How to Renew a Nation

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, “Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel.” Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – “I am the Lord your God,” and, “You shall have no other gods beside Me,” (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.[1]

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are Hakkel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and “Now write for yourselves this song” (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakkel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel’s words, “If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?” In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good.

Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakkel: “At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King.[2] This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it “all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony: Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set

up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.[3]

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakkel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – “as on the day the Torah was given,” “as though he had heard it from the mouth of God” – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses’ description of the Giving of the Torah in Va’etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, “Assemble [hakkel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.” (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakkel command, especially the word Hakkel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2

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Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called “the devotion of your youth” (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).^[4]

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.^[5] According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibbur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual.^[6] So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as “the Reading of the Torah” but as “the Proclaiming of Torah.” It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget “the devotion of our youth,” the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses’ parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

[1] Makkot 23b-24a.

[2] This rule was broken by some of the Hasmonean Kings, with disastrous long-term consequences.

[3] Mishneh Torah Haggigah 3:4-6.

[4] See R. Elhanan Samet, *Iyunim be-Parshot ha-Shevua*, 2nd series, 2009, vol. 2, 442-461.

[5] Shulchan Aruch, *Orach Hayim* 141:4, and commentary of *Levush ad loc.*

[6] This is the view, regarded by most as normative, of Ramban. See e.g. *Yalkut Yosef, Hilchot Keriat ha-Torah*.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“You are all standing before God your Lord – the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your bailiffs, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water. [The purpose is that] you should enter into a covenant with God, and into His oath, that He is making with you today.” (Deuteronomy 29:9-11)

We read a bit further on, in the book of Joshua (8:33-34), “And all of Israel and its elders, its heads of tribes and its judges.... Priests and Levites, half facing Mount Gerizim and half facing Mount Eyal... Joshua read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse.” Why must Moses make a covenant with the nations “today,” in the plains of the Moab, so similar to the Covenant which will soon be made with Joshua on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eyal?

The Midrash Tanhuma, which is cited by Rashi and which opened our last commentary, provides an important insight by teaching us that what necessitated the Third Covenant is the sin of the Golden Calf. It might have been thought that once the Israelites formed and worshipped a golden calf – only forty days after they had ratified the covenant at Sinai and on the very watch of Moses – their evil deed of treachery and faithlessness, idolatry and adultery, abrogated the covenant forever. The Almighty therefore enters into a third covenant during Moses’ lifetime as an affirmation of the truth that whereas a contract can be broken, a covenant is irrevocable; despite the backsliding of Israel, their covenant with their God who is always ready to accept their repentance remains eternally validated. “You have greatly angered the Almighty, but nevertheless you have not been destroyed, and behold you are standing here today.” (See “Two Destructions and Two Redemptions.”)

I would suggest another significance to this third covenant, and by so doing explain why and how the Israelites could have stooped to idolatry so soon after the glory of the revelation. In addition, we shall interpret the unique language of the Third Covenant itself.

What initially strikes us about the Third Covenant – and the manner in which it clearly differs from its predecessors – is its democratic element. Every single Israelite is summoned and included, from the chairman of the board to the lowly water carrier: “the heads of your tribes... your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water” (Deut. 29:9-10).

In terms of the ancient world, what could possibly be more all-inclusive and democratic?

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This town-hall meeting is in sharp contrast to the Sinai covenant, as recorded in Parashat Mishpatim: “All of you must bow down at a distance. Only Moses shall then approach God. The others may not come close, and the people may not go up with him” (Ex. 24:1-2). The extraordinary demonstration of God’s transcendent presence upon Mount Sinai necessitated warnings and boundaries. The Revelation was clearly aimed for the entire nation, but God spoke to Moses in a special and unique way; the rest of the nation was warned to keep its distance from the frenzied fire of faith, which has the capacity to consume as well as to construct. Hence it was Moses who received the bulk of the Revelation, and he served as the intermediary to convey the divine will to the nation (Deut. 5:4, 20-25).

On this basis, we can readily understand why and how the Israelites could succumb to idolatry so soon after the Revelation; since the Revelation revolved so centrally about Moses, when Moses failed to descend from the mountain at the expected time, the people felt bereft and orphaned. After all, the nation related to Moses more than to God – and in their frightened and desperate moment, due to the absence of Moses, they turned to the familiar Egyptian idols.

Enter the covenant in our portion of Nitzavim, the covenant that stresses the truth that God has a unique relationship with every single Israelite – Jew and stranger, man and woman, rich and poor, elders and children, wood-choppers and tribal chiefs – and not only with Moses or the elite class of scholars and pietists. The Third Covenant attempts to correct the previous misimpression that God was primarily concerned with the religious elite; God entered into a covenant with every single Jew!

Furthermore, unlike the Sinai Covenant, the present covenant takes into account not only the totality of all Jews, an across-the-board horizontal gathering, but it’s also a vertical covenant, extending both backwards and forwards, spanning even past and future generations: “Not with you alone do I make this covenant.... But with those who stand here this day before the Lord our God...as well as with those who are not here with us this day” (Deut. 29:13-14). The Third Covenant includes all of historic Israel, Knesset Yisrael entire, past, present, and future; it emphasizes the all-inclusive historical and eternal aspect of the relationship between God and Israel.

Years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 29, 1947, an earlier plan was offered which would have given the aspiring state a very meager parcel of land. David Ben Gurion, the chairman of the Histadrut HaTzionit, was unsure as to whether or not to accept the offer. He greatly respected Yitzhak Tabenkin, a leading Labor Zionist of that period, and so he uncharacteristically agreed to

abide by Tabenkin's decision. Tabenkin asked for another twenty-four hours, insisting that he must first seek counsel with two individuals. The next day, he advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. "I accept your decision," said the modern-day Lion of Judah, "but just tell me by whom you were advised?" "I had to ask two very important individuals," said Tabenkin, "my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet born." Yitzhak Tabenkin fully understood the significance of the Covenant of Arvot Moab, the Third Covenant.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

Days of Completion

"And [Moshe] said to them 'I am a hundred and twenty years today, I can no longer go forth or come in...' (Devarim 31:2) The Gemara, focusing on the word "today", explains this possuk as indicating that Moshe had turned one hundred and twenty on the very day of his death; his birthday and day of departure were the same. This, the Gemara indicates, is the mark of the death of righteous people, as Hashem, "completes their lives from day to day and month to month." It is unclear what exactly is the significance of this. Given a choice of living a long life without "rounding out" the days, or living a shorter life with the days and months "rounded out", would one not rather have the longer life?

The Maharal (Chiddushei Aggados, Sotah 13b) associates another Chazal with this point. He points to a midrash about Sara's life, and uses the verse, "Hashem takes note of the lives of temimim (righteous, literally - complete)"; just as they are "complete" so too are their years "completed". Although it is not clear from the midrash what exactly is referred to by this "completeness", the Maharal compares it to our Gemara, indicating that the point of our Gemara is to delineate the temimus quality of tzaddikim.

But what exactly does this "completeness" mean? It is unreasonable to say that this refers to "complete in the sense of "perfect", for we know the dictum that, "there is no tsaddik in this world who never sins" (Koheles 7:20). So what particular quality of the righteous are we referring to with the metaphor of "complete"?

Indeed, the quality of temimus is not a measure of total righteousness, but rather a perspective on man's mission. One can look at the world simply as a place with many opportunities for mitzvos, which in turn add up to many wonderful rewards. In that perspective man has no particular mission and no all-encompassing accomplishment, but rather mitzvah by mitzvah we attain more and more reward. This frames the world as a sort of carnival where you can earn reward cards through various activities, and more cards you collect the greater your prize.

But there is a much deeper perspective on life. A person's life is a discrete unit of avodas Hashem, and there is a specific mission to be carried out. The subdivisions of time, i.e. years, months, and days, are meaningful subdivisions, each one in turn containing a discrete subdivision of that big picture. Thus, a complete month is a complete unit of avodas Hashem which, together with the other months, forms a complete year. The same is true of days adding up to a month.

A true tzaddik is someone who has this deeper perspective on life. He is not busy collecting mitzvos, but rather fulfilling a clear and distinct mission. An incomplete month, or a partial year, is a total failure from a tzaddik's perspective; one has done good things but has not really "accomplished" anything. Thus, Hashem's reward for the tsaddik is to have his life come to fulfillment - full years, full days.

Moshe Rabbeinu emphasizes this point with the continuation of his statement, "I can no longer go forth or come in." Rashi explains that this can't be referring to physical infirmity, for the passuk emphasizes his total health. Rather, Rashi says, his "wellsprings of wisdom" had dried out.

This does not mean that his mental acuity had dulled. Rather the "wellspring had dried out". There was no longer any new wisdom coming forth from his studies. For the true tzaddik who finds meaning in the unique mission that each day and month brings, a simple repetition of "what was, will be" is contrary to his approach to life.

As we begin our new year iy"H, we must bear in mind that a new unit of time is not just a yardstick for "how much more of the same will we have". Rather it is a new phase of avodas Hashem, with a starting and ending point at Rosh Hashana. Our job is to undertake the new year as a new mission and iy"H Hashem will give us the opportunity to wholly complete the mission of our lives, so that when we finish our mission in this world, it will be with a sense of completeness: days, months, and years.

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Rabbi Mordechai Willig

The Coronavirus presents a serious ongoing danger. Doctors have warned that public gatherings can spread the virus unless proper precautions are taken. They recommend outdoor gatherings, if possible, and require masks and social distancing. As a result many questions have arisen concerning Rosh Hashanah 5781. Each shul should follow the psakim of its own rav. What follows are merely my suggestions which may be implemented in our own shul, depending on the facts the facts on the ground come Rosh Hashana.

The main issue is the need to shorten the davening Rosh Hashanah morning in order to

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reduce the risk. In addition, it is difficult for many to keep masks on for a long period of time. Furthermore, for the outdoor minyanim, it is hard, and for some even dangerous, to remain in a potentially very hot tent for an extended Tefilla. Finally, it may be necessary to have two consecutive minyanim in shul, since it may not be filled to capacity as usual for health and/ or legal reasons. For example, in our shul davening on Rosh Hashanah typically lasts for six hours. How can it be reduced to three hours?

It is critical to preserve the primary ingredients of the Rosh Hashanah experience that the tzibur is accustomed to and anticipates. The Rama (Orach Chaim 619:1) states: one may not change the custom of the city, even the tunes sung and piyutim that they say there. The Mishna Berurah (619:9) explains that changes confuse the kahal. If we omit a tune or a devotional piyut, the kahal may be confused and/or disappointed.

The lesser of the evils would be to omit the piyutim accompanied neither by tunes nor by tears. These literary masterpieces, primarily authored by R' Elazar HaKalir (day one) and by R. Shimon ben Yitzchok HaGadol (Shacharis day two), should be studied and even recited at home during the course of Rosh Hashanah.

As such in Shacharis, only Ata Hu Elokeinu and L' Keil Orech Din, and their brief introductions and conclusions will be, respectively, sung and recited. In Mussaf, only Melech Elyon (on day one) and Un'saneh Tokef will precede Kedusha. From Kedusha and on, we will daven as usual, but, if necessary, at a somewhat faster pace.

The lengthy Mi Shebarach's will be omitted, and Lamenatze'ach before shofar will be recited only once, not seven times as usual.

The beginning of Shachris will be recited individually, in shul or at home. At the appointed time, the Chazan will begin at Nishmas, which is the beginning of the beracha which ends with Yishtabach (Mishna Berurah 52:5. See the pask of Harav Hershel Shachter shlit'a, 20 Tamuz 5780). Even those coming from home should not speak in the middle of p'sukei d'zimra. Even though from the perspective of hefsek it would be better to start after Yishtabach (Orach Chaim 54:3, Mishna Berurah 54:6), it is more desirable that the ba'al Shachris begin with the traditional, haunting chant of Hamelech.

The custom of one hundred shofar blasts is not recorded in the Shulchan Aruch; the Mishna Berurah (596:2) quotes it from the Shelah. If necessary, the last forty blasts can be omitted. Alternatively, they can be sounded outside of shul after Musaf concludes. As mentioned, doctors agree that risk is reduced outdoors and many are davening outside as well.

Some doctors are concerned with aerosols from the shofar. To allay these fears, the shofar can be blown near a door, if feasible, so the air goes outside.

Some have suggested covering the wide end of the shofar with a mask. However, if this changes the sound of the shofar the mitzva is not fulfilled (Orach Chaim 586:16). It is reported that a very tight fit, such as a rubber band, changes the sound. Therefore, a loose fit must be used, and it must be tested in advance to make sure that the mask does not change the sound of the shofar.

In case consecutive minyanim are held, Harav Hershel Shachter shlit"a ruled (17 Menachem Av 5780) that Chazaras HaShatz may be led by a Chazan two times, as seen in Mishna Berurah (124:5). The Rivevos Ephraim (Greenblatt, 2:83, 4:254) agrees. The Divrei Yaakov (Adas, Berachos 21a,7) asked many poskim and they said it is obviously permitted. Therefore, while the Mishna Berurah is not conclusive (it may refer to one who davened at the first minyan but was not the Chazan), it is nonetheless permissible.

Some wish to use the Tzomet microphone for outdoor minyanim. This device has not been accepted by American poskim. Tzomet has developed an infra-red thermometer based on their notion of grama. This, too, is not universally accepted. Therefore, if there is a need (many doctors question its accuracy when entering a building), a non-Jew should use a thermometer as a shvus d'shvus which is permissible in a case of need.

In the merit of our strict adherence halacha and our strict adherence to responsible medical guidelines may we all merit a K'siva V'Chasima Tova.

OU Dvar Torah

Returnings - Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

...הַיְהָ כִּי בָאֵץ לִי כִּי כָּל קָדְבָּרִים קָאֵלָה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה... וְשַׁבְּתָעַד הַאֲלָקָר

It shall be when all of these things befall you, the blessing and the curse... And you shall return to Hashem, your God.[1]

Background: Is Teshuvah a Mitzvah?

The Ramban, in his commentary to these verses, states that the word “שׁבָּתָעַד – you shall return” denotes a positive command to do Teshuvah. In contrast, the Rambam does not appear to construe this word as reflecting a mitzvah, for in Mishneh Torah he writes:[2]

Israel will only be redeemed through having done Teshuvah, and the Torah has already promised that they will do Teshuvah in the end of their exile and then they will be redeemed, as it says, “And it shall be when all these things befall you... and you shall return (שׁבָּתָעַד) to Hashem your God.”

We see that the Rambam sees these words, not as a mitzvah to do Teshuvah, but as a promise

that the Jewish people will ultimately do Teshuvah.[3] In truth, although the Ramban does understand the verse as commanding us to do Teshuvah, nevertheless, since it is not written in the command form (“גְּשֵׁשׁ – Do Teshuvah”), but rather in the descriptive form (“שׁבָּתָעַד – You will do Teshuvah”), it thereby also contains the additional connotation of a promise that we will do Teshuvah.

It is noteworthy that the Torah presents the background to teshuvah as “when all these things befall you, the blessing and the curse.” If we were to experience only blessing, we might come to believe that we are charmed, losing thereby all sense of accountability. Conversely, if we were to experience only curses, we may come to believe that we are doomed and lose all sense of hope. It is the combination of the two which can produce both the impetus to do teshuva and the confidence that it will be of ultimate benefit to us.

Additionally, contemplating the experiences of the Jewish people – both “the blessing and the curse,” the highs and the lows – can help embed within us a sense of our uniqueness as a people, leading us to return to be dedicated to our unique destiny. Moreover, this idea only becomes more impactful as time goes on. For although each generation might not have more spirituality than the one that preceded it, it does have more history, whose voice resounds continually deeper allowing it to reach the ears of the Jewish people at that time, and its message to reach their hearts.

Reverberations: “For this mitzvah that I command you today...”

The question of whether the word “שׁבָּתָעַד” represents a mitzvah to do Teshuvah has implications, not only for our understanding of verse 2 in which it is stated, but also for a number of verses that follow. In verses 11-13 we read:

כִּי הַמִּזְמָה הַזֹּאת אָשֵׁר אָנֹנוּ מַצּוּנָה הַיּוֹם לֹא נִפְלָאֶת הָוָא
מִמְּזֹא וְלֹא רְחַזָּה הָוָא. לֹא בְּשָׁמִים הָוָא... לֹא מַעֲבָר לִפְנֵי
הָאָה...

For this commandment that I command you today, it is not concealed from you, nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens... nor is it across the sea...

To which commandment do these verses refer? If we consider Teshuvah – mentioned just prior to this – to be a mitzvah, then presumably that is what “this commandment” refers to. However, if teshuvah is not a mitzvah, then it turns out that the words “this commandment” are stated without any prior context, in which case they would be taken as referring either to mitzvos generally or, alternatively, to the quintessential mitzvah of learning Torah. Not surprisingly, the Ramban and his school, who consider teshuvah to be a mitzvah, take the first approach.[4] According to this view, what does the verse mean by saying that teshuvah is

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“not concealed... nor distant”? The Seforim explains:

“It is not concealed from you” – that you should need prophets [to reveal its nature]
“Nor is it distant” – that you should require the wise men of the generation who are far away to explain it to you.

The ensuing verses elaborate on this theme: “It is not in heaven” – that you should need a prophet to tell it to you.

“Nor is it across the sea” – that you should require sages who are far away.

There is an amazing contrast here, for while teshuvah itself is a radical and profound idea, the path to its implementation is not a mystery nor is it remote. Rather, as the section concludes:

כִּי קָרוֹב אֶלְךָ הַקְּבָרָה מֵאַפִּיךָ וּבְלֹבָבְךָ לְשָׁתָו

For the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

With these words, the Torah outlines the three fundamental elements of teshuvah:

“in your mouth” – to orally confess one’s sins
“and in your heart” – to feel regret over having transgressed

“to do it” – to make a firm resolve to act correctly in the future.

Beautiful words. Teshuvah and Redemption

As mentioned above, both Rambam and Ramban understand that verse 2 contains a promise that at a certain stage, the Jewish people will do teshuva, at which point they will be redeemed and returned to their land. Thus, the verses that follow (3-7) describe Hashem returning the exiles to Eretz Yisrael and granting them prosperity there. What is most intriguing in this description of events is verse 8, which states:

וְאַתָּה תָשׁוֹב וְשִׁמְעָתָק בְּקוֹל הַיּוֹשֵׁב אֶת כָּל מִצְרַיִם

And you shall return and listen to the voice of Hashem, and perform all His commandments.

What is the role of the teshuvah mentioned in this verse? Have the people not already done teshuvah and thereby brought about their redemption?

The Chasam Sofer explains.[5] In order to merit complete redemption, the Jewish people need to perform complete teshuvah. However, this presents a problem. In order for teshuvah to be considered complete, the person needs to be in the same situation that led him to sin in the first place, only this time acting correctly. The cause of our exile as that we did not live correctly in Eretz Yisrael, allowing our material success to distract us from what life there is all about. If failing to live as we should in Eretz Yisrael was the root problem which led to our exile, we will appreciate that, by definition, this is a problem that cannot be fully rectified while in exile – we would need to return to Israel and get it right. As such, we seem to be stuck: We cannot be redeemed from exile in Eretz Yisrael until we perform full

teshuva, while at the same time full teshuvah is only possible in Eretz Yisrael!

However, there are times when the person has done all he can to rectify his wrongdoings from within his current situation, at which point Hashem arranges for him to return to his original situation and complete the Teshuvah process. This, says the Chasam Sofer, is what is being described in these verses:

Verse 2 describes the Jewish people doing Teshuvah while in exile. At this point, Hashem will allow them to return to Eretz Yisrael in order to complete the teshuvah process! By bringing them back and blessing with prosperity, they are now in the situation which led their ancestors to incur exile in the first place. If they should use their prosperity meaningfully, enlisting it in the cause of Torah living, then their teshuvah will be complete. This is the nature of the teshuvah mentioned in verse 8. With this complete teshuvah will come complete redemption, as described in verses 9 and 10.

It turns out that the full relationship between teshuvah and redemption is ultimately reciprocal. Teshuvah leads to redemption – which then allows for further teshuvah, which in turns brings about further redemption

It is fascinating to consider that if we were to be asked what stage of history we are in, a good answer would be: “Devarim Chapter 30 verses 3-7.” May we merit to soon fulfill the mandate of verse 8, ushering in the glorious era of the verses that follow.

[1] Devarim 30:1-2.

[2] Hilchos Teshuvah 7:5.

[3] Interestingly, although the Ramban disputes the Rambam and considers Teshuvah to be a positive mitzvah, he does not mention it in his list of mitzvos at the end of his Commentary to Rambam’s Sefer Hamitzvos where he enumerates those mitzvos that he feels the Rambam should have included.

Additionally, although the Rambam does not seem to count Teshuvah mentioned in our verse as a positive mitzvah, he does list the confessing of one’s sins (vidui) when one does Teshuvah as a mitzvah, see Sefer Hamitzvos, positive mitzvah 73. See Meshech Chochmah Devarim 31:17-18 for a discussion of the Rambam’s view.

[4] The Rambam, in keeping with his view that teshuvah is not a mitzvah, explains these verses as referring to Torah study, see Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 9:1 (based on Bava Metzia 59b), and Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:8 (based on Eiruvin 55a).

[5] Derasos Chasam Sofer.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

Choosing Life

Zocher Nishgachos B’Yom Din... Remembers the forgotten on the day of judgment. (Machzor)

On Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur HASHEM is described as remembering the forgotten. How awesome is that notion!? We may lose track of things but HASHEM does not! One

person described it like a bank statement with a list of checks and charges. Try to remember who spent \$35 at that stationary store and why. There is an itemized account of all of our deeds, words, and thoughts that exists forever. The good news is that just in case you thought your life was going unnoticed, and you suspected it was meaningless, you need not worry. Everything we do is forever. The bad news is that everything we do is forever. Oy! What’s to be done!?

The Talmud (Chagigah) says, “Who is a fool? One who destroys what in his hands!” In another place in the Talmud (Tamid) the question is asked, “Who is the wise person? The one who sees the future!” The fool destroys the opportunities of life. He wastes time and the resources of his life. In doing so he squanders the most valuable ingredient in the universe, his life.

The wise one who sees the future is not just one who can pick a good stock or see the local results of his actions. No, foresees the ultimate consequence of how he spends his life here in this world and that impacts his behavior and attitude in all that he does.

The Zohar says that there really is only one giant Mitzvah and that is “CHOOSE LIFE” all the rest of the Mitzvos are Etzos- advice on how to achieve CHOOSING LIFE! Life is ultimately cleaving to HASHEM Who is eternal. Death is capitulating to the temptations of the temporal.

At any one moment a person holds his entire life in his hands. He has both the past and the future. About the past he can do Teshuvah. About the future he can choose to exercise his options more wisely or not. Stated otherwise, the Talmud (Brochos) says, “The ultimate purpose of wisdom (being able to transcend our immediate circumstance) is Teshuvah and Maasim Tovim – repentance and good deeds. Repentance does not mean psychoanalysis and indulgence in grief. No it means editing. At any given moment while we are writing “the story of our life” we can go back and edit or type further.

The computer gives us a more perfect analogy. Nothing is solid yet until the print button is pressed. Everything can be rearranged and deleted or understood and reframed differently until the day of death or till the print button is pressed. At any given moment everything is in our hands to type and live wisely forward or to go into the archives and edit.

The Kotzker Rebbe detected a powerful strategy in the words of the Machzor, “Zocher Nishgachos B’Yom Din... Remembers the forgotten on the day of judgment.” The implication is that the reverse is also true. HASHEM forgets what is remembered (or mentioned). Armed with this inference, an approach to editing and doing Teshuvah emerges. If whatever we remember is forgotten

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and whatever we forget is remembered by HASHEM, then it is best to mention and remember, without having to be reminded, whatever wrongdoings we can recall. That will cause them to be forgotten.

Whatever good deeds we do should be forgotten by us. Let them remain in the private realm between us and HASHEM. They need not be cashed in during this lifetime. Then will ultimately be remembered. These two criteria can be helpful in the business of choosing life.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

What is a Real Tikkun?

Rabbi Udi Abramovitz

The Book of Deuteronomy is known for offering us a new way of looking at the events, the commandments and the concepts we encountered in the other four books of the Pentateuch, beginning with its attitude towards the sacrifice, and ending with the status of the Hebrew servant.

This happens once more in Parashat Nitzavim, though this time, it appears alongside the concept of teshuvah, repentance, which we may have mistakenly believed to have existed from time immemorial. Sin, in all of its forms, leads to kilkul. That is, it has a ruinous effect on the entire world, and on human beings in particular. The question is: How is sin rectified, and what is meant by tikkun, rectification? The main answer to this question in the biblical text appears in the concept of kapparah, atonement, a word that appears over a hundred times in the Torah. Literally, the word lechaper means to remove, to cleanse, to purify, and sometimes, it simply means “to cover”. Sin created an objective fault in the world, and the sinner must rectify it, that is, the sinner must remove it, or, at the very least, find some way of compensating for it. This is the primitive (or most basic and primordial) logic of the Torah: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. Our moral intuitions are also founded on this. In the case of certain evil deeds, regretting them just isn’t enough; the opposite action must be performed on their account. Naturally, the concept of kapparah is tied to the world of sacrifices. We mustn’t forget that the greatest day of tikkun in the Torah is called Yom Hakippurim, the day the high priest “cleanses” the world of all of the spiritual filth that had accumulated throughout the year, through the painstakingly precise services tied to the offerings at the Temple, and other actions that were performed.

In 1958, the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, a German volunteer organization comprised of people who wanted to atone for what their parents had done during World War 2, was founded. Are these people “regretful” of what the Nazis did? No, that would be a preposterous notion. They did nothing wrong, and they may have never identified with any of the things done by the Nazis. If so, why do they want to “atone”? They choose to do so because the moral void their parents left in the

world is an existing reality, independent of what we feel about it. Almost always, atonement will be achieved through a physical act performed in this world. It is the victim, or Hashem, that will determine what it will look like and how the atonement is to be done – and not the one doing the atoning. Many years ago, someone who had accidentally run over someone else who had run out to the street, and was ultimately cleared of any wrongdoing, asked Rabbi Eliezer Melamed what he needed to do. How could he atone for what he had done?

The converse case could be given too, though. Every so often, we hear about politicians that had served prison time for corruption, and now wish to return to public office, claiming they had paid their debt to society. “Give me a break”, they say. And perhaps, we might. However, some of us certainly might ask ourselves if those people had truly paid their debts to society. Who says they have really turned over a new leaf? This is exactly why the concept of teshuvah, repentance, was created. “... once you return to Hashem, your God, with all your heart and soul.” (Deuteronomy 30:10), and this concept is fleshed out in the Book of Ezekiel (Chapter 18):

Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions he committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness he has practiced, he shall live. Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.

From this point on, the emphasis will be placed on a subjective, inward rectification applied to a person’s attributes, emotions, and thoughts. If someone had “paid” for his evil actions, but hadn’t undergone any internal process, we fear that this person holds morality in contempt, using the system to engage in horse-trading. Our sages set this out very clearly when they discuss Yom Kippur. They say that this day does not have the power to atone for those who say “I have sinned, and I will go on sinning”, or for those who hadn’t reconciled with those they have wronged. In general, they celebrate the notion that repentance “preceded the world”. This notion is most aptly expressed in Maimonides’ Hilchot Teshuva.

Maimonides stresses that even during biblical times, the offering of sacrifices wouldn’t work unless a confession was made during the service. What is meant here by confession isn’t the uttering of empty words, where the sinner admits to having committed the sin and “sets it before Hashem”. Rather, it is referring to a full process of repentance:

“How is confession performed? One says: ‘Please, Hashem, I have sinned, I have erred, I

have transgressed, I have done such-and-such, I am regretful, I am shamed by my actions, and I will never again return to my old way’. This is the essence of confession, and anyone who wants to lengthen [his confession], this is praiseworthy. (Hilchot Teshuvah, 1:1).

Moreover, currently, when the Temple does not stand, repentance substitutes for atonement. “At this time, when the Temple is not established and, therefore, no altar to atone for us, there is nothing else left for us but repentance. Repentance atones for all sins (ibid., 1:3).

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Ani Le-Dodi Ve-Dodi Li: The Relationship Between God and the Jewish People

Rav Michael Rosensweig

The gemara (Gittin 90b/Gittin 90b/Gittin 90b, Sanhedrin 22a Sanhedrin 22a Sanhedrin 22a) cites R. Elazar’s comment that whenever a zivug rishon (first marriage) ends in divorce, the Temple altar sheds tears:

אמר ר' אלעזר כל המגרש אשתו ראשונה אפילו מזבח מורי עליו דמעות

What is the connection between a first marriage and the altar that accounts for this emotional response?

The Maharsha, in his novellae to Sanhedrin (Chiddushei Aggadot, Sanhedrin 22a Sanhedrin 22a Sanhedrin 22a), offers a very technical explanation: **הוא משל כל המזבח בו כה עליו שהמגרש אשתו אשת נערום ממעט אכילת זבחים דاشת הנערום מצויה שמבייה קיוי זבחה ולידה מזבחה**.

It is as if the altar itself cries because one who divorces his wife diminishes the amount of sacrificial offerings, because it is common for the eshet ne’urim (wife of one’s youth) to bring childbirth and zava offerings on the altars.

Generally speaking, a first marriage is more likely to produce children; a divorce thus likely reduces the quantity of childbirth offerings, and zava offerings as well. In this respect, the altar is “upset,” as its activity is diminished when a first marriage concludes in divorce.

While technically sound, this is obviously not a particularly inspirational explanation. In his comments to Gittin (90b) Gittin (90b) Gittin (90b), the Maharsha provides a more edifying explanation. The Nevi’im and Ketuvim often invoke the relationship between a husband and wife as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Keneset Yisrael, the Jewish People. The Maharsha explains that zivug rishon and zivug sheni (a second marriage) parallel the First and Second Temples. The degree of sanctity and quantity of sacrificial activity in the First Temple far surpassed that of the Second Temple. This decline, which is emblematic of the very quality of this lofty relationship, prompts the altar to weep.

In parallel fashion, it can be suggested that the altar bemoans the tragedy of the egel ha-zahav, the golden calf, which marred the initial idealistic bond between the Jewish People and God. At Sinai, the Jewish People accepted the Torah, and the building of the Mishkan was intended to be the marital chuppa and their shared dwelling place. In the midst of the wedding itself, the Jewish People sullied the fledgling relationship and desecrated that exclusive bond by constructing the golden calf. In this metaphor, the distinction between zivug rishon and zivug sheni is a consequence of the sin of the betrayal at the golden calf.

The Broken Relationship - The idea that discord between a husband and wife is symbolic of a

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disconnect – even a rupture – in the relationship between God and the Jewish People resonates throughout Jewish theology. The poignant metaphor of a wayward wife repently returning le-ishah harishon, to her first husband – symbolically casting Klal Yisrael as the wife who has betrayed God, her faithful husband – is quite prominent throughout Tanakh.

The marital bond paradigm of God’s relationship with the Jewish People is, of course, the dominant metaphor of Shir Ha-Shirim. It is therefore unsurprising that this megilla is also perceived as a source that calls for introspection and teshuva, centering on the demands and opportunities of that relationship. In this context, we encounter the passionate declaration and articulation of devotion: “Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li, I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Shir Ha-Shirim 6:3). Avudraham’s insight, which was popularly cited by subsequent halakhic thinkers, is that the first letters of each word form an acronym for Elul, the period that initiates intense reassessment of this special bond, thereby reinforcing this theme. Furthermore, the conceptual basis for the halakhic construct of teshuva mei-ahava (Yoma 86a/Yoma 86a/Yoma 86a) – repentance motivated by love – is patterned after this seminal theme of Shir Ha-Shirim. The Rambam (Hilkhot Teshuva 10:2/Hilkhot Teshuva 10:2/Hilkhot Teshuva 10:2) explains that ahavat Hashem, love of God, is the highest level of religiosity that one can attain. This ideal is depicted dramatically as an all-encompassing, even a (constructively) obsessive, relationship between a husband and wife, whose mutual devotion is absolute. That intensely single-minded admiration, devotion, and longing models how Keneset Yisrael are to cultivate their feelings toward God. Indeed, the Bach (Orach Chayim 581:2) cites the verse, “Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li” as reflecting the teshuva mei-ahava performed during Elul.

Thus, the casting of the relationship between chet and teshuva, sin and repentance, in terms of returning to one’s first husband is a notion that deserves further attention and examination.

The Marital Relationship Between the Jewish People and God

Let us begin by examining in greater depth the nature of this marital relationship. Following the pattern reflected by the numerous verses of Tanakh, metaphors describing this kind of marital relationship between the Jewish People and God abound in Chazal. Chazal understood the relationship between God and the Jewish People as a marriage in which the Torah serves as the marriage contract. The mishna (Ta'anit 4:8/Ta'anit 4:8/Ta'anit 4:8) explains that “be-yom simchat libo, the day of his heart’s rejoicing” (Shir Ha-Shirim 3:11), refers to the giving of the Torah, and the gemara (Pesachim 49b/Pesachim 49b/Pesachim 49b, Sanhedrin 59a Sanhedrin 59a Sanhedrin 59a) conflates the terms “morasha” in the verse, “morasha kehillat Yaakov, the heritage of the congregation of Jacob” (Devarim 33:4/Devarim 33:4/Devarim 33:4), with the term “me’orasa,” connoting betrothal. The verses in Hoshea 2:21-22 Hoshea 2:21-22 Hoshea 2:21-22 also relate to this theme:

וארשיך ל' לשלום וארשיך בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד (א) ובראהמה: (כ) וארשיך ל' באמונה וצדקה אהבה

And I will betroth you forever: I will betroth you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy. And I will betroth you with faithfulness; then you shall know God.

These verses, recited daily in the final phase of donning tefillin and constituting the denouement of Hoshea, further confirm this betrothal motif. This is the foundation for the Jewish People’s commitment to the Torah; sin constitutes betrayal of this commitment. The altar itself shedding tears reflects this lost potential of the unrealized ideal, an ideal

and a commitment characteristic of a fully realized marital relationship as well.

However, the metaphor of “Eilkha na el ishi harishon, I will return to my first husband” (Yeshayahu 54:5/Yeshayahu 54:5/Yeshayahu 54:5), demands closer scrutiny. While the marital paradigm is so suggestive, its application here, when assessed against normative Halakha, seems problematic. A betrayal of the marital bond, as in the instance of sota, marital infidelity, precludes resumption of the marriage. Furthermore, there is an equally important and related distinction between the relationship of God and the Jewish People and even the most idyllic bond between a husband and wife – there is no capacity for gerushin, divorce, between Klal Yisrael and God. Notwithstanding the tears of the altar, divorce is at times a necessary option in the human domain.

R. Soloveitchik expounded on this important discrepancy and suggested two explanations. First, although the partners in a human marriage aspire to become one entity (see Bereishit 2:24 Bereishit 2:24 Bereishit 2:24), the most personal dimensions of man’s existential being cannot be fully shared with others. The unbridgeable gap that remains provides the philosophical justification or basis for divorce: even the most ideal marriage does not provide complete unity, and therefore an imperfect union can be dissolved. This restriction does not exist in man’s relationship with God, as there is no distance between Creator and creation that cannot be spanned through service of God. Although philosophically the chasm is greater and the gulf more unbridgeable, Torah study and observance are the divinely ordained guide and mechanism to bridge this gap. We perceive the Torah as a divine gift “le-zakkot et Yisrael, to give merit to Israel” (Makkot 3:16/Makkot 3:16/Makkot 3:16).^[7] Man’s devekut ba-Hashem, cleaving to God, will by metaphysical and philosophical necessity always be circumscribed, but this gap need not be a function of man’s inability to share, but rather a fundamental theological reality of God’s transcendence and infinitude. This is one distinction between human relationships and the relationship with God that precludes termination or divorce in the latter context.

The Rav advanced a second reason that the divine relationship is irrevocable. A meaningful physical human relationship is contingent upon sanctity, which is subject to desecration and destruction. For example, the Halakha addresses the specific parameters of ervat davar, the grounds for divorce that constitute desecration in a framework of a marriage. However, when it comes to God’s relationship with the Jewish People, that bond is completely suffused with sanctity to such an extent that it withstands any abuse or challenge that taints or compromises it. This singular bond is hypersensitive to impropriety, dysfunction, and desecration, but simultaneously invulnerable to permanent breach or irrevocable disrepair. This relationship is more easily damaged and disappointed, but it can never be absolutely profaned or irrevocably tarnished. Rashi explains this phenomenon in his commentary on Shir Ha-Shirim (1:6, s.v. she-shezafatni ha-shamesh): Sometimes the impression of darkness is only superficial. The sanctity that is the basis of the relationship between God and the Jewish People is permanent, and therefore there can be no gerushin. This idea is expressed by Yeshayahu (50:1) Yeshayahu (50:1) Yeshayahu (50:1) when he remonstrates with the nation, reminding them that God never divorced them; it was their improper behavior that alienated them from Him.

This relationship even endures in a time of destruction, when Jerusalem and Klal Yisrael are referred to figuratively as “ke-almana, like a widow”

(Eikha 1:1), but never as a gerusha, a divorcee. Additionally, they are only compared to a widow, “ke-almana”; they are not really widowed. Rashi (ad loc., s.v. haya ke-almana), quoting the interpretation of the midrash based on a careful reading of the verse, explains that it is possible for the Jewish People to return to God precisely because her situation also differs from the actual almana analogy. In any case, irrespective of the transgression/desecration, there is certainly no equation to divorce. Indeed, the prophet Hoshea, even as he invokes the imagery of the marital paradigm of erusin, declares unequivocally the divine promise that this particular betrothal is permanent: “ve-erastikh li le-olam, And I shall broth you to Me forever” (Hoshea 2:21/Hoshea 2:21).

In light of these explanations, the atypical elements and departures from classical marriage underscore that the differences do not detract from the metaphor; they merely reflect an even more intense marital relationship. The discrepancies magnify further the characteristics associated with a marriage here.

Preserving the Relationship for the Long-Term – There are consequences to the fact that the relationship between God and the Jewish People cannot be broken. On the one hand, the permanence of God’s relationship with the Jewish People means that there is always the possibility of return; the door is always open. That is, of course, a very good thing. But this positive consideration also heightens the expectations and raises the stakes of this bond, magnifying even minor grievances within this treasured exclusive relationship. If two people share a lesser, casual relationship, neither will be particularly sensitive to a petty offense; damage to the relationship would require a more grave or acute transgression. Such relationships are typically conducive to a wider latitude of perceived insults that likely inflict less pain. Longer-term, higher-stakes relationships require far greater existential investment and effort. They demand a greater appreciation of context, and they necessitate some compromise or, at minimum, coping mechanisms to overcome or integrate differences. Absent the luxury to simply withdraw and abandon the relationship, a long-term perspective must be cultivated, especially since the capacity to inflict pain and exacerbate conflict is heightened.

This is one way to interpret the verse in Amos (3:2) Amos (3:2) Amos (3:2): “Rak ethhem yadati mi-kol mishpechot ha-adama, al kein efkod aleikhem et kol avonoteikhem, You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth; that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities.” There are several levels of meaning to this interpretation. First, as Chazal frequently explain, the stakes are not as high for the other nations of the world as they are for the Jewish People, because God does not supervise or scrutinize the conduct of other nations as extensively. As such, there is rarely an intermediate level of palliative or corrective punishment. Particularly egregious or degenerative transgressions typically engender severe punishment or even destruction, while relatively minor infractions are ignored or treated benignly. In sharp contrast, God scrutinizes Klal Yisrael’s conduct and holds them extensively accountable. Chazal perceive this as an extraordinary kindness reflecting the depth of the bond, even as high expectations concomitantly may also imperil. Indeed, the constant supervision constitutes a further kindness in that it enables the neutralization of lesser offenses before they cascade into unmanageable, unforgivable offenses. Ultimately, this approach secures the Jewish People’s future by providing a defusing mechanism and a safety net to protect the precious relationship.

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It is common wisdom that the key to a successful marriage is to stay on top of petty misunderstandings, differences, or offenses, preventing them from festering. If one tarries too long in addressing minor but vexing issues, divisions and distances eventually grow and become unbridgeable and irreparable. The verse in Amos accentuates our good fortune by telling us, “Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpechot ha-adama” – we alone, Klal Yisrael, have this special relationship with God. And therefore, “efkod aleikhem et kol avonoteikhem” – God is going to supervise us more closely.

An additional motif accentuated in this verse articulates the delicacy and high spiritual stakes of the relationship as a factor in dictating ubiquitous scrutiny – also enabling constructive accountability – which determines that even relatively peripheral violations of trust may constitute an act of begida, betrayal. The marital paradigm reflects this perspective acutely. This theme is conveyed by the Talmud’s discussion of “hikdicha tavshilo” (she burned his food) and “matza isha na’ah heimena” (he found a more beautiful woman than her) as stimuli for divorce. The zivug rishon should be preserved at almost all costs. One method of accomplishing this is to make sure that small matters are neutralized and are not conflated with larger issues. At the same time, apparently minor infractions, and even petty annoyances like hikdicha tavshilo or superficial distractions like matza isha na’ah heimena, may be valid grounds for divorce precisely because the standards defining this ideal relationship are lofty indeed. The fact that trivial factors and mercurial considerations sufficiently exacerbate what should be an existential, loyal, and substantive bond is inconsistent with these standards of sanctity. It reflects that the relationship is already deficient and has deteriorated.

Another implication of this verse from Amos is that strict halakhic accountability and the concrete threat of punishment for halakhic dereliction are actually advantageous for the Jewish People, as they encourage the critical process of teshuva and repairing one’s deeds. This is more important for the Jewish People’s relationship with God than it is for the bond between God and the gentile nations. While repentance also applies to non-Jewish violations, its central role in Judaism defies comparison. Teshuva for Jews is not merely the neutralization of outstanding sin; it is an indispensable process of avodat Hashem that entails broader introspection and enables a transgressor to redefine and elevate his relationship with God.

This unique relationship between God and the Jewish People is further highlighted by the Mabit’s controversial assertion (Beit Elokim, Sha’ar Ha-Teshuva, 13) that notwithstanding the story of Yonah’s mission to Nineveh, the opportunity of teshuva is unique to Klal Yisrael. The Mabit explains that Yonah does not actually call upon the people of Nineveh to repent; he simply informs them of the consequences of their transgressions. They take the initiative on their own to do teshuva when they declare, “Yashuvu ish mi-darko ha-ra’ah, Let every man repent from his evil ways” (Yonah 3:8/Yonah 3:8/Yonah 3:8). Yonah hesitated to go to Nineveh because he thought teshuva would be ineffective, since the concept of teshuva is restricted to Klal Yisrael. Of course, this assumption about the effectiveness of teshuva for non-Jews was an error. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that the obligation to repent and the scope and centrality of teshuva derives from the singular bond with the Jewish People. Certainly the category of teshuva mei-ahava – which has the capacity to transform willful transgressions into merits (Yoma 86b/Yoma

86b(Yoma 86b) – is a special prerogative for the Jewish People alone.

The restriction of teshuva mei-ahava to the Jewish People stems from the dialectical nature of teshuva mei-ahava. At first glance, teshuva mei-ahava appears to be a very surprising and even mystical idea. How could willful transgressions ever turn into merits? Upon further reflection, however, it betokens an intense and profound relationship that transcends particular moments and actions. The bond with the Jewish People spans thousands of years and includes inspiring highs, spiritual attainments, abysmal failures, and cataclysmic setbacks. It is marked by a history of disruption and reconnection, and it is, by definition, one that is irrevocable, no matter how intolerable present circumstances are.

Again, the marital paradigm is instructive. An acute sense of alienation that stems from and accentuates distance and separation can also serve as a powerful catalyst for greater appreciation of one's absent partner, which can facilitate the urgency to strengthen the bond. The crisis of impending profound loss can turn willful transgressions into merits, particularly when there is a long and intense history that reinforces the absolute conviction of a future joint destiny. For this reason, a marital bond that is irrevocable, which survives even betrayal and precludes any kind of termination, certainly exemplifies this motif even more forcefully.

Understanding Teshuva - The significance of the long-term underlying relationship also pertains to the components of teshuva: charata (regret), busha (shame), and even kabbala le-haba (commitment for the future). Although we become acquainted with these facets of teshuva at a formative age, reflecting upon them reveals that they are challenging to implement, contemplate, and even to comprehend. True regret, for example, differs from a mere expression of "sorry." It requires profound, tortured regret and authentic humiliation, even mortification. The goal is not simply to assuage one's guilt and move forward, but to powerfully experience the magnitude of one's transgression, stimulating an existential crisis. The teshuva process certainly entails a core assessment of purpose and meaning that is completely incompatible with a superficial disavowal of transgressions that retains a trace of ambivalence regarding this sinful experience. Ideal teshuva requires charata and busha – an unequivocal rejection of past experience as well as a clear future commitment. The sense of profound regret relates not only to one's self-perception, but also to one's image and reputation in the eyes of those who command one's love and respect. Even more so, the sinner can hardly tolerate the fact that there is no refuge from Divine Omniscience. Authentic agonizing over the implications of an aberrant past, coming to grips with one's capacity for egregious conduct, constitutes not only a vehicle to neutralize past infractions, as repentance is typically understood, but also a transformative cathartic act of avodat Hashem that elevates the true penitent.

Kabbala al ha-atid similarly goes beyond even a sincere resolution about the future. It requires that the penitent thoroughly reinvent his persona and reorder his values so that his present status will conform to his enlightened new reality and his commitment will preclude any predictable future lapse. One might question how kabbala al ha-atid can be required for teshuva, inasmuch as it entails a commitment absent knowledge of what tomorrow will bring and what influences will come to bear. Indeed, even if one can make a kabbala la-hoveh, a commitment for the present, can one really sincerely undertake a kabbala al ha-atid? While kabbala al ha-atid can be understood narrowly as a sincere commitment for the future, it too can encompass much more.

The rigorous teshuva program, comprised of these steps, is significantly facilitated by a national relationship with God that is very intense and complex, that is deeply rooted in the past, and that will confidently stretch forever into the future. The Rav spoke extensively about Halakha's dynamic view of time. Time in Halakha is not static, and the boundaries of the past and the future are rather blurry. Halakhic time-consciousness defines how we relate to our national history as well as to pivotal halakhic institutions. This is true of the catastrophic events of destruction and mourning, and is equally applicable to the foundational experiences of Jewish life such as the revelation at Sinai, which is referred to in the Torah in the present tense, and the exodus from Egypt, whose memory is ubiquitous. This is further reflected by Moshe Rabbenu's introduction of God to Klal Yisrael as the God who transcends time (Shemot 6:6/Shemot 6:6). For God, in a metaphysical sense, the past, present, and future converge; they are all one reality. His name, the Tetragrammaton, connotes omnipresence in time – that He always was, is, and will be. The precise nuances of this concept are inherently beyond our cognitive grasp, but the Jewish People's relationship with God partakes of this permanence and timelessness. For this reason, the institution of teshuva can redeem the past, and even elevate it. The very notion of kabbala al ha-atid would be more tenuous if the bond between God and the Jewish People could be terminated. However, this relationship is governed by the promise of "ve-erastikh li le-olam, I will be a partner to you forever." Because of the irrevocability of the relationship, which determines that at worst we will be ke-almana and no more, because the relationship is enduring and timeless, it can withstand our limited knowledge and control of the future, enabling kabbala al ha-atid to become a rigorous and integral part of teshuva.

The Opportunity of Elul - The eternal nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish People has profound implications for the special teshuva opportunity of the month of Elul. The Avudraham's acronym explaining the name of the month has much more significance than is thought; it reflects not only reciprocity, but also and especially the marital relationship described in Shir Ha-Shirim. It thereby reflects the breadth and depth of teshuva as a process of avodat Hashem that stems from that special relationship. The Bach's claim that teshuva mei-ahava is specifically connected to the teshuva of Elul and precisely the theme of "Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li" reinforces this motif.

This should motivate us to seize the opportunity of Elul. It is not only for the narrow pursuit of merits that secure our physical survival, but even more an opportunity to focus on this special bond that undergirds the purpose of existence and the concept of teshuva.

This article is an adaptation of a sicha delivered by Rabbi Rosensweig in Elul 5768 and was closely reviewed by Rabbi Rosensweig. He thanks his students Avraham Wein and Yaakov Schiff for their help preparing this article for publication. [Notes omitted]

Weekly Parsha NITZAVIM – VAYELECH 5780

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The very two words that signify the titles of the two portions of the Torah that we will hear in the synagogue this Shabbat are, at first glance, contradictory. Nitzavim signifies a solid stance, and unwavering presence, and a commanding appearance. It reflects an unchanging nature, and the necessary ability to stand one's ground, no matter what the circumstances of life.

On the other hand, the word Vayeilech signifies motion, progress, change and a forward thrust in behavior and concepts. It seems that these two Torah readings cancel each other out, for one signifies unchanging steadfastness while the other champions progress, change and motion. Such an understanding of Torah and Judaism is very superficial and erroneous.

Rather, the two traits indicated in the opening words of these two Torah readings essentially complement each other. They do not come to point out a disagreement, one with another, but to point out that Judaism requires both traits to be present within every Jewish individual and the Jewish people as a whole, in order that Torah and tradition will survive and prosper in Jewish society.

An important and necessary part of our Jewish character and that of Jewish society, is our stubbornness – our refusal to abandon what we have been commanded by the Lord to observe and practice. This commitment can never be modified or adjusted, acceding to the passing social norms, and changing human mores.

We are witness, in our times, how quickly acceptable human behavior and ideas can rapidly change, so that what was unthinkable and perverse a few short decades ago is today not only acceptable, but behavior that should be championed, admired, and, in some cases, even enforced legally against ones wishes.

At the same time, Jewish society cannot remain eternally frozen and incapable of adjustment to new situations and differing societal changes. Our recent experience with the Coronavirus, with the various halachic responses to it concerning prayer services, study sessions and personal behavior, testify to the adaptability that the Torah and Jewish tradition, dating back to Sinai, has built-in in order to be able to deal with all possible situations, no matter how unforeseen.

The only question that remains is how to achieve a proper balance between Nitzavim and Vayeilech. We are witness to the fact that helter-skelter progress and the adoption of new norms leads to spiritual destruction and is an enormous danger to Jewish survival. On the other hand, we certainly need to recognize that 21st-century Israel or the United States is not the same as 19th century eastern and central Europe. Every individual, as well as every group within Jewish society, must feel its way slowly and carefully, to try and find the proper balance that fits them, and allows them to retain the blessings of tradition and faithfulness, while still dealing with current problems and situations. Understandably, this process is an ongoing one, and it is one of great delicacy and nuance. Nevertheless, it is part of our drive for eternity and the enhancement of our religious society.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

In My Opinion ROSH HASHANA

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

I believe that all of us can agree that this year the awesome days of Rosh Hashana will be different than in past years. Many of us may not even be allowed to attend the synagogue for public worship. Others will pray and assemble in open, outside areas. There is a rhythm to our holidays that this coronavirus has interrupted. Nevertheless, Rosh Hashana will take place and Jews worldwide will commemorate it according to our halachic and traditional customs. But perhaps most importantly, I feel, and I certainly hope that it will be a more introspective Rosh Hashana than we perhaps have experienced in past years.

The prayers for life and family, success and prosperity, peace and tranquility, accomplishment and productivity, purposefulness and meaning, will have a more intensive, personal tone. This year it requires little imagination to realize that we stand before the heavenly court and pass, in single file, to be judged and blessed. There are those who because of circumstances in their synagogues or community may curtail the prayer service and omit certain of the paragraphs that are ordinarily so much a part of the holiday service of the day. I respect the opinion of rabbis who chose to follow this route because of the local situation in which they find themselves, however to me every word of the holiday prayer book now takes on even greater meaning and relevance.

I cannot imagine that under the present circumstances that exist here in my synagogue, that we will omit any prayers. We can all do without sermons and other additions but the holy words that have been sanctified over the centuries by the tears and even the blood of millions of Jews who stood before their creator for judgment and blessing should not be absent from our lives and lips. We need to remember that wherever we are it is Rosh Hashanah and that it should be treated and observed as such.

The Talmud records that we passed before the heavenly court as soldiers in the army of King David. It also compares us to the sheep that exist around Mount Meron. Sheep and soldiers, at first glance, seem to be opposite descriptions and scenarios. Soldiers stand erect and march proudly, while sheep always have a low profile and are not given to represent strength and firmness. Yet, I believe that we can well understand that the Talmud did not present us here with an either/or choice – soldiers or sheep. Rather, it meant to teach us that all human beings are both at the same time. We have within us enormous strength and capability, potential and firmness of purpose and behavior while at the same time we are but dust and ashes, putty in the hands, so to speak, of the Holy One who has fashioned us.

It is the challenge of life, its experiences and events that confront us as to when we should stand erect and firm as soldiers or whether we should be humble and adopt a low profile, as do sheep. Rosh Hashanah brings us face-to-face with this challenge. As far as Torah values and the Jewish people are concerned, we are certainly to be soldiers in the army of King David. But as far as our own personal wants and desires, social behavior, and communal responsibility, we should lower our egos and allow ourselves to be counted as the sheep of Mount Meron.

I send you my blessings for the new year and for a *ktiva v'chatima tova*.
Rabbi Berel Wein

How to Renew a Nation (Nitzavim – Vayeilech 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, “Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel.” Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – “I am the Lord your God,” and, “You shall have no other gods beside Me,” (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.[1]

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayeilech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are *Hakhol*, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and “Now write for yourselves this song” (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own *Sefer Torah*.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be

forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King.[2] This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony:

Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.[3] Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-

enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – "as on the day the Torah was given," "as though he had heard it from the mouth of God" – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses' description of the Giving of the Torah in Va'etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called "the devotion of your youth" (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).[4]

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.[5] According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual.[6] So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as "the Reading of the Torah" but as "the Proclaiming of Torah." It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget "the devotion of our youth," the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim-Vayelech (Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "Behold, I give before you this day the life and the good, the death and the evil... blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your seed..." (Deut. 30:15, 19)

What does it mean, to choose "life"? Is it really an individual choice as to whether one lives or dies? I believe it worthy of note to raise another linguistic curiosity within this context: the Hebrew word hayyim (life) is a plural noun, ending in the two Hebrew letters yod and mem to signal the plural case. I do not know of any other language in which the word for "life" is a plural form; Why is it so in the Hebrew language? Hassidim have a cute play on words which provides an interesting

insight explaining the composition of the Hebrew word for "life": on an occasion of joy such as an engagement, marriage or birth it is customary to celebrate with a "drink," but only when drinking wine or liquor do we call out, *le'hayyim*, "to life." Why not also say *le'hayyim* when drinking water, which is so basic to the formation of life (remember the amniotic fluids which "break" before an impending birth) and to the continuity of life which is impossible without water ?!

They answer that the Hebrew word for wine, *yayin*, has two yods, as does the Hebrew word for liquor, *yash* (literally *yayin saraf*, "fiery wine"). The Hebrew letter yod is phonetically and homiletically tied to *Yid* (Yehudi), or "Jew"—a toast usually being invoked to celebrate two Jews coming together in marriage, in joining for a birth celebration, or generally within the familial context of *kiddush* on Friday evening. The Hebrew word for water, *mayim*, has only one yod, and God Himself has declared that "it is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Hence, say the Hassidim, the Hebrew word for life consists of four letters, the exterior letters being *het* and *mem*, spelling *hom*, warmth, love—surrounding two yods completely together and not separated by any other letter. And the beverages which go along with the toast also require two yods (Jews) together as in the Hebrew words *yayin* and *yash*.

Despite the sweetness of this explanation, allow me to present an alternative interpretation, which proves a profound theological truth at the same time. In attempting to pictorially describe the creation of the human being, the Bible states: "And the Lord God had formed the human being [Adam] of dust from the ground, and He exhaled into his nostrils the soul [breath] of life, making the human a living being" (Gen. 2:7) Apparently the Bible is here explaining in more graphic language the difficult term *tzelem Elokim*, image of God, used in the first creation chapter, "And God created the human being [Adam] in His image, in the image of God created He him..." (Gen. 1:27). The Sacred Zohar adds a crucial dimension to the imagery of God's exhalation into the nostrils of the clay-dust form: "Whoever exhales, exhales from within himself," from the innermost essence of his existential being.

What this teaches us is arguably the most important insight into the essence of the human being defined by the Bible, the one element which qualitatively separates the human from all other creatures of the earth: a "portion" of God from on High resides within every human being, to which the Tanya (written by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, late 18th century, known as the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement) adds: *mamash*, really, palpably, within the very physical human being "resides" the spiritual essence of the Divine, the eternal and transcendent soul.

This idea has enormous ramifications as to how we see the human being, as to how we look upon ourselves. The human being is indeed a composite creature; *homo natura* and *homo persona* (see R. Soloveitchik, Family Redeemed), a part of the natural world with many of the instincts and limitations of the other physical creatures, but at the same time apart from the natural world, endowed with a portion of Divinity which enables him to create, to change, to love, to transcend both himself as well as the physical world into which he was created; the portion of God within the human being lives eternally just as the God without and beyond is eternal, and empowers the human being to perfect God's world and redeem God's world.

The challenge facing each of us is which aspect of our beings we choose to develop, the bestial or the celestial. Idolatry idealized the physical, the bestial: power (Jupiter), speed (Mercury), physical beauty (Venus), a golden calf; Judaism commands that we idealize the spiritual, the celestial: love, compassion, loving kindness, truth... The good news is that to help us in this existential struggle within ourselves is that very portion of God from on High who dwells within us, and that the human being is never alone, that God is always with us, within us, the still small voice which we must listen for and hearken to. Yes, God is Above, but even more importantly God is also Within!

That is why the Hebrew word for life, *hayyim*, is a plural noun; the "soul of life" is the God who resides within each of us, the essence of our

personalities to whom we must return and with Whom we must live our conscious lives if we are to realize our truest human potential, if we are to truly live eternally, together with our partners and progeny in a perfecting world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech Elul 5780

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of our parents, Daniel bar David & Esther Miriam bas Yaakov and Noach Yaakov ben Chaim & Dvora Esther bas Moshe.

"May their Neshamos have an Aliya!"

The Real You

...there among the nations that I have banished you, you will reflect on the situation. You will then return to Hashem your God and you will obey him [...] You and your children (will repent) with all your heart and soul (30:1-2).

Ramban understands the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (30:11), as referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah that is introduced above (30:1-2). Ramban continues; "this mitzvah is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Ramban's description of the mitzvah of teshuvah as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. Ramban's comment on the ease of teshuvah is reminiscent of the not-yet-reformed smoker who says "quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world - I have done it a hundred times."

This becomes even more troubling when we examine Maimonides' description of teshuvah (Yad Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2): "What constitutes teshuvah? A sinner must abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again [...] Similarly, he must regret the past. He must attain a level that he knows (that the Almighty) will testify for him that he will never return to this sin again [...] He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."

Clearly, the objective is to regret the past and pledge to never again commit those sins again. How can anyone honestly come back year after year and say the exact same words, asking forgiveness for the same sins time and time again? At what point is it no longer believable? Even in the case of the truly penitent, how can he look himself in the mirror after resolving to no longer commit the sins that he knows he'll be repenting for again next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What kind of teshuvah is this? What honest commitment can one possibly make? The answer to this question is probably the key to understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these "ten days of repentance."

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine, for a moment, someone who is very overweight, but has committed to a strict diet, suddenly facing a crucial test: a pizza pie with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them. Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people that succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it - I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?", and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. In other words, the reason they continue down the same path is because they look at themselves as overweight. Their diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior - when they really should have been focused on trying to change themselves. Therefore, they aren't dealing with this as a new situation; they are, in reality, succumbing to their past mistakes and accepting that as their reality. This new eating indiscretion is rooted in their past behavior, which is why they fail.

This is exactly what teshuvah is supposed to address; when we commit to doing teshuvah we have to 1) regret the past 2) resolve to no longer commit this transgression. In other words, we commit to making a real change. While it is true that we must distance ourselves from how we

behaved in the past, our commitment isn't merely a behavioral change, it is a change of self definition. We must say, "In the coming year I may be faced with a test of the same sin, and hopefully I will be able to restrain myself because I truly do not want to be that type of person."

"But even if I fail, it will be because I couldn't control myself, it will absolutely not be a transgression based on my past behavior." At that point one's transgressions are not a repetition of past sins. This is why Ramban says it is not hard to do. One has to merely decide to be the person he wants to become, and commit to leave who he currently is behind. At that point Hashem will help him find the true path to teshuvah (see Ramban on 30:6).

What Are Kids Good For?

Gather together all the people - men, women, small children...so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they will fear Hashem... (31:12)

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of hakhel - the gathering of the entirety of the Jewish people on the holiday of Sukkos following the shemitta year. The king at that time would read from different sections in the Chumash of Devarim from an elevated platform. The Gemara (Bavli Chagiga 3a) explains that the men came to study and the women came to hear. The Gemara then asks; "Why did the very small children come? To give reward to those that brought them" (ibid).

Maharsha (ad loc) explains that the Gemara wonders why the Torah discusses the children in this verse and then mentions the children again in the very next verse. In fact, the next verse clearly explains that the children are coming to learn from the experience. So, explains Maharsha, the first verse must be talking about children who are too young to gain from the experience. Therefore, the Gemara explains they are only coming in order "to give reward to those that bring them."

Simply understood, the Gemara seems to be saying that the extra strain of bringing the very young children will bring some kind of reward to their much beleaguered parents. Perhaps this can be understood along the lines of the Talmudic dictum (Avos 5:26) "commensurate to the pain is the reward." But notwithstanding the fact that children can inflict exquisite discomfort on their parents, this cannot be the sole reason for bringing them. First of all, older children can be even more painful to drag to a speech that they can hardly understand. Second, if it is simply to make the experience more difficult, why shouldn't even people without young children have to do something to make the experience more trying? Why are only parents of very young children worthy of this added aggravation?

Obviously, there has to be another reason why we bring very young children to such a gathering. Have you ever noticed that some sports crazy fans bring their one year old children to baseball and football games decked out in baby sized team jerseys and other team themed items? What possible purpose can there be in such an effort? Clearly, the child will have no recollection of the event or of his parents' single-minded obsession; so, why would someone go to all that effort?

The answer has to be that it is an internalization, for ourselves and our children, that we want our legacy to be connected to this ideal. There are families who take great pride in being multigenerational fans of certain teams. So too, by the mitzvah of hakhel we are expressing the ideal, that our deepest desire is for our children to be connected and bound to the values of the Torah and the Jewish people. The reason these parents earn special reward isn't because of the added aggravation; it is because they are making the greatest expression of their personal commitment to Hashem and his Torah: They want their children to follow in their footsteps and the legacy of the Jewish people.

Did You Know...

The first night of Rosh Hashanah is also when we eat the first meal of the year. This special meal is marked by the tradition of creating simanim (signs) through the consumption of certain foods. There are many that are universally accepted as customary to eat; karsi (leek) so that our enemies may be "cut down," silka (beet) and tamri (date) for the removal and obliteration of our enemies, and rubia (black-eyed peas) in order for our merits or assets to increase in the coming year.

The Geonim mention the age-old custom of eating additional items not mentioned in the Talmud. This includes eating the head of an animal (customarily head of a lamb or a fish), as a request that Hashem place us in a position of leadership and not servitude.

Another ancient practice is eating fatty meat and sweet beverages as a sign of a prosperous and sweet new year. The Geonim traces this custom back to the second Beis Hamikdash, when Ezra and Nechemia instructed the people on Rosh Hashanah to "go and eat fatty dishes and drink sweet drinks" (Nechemia 8:10).

The Tur remarks that Jews have always added to the list of simanim (often using wordplay). Many people eat carrots since the Yiddish word for carrot is mehren, which is similar to the word mehr or "more." In Morocco, they serve boiled lungs as a siman since the Hebrew word for lungs reaya resembles the word riya (vision).

There's also a siman by some in France to eat bananas because the French word for banana, banane, sounds just like the words for good year in French, "bonne année."

Many years ago, Rav Heinemann Shlita introduced a now famous Baltimore siman to take lettuce, half a raisin, and celery as an indication to "let-us-have-a-raise-in-salary."

Although it is not mentioned in the Gemara, the Tur also records eating apples and honey as an old Ashkenazic custom. Maharil (Darkei Moshe 583:3) says that the apple reminds us of the sweet aroma that accompanied Yaakov Avinu when he appeared before Yitzchak to receive the brachos (according to Midrashim, this occurred on Rosh Hashanah, see Biur HaGra). Moreover, honey represents an additional significance in that the Gematria of honey (d'vash) is equivalent to "Merciful Father" (Bnei Yissoscher 2:13).

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For the week ending 12 September 2020 / 23 Elul 5780

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech

Let It Go!

"You are standing..." (29:9)

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the great things about having been part of Ohr Somayach for more around three decades is that I have met some people who are clearly living on a different level to the rest of us mere mortals. One of these great souls distilled the essence of one's relationship with one's fellow into three principles: His first principle is, "I was created to serve others, and no one was created to serve me."

The second is, "I wouldn't do it to you. But if you do it to me – it's okay." This doesn't mean that a person should be a doormat and invite the world to trample on him, but post facto – if you did something to me that I could really take you to court for and get back at you — and I give up on that — I get forgiven for all my sins.

The source for this is the Gemara that says, "Anyone who 'passes over on his character traits,' meaning one who resists the knee-jerk reaction that many have to resent and want revenge — and just lets it go - so, concomitantly, Hashem lets go on all our sins.

It's true that this level of saintliness is beyond the letter of the law, but it sure sounds like a good deal to me. All of my sins? Another source for this idea is the Tomer Devorah, which says that even though we constantly flout the Will of Hashem and use our G-d-given abilities to go against His Will, nevertheless, He constantly continues to give us the power to continue to do this and doesn't "hold a grudge."

During this week, before Hashem opens the Books of Judgment, I can think of no better exercise than to think of someone who has wronged us — and remove all resentment from our hearts. And with that we may approach the Heavenly Throne.

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Parshas

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Forgiven, but not Forgotten

He was one of the greatest Talmud scholars of the last century, but outside of a small circle of disciples, he was never well-known. He was a tragic figure in many ways, and although few have heard of him today, he has not been totally forgotten.

Interestingly, forgetting was one of the central themes of his many teachings.

His name was Rabbi Arye Tzvi Fromer, and he hailed from an obscure town in Poland named Koziglov. He served in the rabbinate of several towns with equally obscure names. His extreme modesty mitigated the spread of his reputation.

Late in his life, he experienced the unique frustration of being called upon to succeed an individual who was unusually charismatic and world-famous. He was asked to fill the shoes of a great man, and his accomplishments were constantly compared, usually unfavorably, to the achievements of his glorious predecessor.

The man he was called upon to succeed as the head of the great Talmudical Academy in pre-World War II Lublin, Poland, was Rabbi Meir Shapiro. Besides being the founder of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, an innovative school for prodigious young Torah scholars, Rabbi Shapiro was an author, an orator of note, and a composer of Chassidic melodies. He was a member of the Polish Parliament and is remembered best as the person who introduced the concept of Daf Yomi, the daily study of the same page of Talmud each day by Jews all over the world. Rabbi Shapiro died of a sudden illness while a relatively young man in his early 40s. The search for a successor was not an easy one, and the reaction of most people to the choice of Rabbi Fromer was one of astonishment. "Who is he," people asked, "and how could he possibly follow in the footsteps of the multitalented Rabbi Shapiro?"

Destiny did not give Rabbi Fromer much time to prove himself worthy of his new position. Within several years, World War II broke out. He suffered the deprivations of the ghetto and was brutally murdered by the Nazis.

We do have some of the writings he published in his lifetime, and those few of his disciples to survive the Holocaust published some of his teachings on the weekly Torah portion. I have become enamored with these writings and am particularly taken by the fact that he returns again and again to the theme of forgetting.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayeilech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30), we come across the following phrase: "This song (the Torah) will proclaim himself as a witness, for it will never be forgotten from the mouths of his descendants..." Here, the Almighty assures us that despite the vicissitudes of Jewish history, the Torah will never be forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer relates this assurance to an interesting phenomenon. The reader of this column may not be aware that many passages of the Talmud were censored by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries and are today absent from most editions of this fundamental text. Jews have struggled in various ways to preserve these censored passages, and some modern editions do incorporate them, but by and large they have been forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer was once asked by a student who had just completed studying a tractate of the Talmud whether he could make a siyum, a festive meal celebrating that completion. "After all," the student argued, "I didn't really complete the entire tractate. I did not study the censored passages because I had no access to them."

Rabbi Fromer responded, consoled the student, and encouraged him to go through with the festive celebration. "You must understand," he argued, "that we have a guarantee in the Bible that Torah will not be forgotten. If some words were indeed forgotten, that is ipso facto proof that they were not authentic Torah to begin with."

Many will take issue with this concept and find it too radical. But the message is one which we can all affirm. That which is not Torah can be forgotten. What is trivial is ephemeral. Torah is not forgotten. Sanctity is eternal.

This lesson carries over to the wondrous day which typically follows the reading of the Torah portion of Vayeilech. I refer, of course, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Even Jews who have forgotten the rest of their Jewish heritage remember Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur does not allow us to forget who we are.

Stories abound about individuals who were on the threshold of apostasy, but who returned to our faith because of their experience of Yom Kippur. That fascinating Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, is just one example of this phenomenon and writes in his memoirs of his readiness to accompany his close cousin to the baptismal font, only to reconsider after spending a Yom Kippur in a small synagogue somewhere in Germany, nearly one hundred years ago.

"Israel, and the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed Be He, are one." This statement of the mystical holy Zohar says it all. All three are bound together forever.

"Forgive and forget." That is a cliché with which we are all familiar. One of the messages of hope which pervades this season of the Jewish year is that the Holy One Blessed Be He forgives but does not forget. He does not allow his two most cherished objects, His Torah and His people, to be forgotten.

Zvi Arye Fromer could easily have been forgotten, given the horrible circumstances in which he perished. But the Almighty did not allow him to be forgotten. Nor did He allow the Torah he taught to be forgotten.

The Yizkor service, one of the prominent features of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, is a method by which we do our part to see to it that those souls whom we knew personally are not forgotten.

And our regular Torah study is the method by which we each see to it that the words of the Torah are not forgotten.

For four years now, these weekly columns on the parsha have helped so many of you, in an admittedly small way, to prevent the forgetting of Torah. I take this opportunity, at the beginning of this New Year, 5773, to thank each of you for reading my words, for taking them seriously, and for responding every week in so many wonderful ways to what I have to say.

May the Almighty bless you with a new year filled with peace and health, sweetness and joy, and much success. Ketiva Vachatima Tova to you and yours.

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message

Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5780-2020

*"An Exclusive Covenant with an Inclusive Philosophy"
(Revised and updated from Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5760-2000)*

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Nitzavim, the first of this week's double parashiot, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, we encounter the great Moses, on the last day of his life.

Moses has gathered all the Jewish people from the lowliest to the most exalted, old and young, men and women, to bring them into the final covenant with G-d. This covenant is intended to serve as a powerful affirmation of עֲבֹדָה—a'ray'vut, reflecting the profound concept of every Jew assuming responsibility for their fellow Jews.

In Deuteronomy 29:9-14, Moses says to the Jewish people, אַתֶּם נָצְרָבִים לְפָנֵי הָשָׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, רְאֵשֵׁיכֶם שְׁבָטֵיכֶם, זָקְנֵיכֶם וְשִׁירְבָּנֶם. פֶּלְאֵת יְהָוָה. "You are standing today before the L-rd your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers—all the men of Israel. Your small children, and your wives, and the proselytes who are within your camp, from your woodchoppers to your water-drawers. For you to enter in to the covenant of the L-rd your G-d and His oath which the L-rd your G-d is sealing with you today. In order to establish you today as His people and that He be your G-d, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not with you alone do I form this covenant and seal this oath. But, with those who are here standing with us today before the L-rd our G-d, and with those who are not here today."

These bold verses continue to dramatically reverberate with us, even to this day, as if they were being pronounced to the People of Israel at this very moment.

In the name of G-d, Moses declares: אַתָּם נָאכִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִבְכֶם לְפָנֵי הָשָׁם אֶל-לְקִיּוּם, “You are standing here today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d!” The commentators see in the nuance of the language, in the use of the word, אהָתָם—“Ah’tem,” that this covenant is being exacted with a broad constituency. It is not a contract with the nobility of Israel. Israel has no nobility who are granted special advantages, nor can there be special representatives or privileged proxies before G-d. This gathering is not intended to be a gathering of Priests, Prophets or Holy People. This covenant is not to be concluded only with those of esteemed pedigree or of exalted birth. Judaism, after all, is not a sect or a cult. This covenant is meant for the entire people of Israel. In an unprecedented act in human history and in the history of religions, Moses declares in the name of G-d, that all the people of Israel, without regard to gender, age or status, from the leaders, to the water-drawers, are welcomed into this covenant.

Not only is this covenant historic in that it is totally inclusive of all those who are present at this time, but it actually transcends time to include the past, present and future members of Israel. Deuteronomy 29:14 boldly proclaims, כִּי אַתָּה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנוּ פֵּה עַזְנֵנוּ עַמּוֹ קָיִם לְפָנֵי הָשָׁם אֶל-לְקִיּוּם, וְאַתָּה אֲשֶׁר אַנְגַּבְנוּ, “Not only with you who stand here with us today before the L-rd our G-d, does G-d seal this covenant, but also with all those who are not here with us today!”

At this critical juncture in Jewish history, and from this crucial vantage point of Jewish destiny, not only are all the tribes of Israel joined together, but all Jewish generations are seen as if they are standing before the L-rd our G-d. At this singular moment, we all stand together as one Jewish people—past, present and future.

Yes, this covenant is intended to be all-embracing, to be executed with the entire people, with those who are with us and those who are not with us. And yet, for G-d, even this is not enough. For the Almighty it must be even more inclusive. Not only is this covenant intended for those who are not with us at this time, but even for those who are not with us in spirit, in thought, in mind and in belief. It includes even those who recoil and say: “We do not want any part in this covenant today, יְמִינֵינוּ—Ha’yon. This is not for us. We seek alternative religious experiences. We are off to the Himalayas, to embrace our personal Gurus, to dwell in the Ashram. We reject your concept of Heaven, we relate only to Earth.” There are always some who relate only to the Heavens, to the metaphysical, and reject the concept of “Earth.” But, for G-d it is Ha’yon, only today. G-d knows that these attitudes cannot, and will not, be permanent. With time, with love and with infinite patience, attitudes can change.

From this covenant which Moses executed with the people of Israel in Arvot Moav, in the Wilderness of Moab, with the G-d of Israel, with the G-d of reality, with the G-d of existence—no one is excluded. Everyone is here. Everyone is included!

It is with this same heightened sense of inclusiveness that we are to begin the preparations for the rapidly approaching High Holidays. As we read in the introductory meditation for the קָל וְלִרְאֵי—Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur night, we say, בְּשִׁיחָה שֶׁל מַעֲלָה, By the authority of the heavenly court, by the authority of the earthly court, with the consent of the Omnipotent One, and with the consent of this congregation, we declare it lawful to pray with the sinners. This exclusive covenant is totally inclusive, anyone wishing to be part of it, is welcome to join.

That is why during this propitious time of the year, we must think about the myriads of Jews who are estranged from Judaism, who consider themselves outside the covenant. Yes, our grandparents prayed for a “Melting Pot” in America, but, unfortunately, we’ve wound up with a “meltdown” instead. But, we dare not write off any Jew, and we dare not give up hope on our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters. As we read the prophetic words in Deuteronomy 30:4, in this week’s parasha, אִם יִתְהַגֵּה נָתַתִּךְ בְּקִצְחָה אֶת שְׁמֵךְ הָשָׁם אֶל-קָרְבָּן, Even though your dispersed be at the far ends of Heaven, קָרְבָּן, מִשְׁמָמָה, קָרְבָּן, from there the L-rd will gather you in, and from there He will take you.

It is during this very special High Holiday season that we are called upon to redouble our efforts, to reach out to those of our brothers and sisters who are not yet connected to Jewish life, and are waiting longingly for a hand to be extended to them, so that they too may be welcomed back into the Jewish fold. We must not fail them. We will not fail them.

Rosh Hashana 5781 is observed this year on Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday, September 18th, 19th and 20th, 2020. The Fast of Gedaliah will be observed on Monday, September 21st from dawn until nightfall.

May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech

What is the significance of every single letter of the Torah?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a beautiful explanation. In Parshat Vayelech, which we’ll be reading this coming Shabbat, the Torah presents us with the last of the Mitzvot. Mitzvah number 613 states “וְעַתָּה כְּתַבְוּ לְכֶם אֶת-הַשִּׁיר הַזֶּה וְלֹמְדָה בְּקִיּוּם” – and now, write for yourselves this song, which is the Torah, and teach it to the children of Israel. Place it in their mouths”.

Why is there a mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah? We can fulfil this Mitzvah by writing just one letter of a Sefer Torah and it’s attributed to us as if we’ve written the whole Sefer. But why this imperative to be engaged in the writing of letters of the scroll?

The Rebbe explained, there is a Halacha which we learn from the Gemara in Mesechet Mehachot, Daf 29a. There Chazal tell us that all the letters must be “גּוֹלֵל מַזְקִין” – surrounded by blank parchment”. That is to say that no letter can be connected to any other letter. At the same time there is also a Halacha that each letter must be visibly part of its own word – and visibly separate from all other words.

Each letter represents an individual. The message of the letters of the Torah, is that each one of us should know that we are unique people. As a result, everyone should respect our own individuality, our unique nature and personality. At the same time, none of us should ever forget that we are an integral part of our nation and as a result, we have an ‘areivut’ – a responsibility, to selflessly care for others and reach out to them.

In addition, if one single letter of the Torah is ‘passul’ – rendered unfit, then the entire Sefer Torah is passul. From here we learn that if there is something with just one of us, then every single one of us is affected as a result.

This is such a beautiful message for us and so apposite on the eve of the commencement of Slichot – a time when we’re just about to usher in a new year and when we’re engaging in ‘Cheshbon Hanefesh’ – introspection.

At this time, therefore, let us never forget how important each and every one us is and how we should develop ourselves and excel in our own personal way as individuals. At the same time, we should never forget that everybody depends on us and is looking for us to pull our weight for the sake of our nation and for the sake of the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

blogs.timesofisrael.com

Ego-centric Theology (Nitzavim-Vayelech)

Ben-Tzion Spitz

The egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief. - George Eliot

Moses is near the end of his monumental discourse, conveying the word of God to the nation of Israel about to enter the Promised Land. He touches on multiple themes and a plethora of commandments, but also repeats certain points, each time with a different nuance.

An oft-repeated theme is the need to obey God with one's entire heart and soul, as well as the ability to return to God when we fail to do so, as per the following verse:

"Since you will be heeding the Lord your God and keeping His commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Torah—once you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." - Deuteronomy 30:10

The Meshech Chochma wonders why in this verse, is a person heeding God and the laws written in the Torah only after they return to God. Presumably, just reading the Torah and being familiar with its precepts should be enough to encourage, convince, and instruct a person as to what their divinely ordained responsibilities and obligations are.

The Meshech Chochma explains, that reading the Torah, or even being familiar with it is often not enough. It is human nature to read into things. To read things and understand it according to our notions. It's possible to read the Torah and come to conclusions that support our personal ideals and philosophy, but have nothing to do with Judaism. In short, our powerful egos are often the ones interpreting the Torah in a way that satisfies our vision and thinking, but is far removed from the truth.

That is why, the Meshech Chochma states, we first must return to God. We first have to accept, embrace, and be open to true divine instruction. We need to cease the worship of our egos and in turn worship God. Once we have placed our egos in their proper place, then we may have a chance to understand the truth that has been staring us in the face. Then we can be open to what the Torah is truly saying. Once we check our egos at the door, once we return to God, to our spiritual source, then we can start to understand what he's been saying to us for millennia.

May we remove the blinders of our egos.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova

Dedication - For the Bar-Mitzvah of Eden Yechiel Spitz. Mazal Tov!

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Jerusalem Post

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech - A moment of honesty

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications.

'And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger, and in His wrath' - Deuteronomy, Nizavim 29:22

'For this commandment which I command you this day,' Moses tells the Jewish people in his farewell speech, 'is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Rather, [this] thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it' (Deuteronomy 30: 11 – 14).

What commandment is he talking about? Why would we think it is far away, in the heaven, or beyond the sea? What is this thing that is very close to us, according to Moses?

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According to some of the most important commentators, the commandment he is referring to is none other than teshuva, repentance.

Is repenting easy? If we were asked, many of us would probably say it isn't. If there is one difficult commandment that is especially challenging, it would be teshuva. The expectation that a person will change his habits, adopting a new outlook and new lifestyle, is perhaps

the most far-reaching expectation possible. So how can we explain what Moses said?

We're used to thinking about teshuva in practical terms: What have I been doing until now, and what will I do from now on? This is correct, but only partially. Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications. Sometimes it is a single, solitary moment when a person faces himself honestly, looks himself in the eye and asks: "Is this who I want to be? Is this how I want to live?"

That one moment is a pivotal juncture. It is a turning point whose results will be recognized only in hindsight, but which already serves as a watershed moment. Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, wrote the halachot (Jewish laws) of teshuva in several chapters that should be read and learned.

There he writes, "Teshuva atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his entire life and repented in his final moments should not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness."

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In dramatic language, Maimonides describes the change that occurs in the relationship between a person who did teshuva and God: "Teshuva is great for it draws a man close to the Shechina (the Divine Presence).... Teshuva brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close and dear." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 7: 6)

Try to think of person who you might describe as "disgusting, far removed and abominable." What did this person do? This wouldn't be someone who failed once, or someone who sins occasionally. This would be someone for whom sinning is characteristic, who is immersed in the squalor of sin. This is a person who is addicted to ugly behavior.

Now let's think what we would demand of such a person in order to remove the negative label attached to him. Maybe a process of recovery. Maybe he would have to prove he has changed over a period of time. We would not be quick to purify him from all his sins.

This is not the teshuva that Judaism is talking about. "Previously," says Maimonides, just recently "this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable; and now," today, even one day later, this person we denounced has become "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

How did this happen? What changed from one day to the next? One moment of introspection, one minute without masks, when a person reveals to himself his true desire to be good, pure, exalted. That one moment is etched into the soul forever and it changes a person into being beloved and desirable, close and dear.

During this period of time called the "Days of Awe," Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are all called upon to find that moment of teshuva; that most crucial moment in our lives that will never be forgotten, that moment when we will merit being "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

פָּרָשָׁת נִצְׁבָּע-וַיְלֵךְ ח' ש"ג

Nitzavim

ושבת עד ד' אלקייך

And you will return unto Hashem. (30:2)

Teshuvah means return. One returns to his source, his beginning, from where it all began, so that he can start over again and repair what requires restoration. This is not consistent with the objective of society, which focuses on the future, ignoring the past. What happened, happened. Forget about it. Move on. What society ignores is the dross which envelops us. Unless we expunge it, it accompanies us wherever we go. Focus on "Why? "Where? How did it all start?" A pathologist searches for the sources, the etiology. Teshuvah is a pathology, searching for the beginning, "Why? How? Where did it all

begin?" Once he has researched the source, the penitent has the opportunity to map out and begin his journey home.

A German Jew from the city of Danzig came to the saintly *Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl*, to seek counsel concerning his daughter who had suddenly lost her eyesight. He had traveled to the greatest doctors, to no avail. No medical reason explained her sudden blindness. The holy *Rebbe* said, "She is unable to see, because her father does not see. Her illness has been passed on to her from the previous generation. The man looked at the *Rebbe* in surprise. "Rebbe, my eyesight is perfect. I do not even need glasses," he said. The *Rebbe* explained, "One who is truly blind is the sinner. The *Navi Yeshayah* says, *Am iveir v'einayim yeish*; 'The people are blind, though they have eyes' (*Yeshayah* 43:8). The *Mishnah* (*Sotah* 1:8) teaches, 'Shimshon followed his eyes, therefore, the Philistines pierced his eyes.'" The *Rebbe* concluded that the danger of loss of vision was imminent to every member of his family who stared at him. Although the man had assimilated into western culture, he still remembered his Orthodox upbringing. He began to weep profusely, knowing quite well that the *Rebbe*'s admonishment was warranted. He promised to change his ways. Upon returning home, he changed his home to observe the laws of *kashrus*, and *Shabbos* observance became his family's way of life. Shortly thereafter, his daughter's eyesight returned.

The penitent must open his eyes and take a penetrating look into the contrast between who he had been and who he has become. The variance should impel him to search for a way to return, but, until he expunges the spiritual smut that envelops him, he will just carry it around. When he performs *teshuva* *gemurah*, complete repentance, he can expect it to disappear. *Teshuvah* achieves something unlike no other purifying agent, as indicated by the following story.

A boy was having difficulty participating in class, mostly because he was almost never present. He was extremely wild and, as a result, he was "invited" by his *rebbes* to leave the classroom since his unruliness was having a detrimental effect on everyone. His parents had tried everything, from different *rebbes*, to transferring him to another school, to educational and psychological specialists, all to no avail. Finally, they were referred to a *rebbes* who claimed that he could help, but it would take time. How long? It would depend on their son. What did they have to lose? He had already hit rock bottom.

Their son arrived at the new *rebbes* office with a smirk on his face, manifesting his usual attitude. The *rebbes* sat him down and said, "As far as I am concerned, I will commence my teaching obligation only when you decide that you are prepared to learn. In other words, you will have no learning until you decide that you are ready. At the end of each day that no learning occurs, I will bang a nail into my wall. The boy laughed at the offer. The next day, he showed up and smirked, paid his respects to the *rebbes*, whom he thought was strange (after all, what *rebbes* would not demand that his student learn?) and went along his merry way. At the end of the day, true to his word, the *rebbes* banged nail number one into the wall. This continued daily: no pressure; no learning; another nail. Week after week, the boy came to "school," checked in, refused to learn, and earned another nail in the wall each day.

It took an entire year for the *rebbes* to wear the boy down. Everyone needs a challenge. When the parents/*rebbes* challenge a recalcitrant child, he will often rebel, fight back, actively or passively, but he will do something negative to demonstrate his reluctance to allow anyone to dominate him. This boy could not accept the fact that no one was challenging him. As he was about to celebrate his one-year anniversary of doing nothing, he took one long look at the nail-studded wall; all 365 nails were in perfect sequence, and the stark realization of one wasted year hit him squarely in the eyes. He broke down in tears. The amount of learning he could have achieved, the year of Torah that he had lost, began to penetrate his mind, his heart, his psyche. He wept and wept, and, when he was finished, he told the *rebbes*, "I am now ready to learn."

The boy and the *rebbes* studied every day, all day, because the boy had to make up for all the time that he had needlessly wasted. At the end of every day, the *rebbes* took his claw hammer and yanked one nail

out of the wall. This continued for an entire year, until all of the nails had been dislodged. It should have been a joyous first anniversary. After all, all the nails were gone. The boy took a look at the wall and, once again, as he had one year earlier, he began to cry. The *rebbes* looked at the scene and asked, "Why are you crying?" The boy looked up at his *rebbes* and, with great remorse, replied, "I am crying because now I have a wall with 365 holes in it."

Every hole cannot be filled; the void remains once the nail is removed. Every blemish leaves a mark, a taint, a deformity. Not so with *teshuva*. Not only does *teshuva* remove the "nails," but it also fills the holes; it builds a new wall. The *Mesillas Yesharim* writes (*Perek 4*), "Truthfully, how can a person repair what he has corrupted when the sin has already been committed? If someone has murdered his fellow or committed adultery, how can he remedy the matter? Can he remove the performed deed from existence? The Attribute of Mercy tempers the Attribute of Strict Justice, however, and it catalyzes a reversal: first, by granting the sinner time to repent; second, by exacting a punishment that is not too severe; and finally, by offering the opportunity for repentance, purely out of Hashem's kindness." *Teshuvah* fills the holes.

החיים והמוות נתתי לך לך והקללה ובחרת בחיים

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life. (30:19)

One would think that choosing life is a decision that requires little to no mental effort. Why would the Torah exhort us to choose life? This question has inspired much commentary. Obviously, the meaning of "life" in Torah-speak is different than the mundane, physical existence to which many have become accustomed. Furthermore, as *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, observes, the Torah implores us to choose life, so that our children will live. The message is clear: the decision we make for ourselves affects our families. What our children will be in twenty years, their demeanor – moral, ethical and spiritual – will be on us. Our decision to live properly determines whether they will live.

After reading an inspiring article by *Rav Yehudah Adler, zl*, I was very moved. He penned this article while he was a patient in the oncology department. He was in tremendous pain, suffering from the effects of his rapidly progressing disease. He was a *kollel* fellow who took great satisfaction from his *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty. He spent the day learning, after arising early in the morning to *daven k'vasikin*, at sunrise.

Rav Adler writes that, at first, when he confronted his dread diagnosis, he was emotionally broken. A young man with a young family, the last thing on his mind was his mortality. Hashem, however, has a way of reminding us of our transitoriness. *Rav Yehudah* was emotionally devastated. Why did he deserve this? He was trying so hard to rise early to *daven* with exceptional *kavanah*, devotion. He did not waste time from his learning. His spiritual life was soaring, and now this. Suddenly, he came upon a revelation which changed his outlook and gave him the strength to confront his pain and mortality.

The answer to his questions was simple. He was not doing Hashem a favor. It was quite the other way around. He wondered why Hashem made it so difficult for him to learn, to *daven*, to think clearly. It was because Hashem does not need us to serve Him at our convenience. He wants us to serve Him the way He decides. One might counter, "I could do much better and much more, if I were not in pain." Well, Hashem wants you to serve Him as you are – now! He has enough members of *Klal Yisrael* who serve Him amid good health, wealth and satisfaction, etc. He wants to see how you *daven* when you are in pain, with an IV in your arm. How you manage to go to *shul* when it is hard to walk, to breathe, to stand. He knows that you are unable to rise from your bed, go to *kollel* and learn all day. He wants to see how you will learn in bed, hooked up to all the monitors. This is the meaning of fulfilling *ratzon Hashem*, the will of G-d. We serve Him on His terms.

Many of us think that after we have had a good day – *davened*, learned, gave *tzedakah*, reached out to our fellow – we deserve a big thank you; Hashem is in our debt. After all, we extended ourselves. Wrong! Hashem has many people who serve Him. He wants you to serve Him – not as a favor, but because it is His will. If He makes it easy

for you, i.e. great health, economics, no family issues, life is going your way, then you owe Him for allowing you to serve Him in comfort.

Hashem is exceedingly kind to us. When we survive troubles, we should express our gratitude with boundless joy. *Horav Yechezkel Abramsky, zl*, said the following to his *talmidim*, students: “Let us open the *siddur* to see how we are supposed to *daven*. We begin with *Mah Tovu*, ‘How goodly are Your tents,’ and continue with *Vaani b’rov Chasdecha*, ‘As for me, with Your abundant kindness.’ Is this correct? Hashem’s kindness? Go to the dormitory and see how many are still sleeping. ‘But I came to *Shacharis* early, you claim. ‘I deserve a big thank you.’ It should say, *b’rov chasdi*, ‘with my kindness’”! *Rav Abramsky* stopped for a moment to allow his question to sink in, and then he said, “Go to the hospital and pass between the beds and see how many would give their last penny away just to get up from their bed. How many cannot go to *shul*? This is why we say, *b’rov Chasdecha*, ‘with Your abundant kindness.’”

We owe Him everything, and as soon as we realize and acknowledge this verity, our plea of *Zachreinu l’chaim*, “Remember us for life,” will have so much more meaning.

Vayeilech

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום הדרא

But I will surely have concealed My face on that day. (31:18)

Hashem will conceal His Presence from us. Indeed, many times Jews feel that Hashem has “disappeared” from their lives. They should know that the Almighty is always present. At times, however, He conceals Himself, making it that much more difficult for us to perceive Him. This only means that we must look harder. Why does the Torah repeat itself – *hasteir astir*, double concealment? Concealment, by its very definition, is absolute. Something is either hidden, or it is not. If one can easily locate it, it is not really concealed. *Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl*, explains that this concealment is unique, in that Hashem will conceal the actual *hester panim*, concealment. People will experience troubles, adversity, economic havoc, unexplained illness. Do they attribute it to Hashem, or do they “blame” everyone and everything, while refusing to stop and think that Hashem might be communicating with them?

Finding fault in everything but the true Source of the adversity is our way of avoiding the truth: Hashem is speaking to us, warning us that enough is enough. It is time to change. Hashem will conceal the concealment. He will not make it obvious for us to sense that He is manipulating the circumstances that affect our *tefillah*, prayer, and *teshuvah*, repentance, so that we own up to our faults and do something to counteract them.

ויאמר ד' אל משה הנה שכב עם אביך ועם העם הזה וזונה אחריו אללו נכו הארץ ... יעזבנו והפר את בריתך אשך כרתי אותו ... ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום הדרא

Hashem said to Moshe, “Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stay after the gods of the nations of the land... and they will forsake Me and annul the covenant that I formed with them... I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them. So now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*. (31:16,18,19)

The above *pasukim* paint a stark picture of the spiritual deterioration that will occur in the period following Moshe *Rabbeinu’s* *petirah*, passing. While it did not happen immediately, the dynamics that led to the nation’s freefall from their *igra ramah*, spiritually-elevated perch, to a *bira amikta*, nadir of depravity, were apparent. During certain moments in history – even in the last two hundred years, leading up to the present – we have observed an acute distancing from positive spiritual activity. For many, assimilation has almost become a way of life. Within the observant camp, a spiritual tug of war has ensued between those who are committed to strengthening Torah study and *mitzvah* observance and those who seek to “open up” Orthodoxy and water it down to the letter of the Law. (The latter have rejected the spirit of the Law and the accompanying traditions and customs, which are not only considered law, but have maintained our spiritual integrity throughout the generations.)

While this situation is certainly depressing, we have hope. I quote a vignette, a conversation that took place between *Horav Shlomo Lorincz, zl*, and the *Brisker Rav, zl*. *Rav Lorincz* lamented the reality (60 years ago) of the nation’s spiritual degradation; the *Brisker Rav* assuaged him with hope. *Rav Lorincz* was a distinguished Torah activist, who represented Agudah Israel in the Knesset. He came to the *Brisker Rav* depressed and dejected, following the defeat of a bill that he had worked on for a while that was almost certain to pass. It did not. Despite all assurances to the contrary, his bill prohibiting the raising of *davaracheir*, pigs, failed. He poured out his heart over the low spiritual state of the country, and his fears that they had not yet reached rock-bottom. It would get worse.

The *Brisker Rav* said, “Let me teach you a lesson in *Chumash* in the manner that I used to teach my sons. He opened a *Chumash* and read from *Devarim* (31:16), ‘And Hashem said to Moshe, “You will (now) lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stray after the gods of the nations of the land.”’ Speaking in *Yiddish*, the *Rav* explained, “To stray after the gods of the nations of the land does not mean that they would not *daven Shacharis*. It means that they literally worshipped idols. If that were not (bad) enough, the *pasuk* continues, *And they will forsake Me*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Minchah*; it means that they will not even serve Me (Hashem)... And if this were not enough, the *pasuk* continues, *and annul the covenant that I formed with them*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Maariv*; it means that they did not perform circumcision. And it concludes with the words, *I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them*.

“Nu,” the *Brisker Rav* said, raising his eyes, “I am certain that you will agree that the situation described here is much worse than the one you just described, but let us continue learning: ‘So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*...’ Torah study is the antidote for all spiritual deterioration, even idol worship and the abandonment of *Bris Milah*. It will return Hashem’s People to Him. All that we are relegated to do is take care of teaching it to *Bnei Yisrael*. In that case, you have no reason to despair.”

What is it about studying Torah that literally transforms a person? I write this *Isru Chag Shavuot*, the *Yom Tov* dedicated to Torah. Due to the various restrictions, the majority of *minyanim* were held outdoors. After *davening vasikin* in a large tent, I was walking home and passed my gentile neighbor who was outside enjoying the early morning air. While he is well aware that his Jewish neighbors attend prayer services in the synagogue, he never realized what this meant until he observed us *davening* outdoors, across from his house. I explained to him what had taken place during the night, how fifty men and many young boys had studied Torah together. He, of course, did not understand the concept of studying a book as part of a religious service. He asked me, “Rabbi, what is so special about this book?” I told him that this Book was the word of G-d, and, through it, the Almighty speaks to us. “In other words,” I said, “we are not simply studying a book. We are listening to the Almighty speak to us.”

This is what Torah study does for a Jew. It affords him the opportunity to listen to Hashem. When a person listens to Hashem, the experience is transformative. Obviously, the degree of listening, and the depths of comprehension, will determine the change that will transpire. *Teshuvah* stories abound which demonstrate the amazing spiritual regeneration that ensues within the person who commits to *teshuvah*. We have varied understandings of the meaning of *teshuvah* and what one must endure in order to succeed. I, therefore, have selected the following vignette, which is both timely and illuminating.

Horav Naftali Ropshitzer, zl, was one of the first *Admorim*. He was learning in his room one day when *Zevulun*, a member of the Jewish community, came to him, obviously very distraught. “*Rebbe*, I cannot live with myself any longer. I have committed numerous transgressions, a number of which are very serious. *Rebbe*, I must know what to do in order to repent to expunge these *aveiros*, sins.” With that, he presented a list of sins that were quite egregious. (We must underscore that many people in those times [mid-eighteenth century] did

not have the luxury of a *yeshivah* education, and they suffered from economic hardship, as well as the influence of a society that was antagonistic to religious observance.)

The *Rebbe* reviewed the list and declared, “There is no question. For such sins, there is only one resolution. You must forfeit your life! There is just no other way.” With a tear-filled voice, Zevulun accepted his fate. “It is better that I die having received Hashem’s forgiveness than to live the life of a sinner. I want to leave this world with a clean *neshamah*, soul.”

“If so, then we can proceed with your *teshuvah* ritual. I will prepare the molten lead that will be poured down your throat. This will serve as the process that expunges all of your sins.”

Zevulun nodded in agreement. He was prepared to die if that is what it would take to purify his soul. As soon as the lead had melted, *Rav Naftali* laid Zevulin down on the bed, tied him up and blindfolded his eyes. “Now, my dear friend, recite *Viduy*, Confession, in preparation for your death.”

Zevulun recited *Viduy* and declared, “*Rebbe*, I am ready. I feel good that I will leave this world as I entered it – pure.” “If so,” the *Rebbe* said, “Open your mouth.” Zevulun opened his mouth, prepared for the searing pain of burning lead to melt his innards. Instead, he received the shock of his life. Instead of hot molten lead being poured down his throat, the *Rebbe* had poured sweet honey down his throat!

“Do you think that the Almighty really wanted me to take your life?” the *Rebbe* asked. “*Chas v’shalom*, Heaven forbid! When a person commits such grave sins that warrant his death, do you think that Hashem wants him to die? Absolutely not! Hashem wants him to live. All the Almighty asks of us is remorse, a broken heart. Forgiveness is not about death; it is about life with contrition. When I saw how deeply pained your heart was, how much you really regretted your sinful behavior, to the point that you were prepared to renege on your life, I realized how utterly broken you were. Therefore, I had nothing to do. You had already achieved forgiveness.”

Zevulun never forgot the day that he received a new lease on life. He changed his past life’s trajectory and became a serious penitent, wholly committed to *mitzvah* observance. All Hashem asks of us is spiritual integrity, not a manifestation of religious observance solely for the purpose of impressing others. The only One we have to impress is Hashem.

Va’ani Tefillah

**נ’ – Mei’olam kivinu Lach. (As long as we can remember)
We have always hoped for You.**

The fact that we continue to hope for salvation, despite having survived some of the most difficult periods in history, is in and of itself one of the greatest *chassadim*, kindnesses, bestowed upon us by Hashem. We have maintained *tikvah*, hope, amidst challenge and adversity. *Horav Shimon Schwab*, zl, notes that the words *tikvah* and *kivinu* both find their origin in the word *kav*, which means a piece of string or rope, which binds/attaches two objects. This is the meaning of hope: connection. As long as one knows that he is firmly anchored in place, the winds that blow him all over will not prevail in blowing him away. He is connected. This is the underlying meaning of *mei’olam kivinu Lach*: Throughout history we have maintained an unbroken and undiminished attachment to Hashem via our unwavering hope that He would respond to our sincere prayers, even when the outlook has appeared tenuous and hopeless. A Jew should never give up hope.

In memory of a dear friend on the occasion of his yahrzeit

ההבר הרב צבי בן החבר ר' משה ז"ל נ' ד' השURI תשע"ג

Mr. Bjorn Bamberger

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum*

Is That Shofar Kosher?

Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Shofars come in many different sizes and prices, and they can be bought in many different places. But is that shofar on sale at Amazon.com fit for use on Rosh

Hashanah? And if a shofar does need a hechsher, what should that kashrus certificate cover?

Yossi had always hoped to follow the family tradition of becoming a *baal tokei’ah*. But even though he had spent many hours during the summer months practicing on his grandfather’s shofar, he couldn’t manage to produce anything more than a weak sound. Then one day he was walking through the Arab shuk in *Yerushalayim* and his eye was caught by a beautiful shofar.

“Try it,” said the Arab shopkeeper, thrusting the shofar into *Yossi*’s hands.

Yossi did try it – and to his amazement, the *tekiyos* not only sounded loud and clear, but they took almost no effort. After some haggling, the shofar didn’t cost that much, either. *Yossi* was so excited by his purchase that when he got home he immediately called his family to listen to a recital.

“I’m sure it’s a very beautiful shofar,” said his brother, “but are you sure it’s kosher?”

“A shofar has to be kosher? What could be the problem? I am not going to eat it!” Soon enough, *Yossi* learned that the potential for problems is far from negligible. And although we can’t repeat every detail of such a discussion in this article, we can look at a few key factors that go into making a shofar not only beautiful, but also kosher.

Beyond the Minimum

Most shofaros sold today in frum stores are made in one of numerous small, family-operated factories scattered around Eretz Yisrael. While some shofaros have no hechsher, others have one that covers the minimal standard: It certifies that the shofar is manufactured from a ram’s horn. Since all halachic authorities rule that a ram’s horn is preferred and that a horn from a different, kosher, non-bovine animal may be used only when there is no alternative, there is some value to this minimal hechsher. In addition to the concern that the shofar might have been made from the horn of a cow or a bull, which is not acceptable, there are commercially available “shofaros” made of quality plastic that but look, feel, and blow like a shofar. Thus, the “minimum standard” hechsher should hopefully ensure that the shofar is a genuine ram’s horn.

By the way, here is a simple, non-scientific way to verify that a shofar is plastic. Look at many available on display in the Arab shuk. Carefully examine them and you will notice that they all have their “natural” markings in exactly the same place. Some are oriented to the left and others to the right, and the color varies from shofar to shofar, but it is quite clear that they were poured into the same mold.

Boiled, Buffed, and Beautiful

The majority of rams’ horns used to make shofaros are imported from abroad. When they arrive at the factory, they are not a pretty sight. Not only is the horn’s exterior rough and lacking a pleasing shine, but the bone is still inside.

Although it is perfectly kosher to use a shofar by drilling a hole through the bone on its inside, commercial manufacturers remove the bone. The first step, therefore, is to boil the horn for several hours to soften it and make it more malleable, allowing for easy removal of the bone.

A hechsher that guarantees only that the shofar was originally a ram’s horn does not address problems that occur to the shofar during the manufacturing process. (While those problems may not occur with great frequency, my opinion is that someone giving a hechsher should assume responsibility for the product’s complete kashrus.)

Returning to our description of the process: After the skull bone has been removed, the wider end of the horn is hollow, whereas the narrower side of the horn, that is attached to the head, is not hollow. Since the horn grew thick on this side, it must be drilled and cleaned out to create an empty “tunnel” that reaches the hollow part of the horn. In addition, a usable mouthpiece on the narrow part of the horn has to be fashioned. In order to accomplish all of this, the narrower section of the horn is straightened. This creates the difference in appearance between the complete shofar, which is straight at this end, and the natural ram’s horn, which is curved along its entire length. Take a look the next time you are this close to a ram.

As part of this process, the factory might shorten an over-long shofar or trim its sides. This does not invalidate the shofar, which, unlike an *esrog*, doesn’t have to be complete. However, a shofar cannot be lengthened, not even by using material from another kosher shofar.

Overlaying the mouthpiece with gold invalidates the shofar, because that puts an intervening substance between the mouth of the *baal tokei’ah* and the shofar, meaning that he is not blowing the shofar itself. Even an overlay, such as gold or silver, on the external surface of a shofar invalidates the shofar if it modifies its sound.

On the other hand, there is no halachic problem with shaping the mouthpiece to whichever shape is comfortable to blow, provided one reshapes the shofar’s natural horn material and doesn’t add other material to coat it. In fact, a shofar’s mouthpiece is always created by opening a hole where the horn is naturally closed.

Buff and polish

The next step in the processing of a shofar is to sand, buff, and polish the exterior of the shofar. Sometimes a lacquer is added to give it a nice sheen. According to all sources I spoke to, the lacquer doesn't modify the sound in a discernible way, so it does not invalidate the shofar.

Still, a shofar can be rendered unkosher if a hole is created during the manufacturing process (other than the hole for the mouthpiece). When that happens, the status of the shofar becomes a whole new story.

Hold the Super Glue

This article is not long enough to cover all the details of opinions concerning a shofar that is cracked or has a hole. Instead, I will summarize briefly those opinions:

- (1) The most stringent opinion contends that any lengthwise crack in the shofar requires repair.
- (2) The moderate opinion rules that any crack more than half the shofar's length requires repair.
- (3) The most lenient opinion states that one may ignore a crack that is less than the full length of the shofar.

Assuming that a cracked shofar is invalid until it is mended, does it make a difference how the crack is repaired?

There is a dispute among early authorities as to whether the shofar will be kosher if repaired by gluing it together. Some, such as the Ramban, contend that since coating the inside of the shofar with foreign material invalidates it, gluing a hole in a shofar with a foreign substance also invalidates it. Those who advocate this approach contend that the only way to repair a cracked shofar is by heating the horn at the point of damage until the horn is welded together.

The Rosh disagrees with this approach, contending that there is a difference between plating a shofar with foreign material — which means that one is in essence combining a non-shofar material with the shofar — and glue, which becomes totally inconspicuous in the finished product. Although the halachah follows this last opinion, one should rely on this only if the crack did not affect the sound of the shofar and if the crack is not so big that the glue is obvious. Otherwise, one will be required to weld the horn as described above, so that the shofar is repaired with shofar material.

Herein then lies an issue. If we need to be concerned about the possibility that the shofar was cracked, do we need a guarantee that it was repaired by welding and not by gluing?

If we do, we have a problem. There is no reason to assume that a non-Jewish, nonobservant, or unknowledgeable shofar crafter would repair it by welding. To compound the concern, shofaros made for sale are always polished to provide the beautiful, but unnatural, sheen that the customer expects to see on his shofar. This polish may mask any damage and repair that was made when the shofar developed a crack; only a highly trained expert might be able to notice such a repair.

Unfortunately, few shofar crafters are that halachically concerned. The assumption is, therefore, that most shofar makers would simply take an acrylic or similar glue and fill the hole. Therefore, enter the potential need for a more reliable hechsher. We will return to this question later.

Holey Shofaros!

Another potential problem is if a hole was inadvertently made in the shofar during the drilling process. The Mishnah states: If a shofar has a hole in it that was subsequently plugged, if "it" affects the sound, then the shofar is invalid, and if not, the shofar is valid.

There are three critical questions here that impact on our discussion:

(1) Does the Mishnah mean that the shofar is invalid because it has a hole? Or is the shofar invalid because the hole was plugged, but the hole itself is not a concern?

(2) Does it make any difference what material is used to plug the hole?

(3) What is the "it" that affects the sound? Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound? If the Mishnah means "because" the hole was plugged, the Mishnah is teaching that a shofar with a hole is kosher, and the plugging of the hole creates the problem.

But why might this be true? It seems counterintuitive that the hole in the shofar does not present a problem, but plugging it does.

The answer is that this opinion contends that any natural shofar sound is kosher — even if the shofar has a hole (Rosh, Tur). Although the air escaping through the hole may affect the sound the shofar produces, the sound produced is from the shofar and not from anything else. However, when the shofar's hole is plugged, the sound is now partially produced by the plug. Therefore, this opinion rules that a plugged shofar is no longer kosher if it produces a different sound from what it produced before the shofar was plugged.

As a matter of fact, this is the way the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7) actually rules. Following his approach, if a shofar develops a hole, it is best to do nothing to the shofar, since the unplugged hole allows the shofar to be perfectly kosher.

Although this solution is halachically acceptable according to many authorities, it does not provide us with a practical solution. A shofar manufacturer will not leave a hole in a shofar because customers won't purchase such a shofar. In other words, customers want a holy shofar, not a holey one.

In addition, not all authorities accept this understanding of the Mishnah. The Rambam, in his Commentary to the Mishnah, rules that a shofar with a hole is not kosher; the Biur Halachah (586:7 s.v. Sh'ein) notes several other rishonim who agree with this conclusion. The Rema (Orach Chayim 586:7) concludes that one should not use such a shofar unless he has no other.

At this point, we should address a second question: The Mishnah states that a shofar with a plugged hole is not kosher. Does it make a difference which material plugs the hole?

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 27b) quotes a dispute between the Tanna Kamma and Rabbi Nosson whether the Mishnah's plugged shofar is invalid regardless of what one used to plug it, or only if it was plugged with non-shofar material. Rabbi Nosson contends that a shofar repaired with shofar material remains kosher even though its sound changed. The Tanna Kamma disagrees, contending that regardless of whether the hole was plugged with shofar material or with non-shofar material, the shofar is invalid if its sound changed. Most rishonim rule according to Rabbi Nosson, which means that a "holey" shofar subsequently plugged with pieces of shofar is kosher.

We've now come to a third question: Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound? According to the Rambam (Hilchos Shofar 1:5), a shofar with a plugged hole is kosher only if it sounds the same after the repair as it did before the hole developed and was repaired. If the shofar sounds different after the repair, the shofar is invalid. It is also invalid if the repair was with non-shofar material, even when the repaired shofar sounds identical to how it sounded before the damage. The Rosh, on the other hand, rules that the shofar is kosher if it sounds the same after the repair, even if it was repaired with non-shofar material. It is also kosher if it was repaired with shofar material, even if the sound changed as a result. This dispute is mentioned in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7), who rules, like the Rambam, that one may not use a shofar plugged with non-shofar material, unless there is no other shofar available.

Do We Need To Worry?

Halachah makes a general assumption that there is no need to be concerned about a problem that is unusual. Do shofar cracks fall into this category? Just how frequently does a shofar develop a hole during its production?

Since no one has conducted a survey on the subject, and it would be almost impossible to perform one, we cannot answer this question definitively. A friend of mine who has attempted to visit shofar factories tells me that they usually do not allow visitors, and are probably not likely to reveal the type of information we are asking. We certainly do not know the track records of the Arab craftsmen, nor those of the shofaros made in China.

Despite this lack of information, I think we can assume that, since the people making shofaros are indeed craftsmen, and since it is highly disadvantageous to drill an extra hole while cleaning out the horn, the majority of shofaros are made without creating unwanted holes during the processing.

Thus, technically speaking, a shofar might not require a hechsher to guarantee that a hole did not develop in the shofar during its manufacture. However, is there a simple way to ascertain that the shofar you purchase was not damaged during the manufacturing process?

Some rabbanim do provide a "hechsher" for the manufacturer, stating that he is a halachah-abiding Jew who would not sell a shofar that has developed a crack or hole in the course of production.

What might the concerned manufacturer do when a shofar develops a hole? I asked this question of a particular manufacturer, and was told that he sells the damaged, rough shofar to a non-Jewish manufacturer. Many shofaros are sold to non-Jews who have a Biblical interest in blowing them. (I had hoped that the plastic variety mentioned above is also marketed exclusively to the same audience. However, I subsequently discovered otherwise, much to my chagrin.) Unfortunately, most shofar manufacturers do not meet this standard. Although the person who began the business usually was an observant Jew, who may have been knowledgeable enough to merit this hechsher, often, the current business operators are not very observant. Therefore, a hechsher on the manufacture may have limited value, unless it is issued by a well-known rav.

There is yet another kind of hechsher, which has a different standard. In this case, the distributor or store interested in selling a particular shofar has it checked by a highly skilled rav or mashgiach who knows how to check a shofar for signs of damage or repair. A shofar that shows such signs is rejected.

Does a hechsher add significantly to the price of the shofar? The answer is that it does not. In some instances, the hechsher adds a small, non-significant premium to the price of the shofar — but the price is almost always primarily linked to its size and the particular retailer's markup.

So what would I do if I wanted to buy a shofar for Rosh Hashanah? I would either ask for a hechsher that meets the last standard mentioned or, alternatively, ask for

a letter from a known rav verifying that he knows that the manufacturer of this shofar is a halachah-abiding and knowledgeable Jew.

Outwitting the Satan

The shofar is blown to remind us of many things, including a wakeup call to do teshuvah and/or to herald Mashiach. The Gemara explains that the repeated blowing of the shofar — that is, both before the Shemoneh Esrei and then again afterward — is in order to confuse the Satan and to prevent him from prosecuting us (Rosh Hashanah 16b). This is surprising. Is the Satan so easily fooled? Most of us have firsthand experience with the Satan, and have found him to be extremely

clever. Does he not remember that we pulled the same prank on him in previous years, when we blew the shofar twice?

Tosafos explains the Gemara on a deeper level. The Satan is constantly afraid that Mashiach will come and put him out of business. Therefore, every time the shofar blows, the Satan leaps up, terrified that Mashiach has come, and forgets to prosecute us! Then he realizes, too late, that it is just Rosh Hashanah again. By that time, Hashem has reached our verdict without the Satan's input. How nice it would be if we would sit on the edge of our chairs waiting for Mashiach with the same intensity as the Satan!

לע"ג

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
בילא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה

PARSHAT NITZAVIM

Can man return to Gan Eden?

Even though Parshat Breishit may have left us with the impression that the Garden's gates (guarded by the 'keruvim' and a fiery sword / see Breishit 3:24) remain inaccessible to man forever, Parshat Nitzavim may allude to the possibility of 'return'.

To explain how (and why), this week's shiur discusses the significance of the speech delivered by Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshat Nitzavim, and how it fits beautifully into the rubric of Sefer Devarim.

INTRODUCTION

In case you hadn't noticed, Parshat Nitzavim contains yet another speech given by Moshe Rabbeinu, the last of his four speeches in Sefer Devarim. In fact, this final speech actually began at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo (see 29:1-8, noting how 29:1 forms the introduction to this speech).

In the following shiur, we first discuss how this final speech relates to the 'tochacha' (in Parshat Ki Tavo); afterwards we will focus on what's so special about its 'finale'.

FOUR SPEECHES

The following table will help clarify the location of Moshe Rabbeinu's speech in Parshat Nitzavim in relation to the rest of Sefer Devarim, as it summarizes his four speeches:

CHAPTERS	TOPIC
1) 1->4	Introductory speech (why 40 years have passed)
2) 5->26	The main speech - the mitzvot to keep in the land
3) 27->28	Brit Har Eival and the tochacha
4) 29->30	The final speech = Parshat Nitzavim

Even though our shiur will focus on the 'final speech' (#4), to appreciate its content, we must first review the primary topic of speech #3.

Recall how chapter 27 described a ceremony that Bnei Yisrael are instructed to conduct on Har Eival, upon entering the land. That ceremony was to include both the teaching of the laws (i.e. those of the main speech) and some festivities. The Torah's description of that ceremony continued in chapter 28 with the tochacha, i.e. the 'blessing and the curses', as they were to be read in public at the conclusion of that ceremony.

Hence, the order of Sefer Devarim up until this point makes perfect sense. Speech #2 details the laws that Moshe taught, while speech #3 explains how these laws were to be taught once again when Bnei Yisrael enter the land, at a special ceremony that concluded with a public warning of both the reward and punishment should Bnei Yisrael obey / or disobey these laws.

However, when one reads the fourth speech, it appears to be superfluous, for in it we find once again Moshe's rebuke of Bnei Yisrael - in a manner which doesn't differ much from the numerous rebukes in his earlier speeches. [For example, compare 29:11-14 with 5:2-3; 29:4-5 with 8:4; and 30:1-3 with 4:26-29.]

However, if we take a closer look at its content, we can explain its function and the reason for its location.

THE STARTING & FINISH LINES

Our first step is to delineate more precisely where this speech begins and ends. Note how it begins at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo in 29:1 and concludes at the end of Parshat Nitzavim (as indicated by the sudden shift to third-person narrative right at the beginning of Parshat Vayelech (31:1)).

Using a Tanach Koren, note as well how it contains five distinct 'parshiot': 29:1-8; 29:28; 30:1-10; 30:14 & 30:15-20.

Let's take a look at each one of these parshiot, and explain what is problematic about each. Afterward, we will explain the logic of their internal progression, and how each of these parshiot relates to the previous speech, and overall theme of covenant in Sefer Devarim.

PARSHIA #1 (29:1-8)

Moshe's opening statements in this 'parshia' raise numerous questions. To understand these difficulties, let's take a look:

"Moshe called together Bnei Yisrael and said to them: You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt... **yet**, until this day, God has not given you a 'heart to know,' 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen.' I led you for forty years in the wilderness... [Therefore] observe faithfully the words of this covenant [**divrei ha-brit ha-zot**] in order that you succeed in all that you now undertake" (see 29:1-8).

First of all, why is he talking to this generation as though they themselves left Egypt? Granted, some of the elder members of the nation may have been under the age of twenty at the time of the Exodus (and hence not included in the punishment). However, the vast majority of the current generation did not witness those events. But even more puzzling is 29:3. How can Moshe possibly say, "Until this day, God has not given you a 'heart to know,' 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen'?" To what could Moshe Rabbeinu possibly be referring?

Finally, why does Moshe conclude these comments by once again reminding Bnei Yisrael of the 'brit' (see 29:8)? Was that not the topic of his previous speech? [See 5:2-3!]

PARSHIA #2 - see 29:9-28

In this section, Moshe reiterates the purpose of this gathering - i.e. to establish the covenant through which Bnei Yisrael are to become God's nation. He then emphasizes the eternal nature of this covenant, i.e. its mandatory application to all future generations as well (see 29:9-14).

But once again we must ask, is this not the same point that Moshe Rabbeinu had already stated in the opening remarks of his main speech? (See 5:2-3, read carefully.)

Furthermore, why does Moshe suddenly raise the possibility that an individual, family, or possibly an entire tribe may consider 'breaking out' of this covenant (see 29:17-25)?

PARSHIA #3 - see 30:1-10

Moshe now 'comforts' Bnei Yisrael, telling them that even in the event of exile, there will always remain the possibility for 'teshuva' and the nation's return to the Promised Land. Why would Moshe, while addressing the people prior to their entry into the land, prematurely inform them of their return to the land from exile? They haven't reached the land yet, and already they are being promised the ultimate gathering of the Diaspora? Furthermore, why aren't Moshe's earlier comments on this topic (see 4:25-31 & Vayikra 26:41-45) sufficient?

PARSHIA #4 - see 30:11-14

Here we find Moshe Rabbeinu's famous insistence that keeping the Torah is 'not as hard' as it seems. Again, although this constitutes a most critical message, the question remains: why now and why here in Sefer Devarim?

PARSHIA #5 - see 30:15-20

As we will explain in Part Two, these soul-stirring psukim depict life in Eretz Yisrael as comparable to the ideal, spiritual environment of Gan Eden. But once again, why is this topic mentioned specifically in this speech, and at its conclusion?

POTENTIAL 'CONCLUSIONS'

To resolve these questions, we must consider the centrality of the concept of 'covenant' [brit], which has emerged thus far as a primary theme in every speech thus far in Sefer Devarim.

Recall that Moshe Rabbeinu began his main speech by underscoring the relevance and application of the covenant of Sinai to the present generation:

"The Lord your God made with you a **covenant** at **Sinai**. It was not [only] with your fathers that God made this covenant, but with **us**, those of us who are **here, alive today...**" (see Devarim 5:1-3).

[Notice that the opening phrase of that speech (5:1) is identical to that of ours (29:1), thus suggesting a thematic connection between the two.]

In both his main speech and finale, Moshe Rabbeinu addresses the new generation as though **they** themselves left Egypt and stood at Har Sinai. He emphasizes their inclusion in the covenant of Har Sinai. Yet, in his third speech Moshe had instructed Bnei Yisrael to enter into a similar covenant at this time (see 28:69 - the final pasuk of that speech!). Why is another covenant necessary if 'everyone' was considered to have participated in the covenant at Har Sinai?

In fact, this 'extra' covenant at Arvot Mo'av, as detailed in chapter 27 in Parshat Ki Tavo, could easily lead Bnei Yisrael to several incorrect conclusions:

1) The necessity of a new covenant for this generation implies that the covenant at Har Sinai does not bind all future generations. Why else would they require a 'new' covenant at Arvot Mo'av?

Evidently, one could conclude, the laws of the Torah are binding only upon a generation (or individual) who formally accepts this covenant, but not upon subsequent generations (unless formally accepted!).

2) An individual (or possibly even a larger group) may decide that he doesn't want either side of the covenant - neither its reward **nor** its punishment! Some people may gladly forego any potential reward for keeping the mitzvot of the brit, so long as in turn they would not be bound by its strict demands or threatened by the harsh punishment for its neglect.

In other words, Bnei Yisrael may conclude that each person or family in any generation has the 'option' to either be part of the brit or to 'back out' ('chas ve-shalom!').

3) Just as any given individual may reserve the right to 'back out' of the covenant, God as well may be enabled to exercise His right to 'retract' His covenant should He see fit. In other words, Bnei Yisrael could potentially infer from the closing section of the tochacha in Ki Tavo that exile signifies the very annulment of this covenant. In other words, if exile is understood as God 'nullifying' His side of the covenant, then Bnei Yisrael (once in exile) could reach the logical conclusion that their 'special relationship' with God is over (chas ve-shalom!).

[See Yechezkel 20:32 and its context, where Bnei Yisrael in the Babylonian Exile raise this very possibility!]

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

With this background, let's now take another look at the various components of Moshe's final speech in an attempt to explain why they from this 'finale'.

In **Parshia #1**, Moshe Rabbeinu first explains **why** this 'new' covenant (as described in the third speech) is necessary. True, a covenant had already been made with the previous generation. However, because of their sins and subsequent demise in the desert, it is only now that the original intention of **brit Sinai** becomes applicable.

To emphasize upon this new generation that **they** must fulfill the destiny originally planned for their parents, God recreates the 'atmosphere' of Har Sinai, allowing the new generation to 'relive' the experience. Although most of them were **not** at Har Sinai, it is important that this entire generation feel as though they actually stood at the foot of the mountain. They will soon enter the land and face the challenge of establishing God's special nation, and they must therefore bring with them the Sinai experience and covenant.

As Seforno on 29:3 explains, it is only **now** that Bnei Yisrael are finally ready, for the first time, to fulfill God's covenant. Moshe thus explains to this generation that 'this is **the day**' for which He has been waiting. Now, God has a nation that can truly **know, see, and listen** (see 29:3, Seforno and Rashi).

Thus, there is nothing 'new' about this covenant. In fact, it serves an opposite function: i.e. to reaffirm the relevance and application of the original covenant at Har Sinai.

With this in mind, we can now explain the need for the second parshia.

Once this 'renewed' brit becomes necessary, Moshe Rabbeinu must disaffirm the possible conclusion that every generation and every individual has the option of accepting or refusing the terms of the covenant (as we explained above). Therefore, in **Parshia #2** Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael of the purpose of that covenant (to become God's nation, see 29:9-14) and then threatens severe punishment for any person or group considering the option of 'backing out' (see 29:17-25).

Afterward, in **Parsha #3**, Moshe Rabbeinu reassures Bnei Yisrael that just as this covenant is binding upon Bnei Yisrael for **all** generations, so is it eternally binding upon God Himself. Therefore, even in the advent of exile, God will (sooner or later) ensure Bnei Yisrael's return to their land to keep His mitzvot and become His nation. [Note that other religions (which evolved from Judaism) reject specifically this point!]

Moshe then proceeds to repudiate another likely conclusion of one who hears the terms of this covenant (and its almost innumerable obligations), the claim that it's simply 'impossible' to be an 'observant Jew.' Moshe Rabbeinu explains in **Parshia #4** that in truth, it's not as hard as it may seem. For if one has the proper attitude of "ahavat Hashem" (the opening theme of the main speech), then the 'way of life' which the Torah demands lies well within his reach.

Finally, in **Parshia #5**, Moshe concludes his speech with the axiom of 'bechira choftshit' (freedom of choice), the God-given ability to choose the 'path of life' [or 'death'], which will now be discussed in Part Two.

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PART TWO - Between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael

Before we begin Part Two, review 30:15-20, and notice that this 'parshia' forms the concluding section of this speech. As you read, note how Moshe Rabbeinu summarizes in this conclusion some of the primary themes of the main speech (which we have discussed in previous shiurim):

"See, I set before you today **chayim** (life) and **tov** (prosperity), **mavet** (death) and **ra** (adversity).

For I command you today to **love** God and walk in His ways [referring to the **mitzva** section / 6-11] and to keep His **chukim u-mishpatim** [referring to the 2nd part of the main speech / 12-26] that you may thrive and increase and that God will bless you in the Land that you are about to conquer...

Should you turn your heart (not listen)... I declare today that you shall certainly perish and not endure on the Land... that you are to conquer." (see 30:15-18).

Clearly, Moshe refers once again to the two sections of the main speech. However, these verses may relate as well to a fundamental theme in Sefer Breishit, as suggested by several key phrases in this section. Let's explain.

Recall the usage of the terms '**chayim** and **tov**' and '**mavet** and **ra**' in 30:15, cited earlier. Let's identify the precise definition of these expressions in the final two psukim:

"I call Heavens and Earth to testify that I am presenting you the **choice** of **chayim** or **mavet** - the 'bracha' or 'klala' - and you should choose **chayim** in order that you live... on this Land that I promised to your ancestors..." (30:19-20).

In this beautiful finale, the Torah equates the concept of **bracha** & **klala**, as detailed by the tochacha (see 28:1-7,15-20!), with **chayim** & **mavet**:

Bracha = chayim (life); **klala = mavet** (death).

Recall, however, that the concepts of **chayim** & **mavet** as well as **tov** & **ra** were first introduced in the story of Gan Eden:

"And God brought forth from the ground every tree... and the **etz ha-chayim**
[the Tree of Life] in the middle of the garden, and the:

etz ha-da'at tov ve-ra

[the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil...] and from the **etz ha-da'at tov v'ra** do not eat, for on the day you eat from it - **mot tamut** - you will surely die!" (see Breishit 2:8-9, 2:15-17).

This textual parallel is strengthened by yet another resemblance to the story of Creation. Note that the Heavens and Earth - **shamayim va-aretz** - are called upon as witnesses to this covenant (see 30:19, as well as 31:28 & 32:1).

This special call upon 'shamayim' and 'aretz' to witness the brit may relate not only to the introduction of the story of Creation (Br. 1:1), but also to the opening pasuk of the Gan Eden narrative in Breishit - see 2:4!

A GAN EDEN CLOSE TO HOME

This textual parallel suggests a conceptual relationship between life according to the Torah's ideals in the Land of Israel and existence in Gan Eden. In fact, the spiritual environment of Gan Eden strongly resembles the spiritual environment that Sefer Devarim wishes to create in the Land of Israel.

Recall how the Gan Eden narrative described a special environment between man and God, with an emphasis on 'sachar va-onesh' [reward and retribution]. God promises Man a prosperous physical existence [**chayim**] should he **obey**, while threatening death [**mavet**] should Man **disobey** (see Br. 2:15-17). In a very similar manner, the tochacha describes a parallel reality in the land of Israel:

Should Bnei Yisrael keep the mitzvot, God will reward them with prosperity (see 29:1-14); if they sin, God will punish them severely (see 29:15-26).

[Note as well Devarim 11:13-20 (from daily kriyat shma).]

Furthermore, **exile** emerges in both settings as the most severe punishment. Adam is banished from the Garden as a consequence of his sin (see Br. 3:22-24). Similarly, the tochacha threatens that should Am Yisrael continue to sin they will be driven from the land by their enemies (see 28:64-68) and remain in Exile until they perform proper teshuva (repentance / see Devarim 30:1-10).

[Interestingly, God's original death sentence for eating from the Tree was translated into Adam's **exile** from the Garden (3:23) when he actually partook of the Tree's fruit.

Considering that Gan Eden reflects an ideal spiritual environment, exile may be accurately equated with death. Whereas the biblical purpose of **life** is to develop a connection with God, biblical **death** refers to life without any such connection, an exile into an environment characterized by God's absence.]

This parallel takes on additional meaning when we consider the location of these two sources: at the **beginning** of Chumash and towards the **very end** of Chumash.

One could suggest that in this manner Chumash underscores the basic nature of man's relationship with God. First, we are told of God's creation of Man and his placement in Gan Eden - the ideal spiritual environment. As punishment for his sin, God expels man from Gan Eden, appointing the 'keruvim' to guard against any attempt to return (see Br. 3:24).

Nonetheless, the presence of the keruvim who guard the 'way to the Tree of Life' does not necessarily indicate the permanent closure of this path. To the contrary, it becomes man's duty to **strive** to return. The keruvim do not restrict entry; rather they protect the Garden from the intrusion of those undeserving of return. But once man proves himself worthy, the **derekh etz ha-chayim** - the **path** to the Tree of Life - no matter how formidable it may at first appear, suddenly opens and invites man inside.

Correspondingly, Sefer Devarim describes Eretz Yisrael as both a physical and spiritual environment where Am Yisrael can rebuild this spiritual connection with God.

For example, Parshat Ekev illustrates how the climate of Eretz Yisrael contributes to this environment:

"...always, God's **eyes** are upon it [the Land], from the beginning of the year until the end of the year."

(see Devarim 11:10-12)

FROM GAN EDEN TO 'JERUSALEM'

But perhaps the most meaningful parallel between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael arises in the **chukim & mishpatim** section. Recall that Parshiyot Re'eh, Shoftim, and Ki Tavo present numerous mitzvot relating to **ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem**, the bet ha-mikdash, which will be built on the site chosen by God. As explained in our shiur on Parshat Re'eh, Sefer Devarim demands that every Jew frequent that site regularly, be it for 'aliya la-regel' on the holidays, to offer korbanot or bikurim, to eat 'ma'aser sheni', to appear in court, etc.

Situated at the focal point of that site [i.e. the bet ha-mikdash] is the **kodesh kodashim**, the permanent location of the **aron**, covered by the **kaporet** and protected by **keruvim**, both on the **kaporet** and on the **parochet**! [See Shmot 25:16-22 & 26:31-34.]

Given that the concept of **keruvim** arises nowhere else in Chumash outside of these two contexts - the mishkan / bet ha-mikdash and Gan Eden - a thematic connection between the two is implied. Just as the **keruvim** of Gan Eden protect the path to the **etz ha-chayim**, so do the **keruvim** of the mikdash guard the path to true **chayim**: i.e. they protect the **aron** which contains the **luchot ha-eidut** - the symbol of the **Torah** and our covenant with God at Har Sinai.

By placing the **luchot** - a powerful symbol of **matan Torah** - at the focal point of our lives in Eretz Yisrael, Sefer Devarim urges us to strive to return to the environment of Gan Eden by observing the laws of the **Torah**.

This interpretation is supported by the famous pasuk in Mishlei, recited each time we return the **sefer Torah** to the **aron ha-kodesh**:

"**Etz chayim hi** - She is a Tree of Life - for those who hold on to her, and whoever holds her is fortunate." (Mishlei 3:18).

[Even though this pasuk seemingly refers to wisdom in general (see 3:13), in the overall context of the perek 'wisdom' refers specifically to Torah (see 3:1-8!).]

Thus, Chumash 'ends' with a theme which is quite parallel to the theme of its opening narrative. God's original intention may have been for man to enjoy a close relationship with Him in Gan Eden. Even though that goal seems to have 'failed' in Sefer Bereishit, Sefer Devarim concludes with the possibility that the Nation of Israel can indeed return to such an existence, in the Land of Israel. [For a similar explanation, see Seforo's introduction to Sefer Breishit.]

To better appreciate our discussion, I highly recommend that you study the Rashi on 30:19. His explanation of what man should learn from his contemplation of shamayim va-aretz (what we call 'nature') that surrounds us will definitely enhance your appreciation of Parshat Nitzavim. Furthermore, it is a most fitting Rashi to study in preparation for Rosh HaShana - the day marking God's creation of shamayim va-aretz.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN - on Part One:

A. The Midrash Tanchuma in Parshat Nitzavim relates that during the time of Yechezkel, a delegation of 'elder statesmen' came to Yechezkel and challenged the obligation to abide by the Torah. They asked the prophet, "If a kohen purchases a servant, does the servant partake from the kohen's teruma?" When Yechezkel answered in the affirmative, they inquired as to what would happen if the kohen then sold the servant to a Yisrael. The prophet replied that, of course, once the servant is no longer under the authority of the kohen, he has no further rights as far as teruma is concerned. "We, too", they said, "have already left His authority and we will no be like all the gentiles."

Yechezkel responds (20:32-33), "That which came to your mind shall not be at all; in that you say, 'We will be as the nations, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.' As I live, says

Hashem, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with fury poured out I will be king over you!"

Explain the relevance of these psukim and their general context to Parshat Nitzavim and the above shiur.

B. One critical question we did not address concerns the 'legal' mechanism by which the covenant of Har Sinai becomes binding upon all generations. It would seem that one cannot be born into a binding agreement - he must first express his consent to the terms thereof! This question was posed by the 'scholars of Aragon', as recorded by the Abarbanel. See his comments in our parasha, and contrast with the Maharal, 'Netzach Yisrael' 11. According to the Abarbanel, this eternal obligation evolves directly from Bnei Yisrael's privilege of settling the Land. Needless to say, this beautifully explains the context of Parshat Nitzavim: the reenactment of brit Sinai on the eve of Bnei Yisrael's entry into Eretz Yisrael.

C. See Rashi's comments on 've-hu yiheyeh lecha l-Elokim' (29:12), and note its relevance to the bilateral quality of the brit as discussed in the above shiur. Rashi continues by citing a Midrash regarding Bnei Yisrael's sense of desperation upon hearing the curses of the tochacha. Moshe reassures them that by observing 'Atem nitzavim' - you have survived, despite many incidents of wrongdoing. Explain how this, too, relates to this above shiur. Additionally, how does this Midrash help explain the seemingly irrelevant historical review presented at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo (29:1-8)?

Explain how the final clause of 29:5 reinforces the equation between this generation and their parents. [See Shmot 6:7.]

D. Different mefarshim have come up with different approaches to explain 29:3: "Yet, until this day, God has not given you a 'heart to know,' 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen.'" In the shiur, we mentioned the explanations of Rashi and Seforno. Other mefarshim explain this pasuk as a continuation of Moshe's 'mussar'. For example, Abarbanel places a question mark at the end of the pasuk. Before you see his commentary inside (which I suggest you do), how does his punctuation change the meaning of the pasuk? Others understand 'ad ha-yom ha-zeh' as meaning, 'even until...'. What does the pasuk mean according to this reading?

Other mefarshim, however, try to explain that Bnei Yisrael arrived at a unique awareness of Hashem's power on 'this day', the conclusion of their sojourn in the wilderness. Rav David Tzvi Hoffman explains that the forty years of wandering and the recent battle against Sichon and Og magnified this awareness far more effectively than the wonders and miracles of Egypt.

E. Moshe describes the potential attempt by an individual or group to breach the covenant as follows: "Perhaps there is among you some man or woman... When such a person hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself immune [JPS translation; note the difficulty in interpreting these words] thinking, 'I shall be safe, because I follow my own willful heart...'"

Many mefarshim address the problematic word 'ki' (translated here as 'because') in this pasuk. Ibn Ezra [and JPS] translate 'ki' as 'even though', while the Ramban, in his first suggestion, interprets the word as similar to 'ka'asher'. How may we maintain the standard interpretation of 'ki' as 'because', based on the second erroneous conclusion Moshe feared, as we discussed in the shiur? See Ramban's second interpretation.

F. As we saw, the psukim in 30:11-14 remind the people that Torah observance is not as hard as it may seem. Nowhere do we find such an explicit reassurance to the generation of Yetziat Mitzrayim and Matan Torah. Why would this younger generation in particular require these words of encouragement?

G. Note the difference between the simple reading of 30:12 and that of the Gemara in Eruvin, as cited here by Rashi. Show how the Midrashic reading of the pasuk addresses the first two incorrect conclusions that, as we discussed, Moshe feared, and contrast this approach with our understanding in the shiur.

[Point of methodology: Explain the difficulty understanding the transition from 30:11 to 30:12 according to the Midrashic interpretation. On the other hand, what other difficulties does this Gemara resolve? Does the Gemara necessarily negate the simple understanding? How do your answers to these questions reflect the general relationship between pshat and drash?]

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FOR FURTHER IYUN - on Part Two

A. We mentioned above that the psukim at the end of Parshat Nitzavim (30:15-20) that allude to Gan Eden could be considered the denouement of Moshe's speeches in Sefer Devarim. Pay careful attention to the literary style from chapter 31 onward. In which person is the narrative written (1st or 3rd)? What about the previous sections of the sefer? Is the style of this concluding section more similar to Sefer Devarim or to Bamidbar? Might this unit be considered a continuation of Sefer Bamidbar? Explain your answer.

B. A famous dispute among the commentators surrounds the psukim just prior to these that we have discussed. To what does 'mitzva ha-zot' (30:11) refer? See 30:11-14, Rashi (on pasuk 14), Ibn Ezra (also pasuk 14), Ramban (pasuk 11) and Seforno (pasuk 11). If we view these pesukim as continuing the previous discussion of teshuva, then perhaps the pesukim discussed in the above shiur (30:15-20) also relate to this theme: the choice between 'life' and 'death' in the aftermath of sin. Explain how this enhances our association between these psukim and the return to Gan Eden. Bear in mind the Midrash that Hashem banished Adam from Gan Eden only after having first offered him the chance to do teshuva (Bereishit Rabba 21, Bemidbar Rabba 13).

Furthermore, compare 15-20 with the opening psukim of Parshat Re'eh. Note the difference in terminology: bracha and klala as opposed to chayim and mavet. [Notice that Moshe makes a point of associating bracha / klala with chayim / mavet in 30:19.] Try to explain this difference in light of our suggestion that our psukim refer to the situation after sin, rather than before sinning. [See Meshech Chochma.] What 'choice' is presented in Re'eh, and which does Moshe present here, in the aftermath of sin? Why is the wrong 'choice' in our context called 'death' (perhaps more accurately, the 'curse' translates into 'death') while in Re'eh it's merely a 'curse'?

C. The Sifrei in the beginning of Parshat Re'eh (54:27) associates the psukim there (as we cited in B.) with Hashem's comment to Kayin: "Surely, if you do right you will be forgiven [see Targum, as opposed to Ibn Ezra]; but if you don't do right, sin couches at the door" (Bereishit 4:7). Why would God have to impress this notion upon Kayin particularly in the aftermath of Adam's banishment from Gan Eden? Why must Moshe repeat this same message to Bnei Yisrael before they enter the land?

D. In 29:12-14, we find once again the concept of Bnei Yisrael's destiny to become a special nation. Relate this to our entire series of shiurim on Devarim. [Note as well the reference to God's promise to the patriarchs, and recall our shiur last week regarding 'mikra bikkurim' and 'vidui ma'aser'.]

E. Read the Rambam's comments concerning the laws of Hakhel in Hilchot Chagiga perek 3. Note particularly his remarks in halacha 6 concerning 'gerim'. (If you have a chance, read also the seventh perek of mishnayot Sota.) How do these halachot relate to the above shiur? Why do you think we skip from shma to ve-haya im shamo'a in kriyat shma? What is the final word read by the king at Hakhel? How might this be significant in light of this shiur? In halacha 6, why does the Rambam emphasize that davka the 'ger' must feel as though he is standing at Har Sinai during the hakhel ceremony?

F. Regarding the association of Torah with 'life' (end of the shiur), see Targum Yonatan on 30:20.

G. We noted the function of Torah as the 'Tree of Life', the means by which we 'return to Gan Eden'. See Midrash HaGadol in

Bereishit: "That tree from which whoever would eat would live - God hid it and gave us His Torah, the tree of life..." See also Tanchuma Yashan, Bereishit 25 that identifies the 'lahat ha-cherev' (the 'fiery sword'), which guarded the entrance to Gan Eden together with the keruvim, as Torah (based on Tehillim 149:7, which we say in Psukei DeZimra).

The parallel between Gan Eden and both the mikdash and Torah study becomes especially apparent in the Midrashim that interpret Adam's responsibility in Gan Eden of 'le-ovdah' in reference to korbanot and Torah study. See Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 12, Bereishit Rabba 16, and especially Sifrei Ekev 41.

PARSHAT VA'YELECH

Were we all at Ma'amad Har Sinai? According to "pshat," only the generation that left Egypt was granted this privilege. According to the popular Midrash, however, the "neshama" [soul] of every Jew, of every generation, witnessed that momentous event.

In this week's shiur, as we study Parshat Va'yelech, we will show how the mitzvah of HAKHEL helps 'bridge this gap' between "pshat" & "drash."

INTRODUCTION

Our study of Sefer Devarim thus far has focused on the centrality of Moshe Rabeinu's main speech (chapters 5->26), which details the mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael must keep in the Land. In our shiur on Parshat Nitzavim, we discussed how Moshe Rabeinu's final speech (i.e. chapters 29->30) forms a most appropriate conclusion for that main speech.

At this point in Sefer Devarim, i.e. as Moshe has completed his address, we would expect to find some concluding remarks and thus bring Sefer Devarim to a close. Sure enough, this is exactly what happens in the opening section of Parshat Va'yelech. Moshe Rabeinu first bids farewell by explaining why he can no longer lead (see 31:2), then introduces his successor - Yehoshua (see 31:3-8), and finally presents the written version of the Torah (whose mitzvot he has just completed teaching) to the Leviim and elders.

This indeed would have been an appropriate conclusion.

However, the next section (see 31:10-13) - the mitzvah of HAKHEL - i.e. the commandment to read the Torah in public once every seven years on the holiday of Succot - seems glaringly out of place. Did we not already finish listing all the mitzvot? Did Moshe not just write down the 'final' version of the Torah and present it to the Leviim? Would it not have made more sense to include the mitzvah of HAKHEL somewhere in Parshat Re'ay, together with all the other mitzvot relating to "haMAKOM ashe yivchar Hashem"? [Note 31:11! see shiur on Parshat Re'ay. (Pay particular attention to 16:12-16.)]

To understand why the mitzvah of HAKHEL is recorded specifically at this time, we must return to Parshat Ki-tavo (and to Sefer Shmot) to uncover the underlying relationship between mitzvat HAKHEL and the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai.

FROM BRIT SINAI TO BRIT HAR EIVAL

Recall from Parshat Ki-tavo that immediately upon the completion of his main speech, Moshe instructs Bnei Yisrael to gather on Har Eival on the 'day they cross the Yarden' (see chapters 27->28). Here they were to:

- a) write down the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, to be read and taught to Bnei Yisrael (see 27:1-4,8);
- b) erect a "mizbayach" & offer OLOT & SHLAMIM /see 27:5-7
- c) conduct a covenantal ceremony including the public reading of the "tochacha" (see 27:11-28:69).

It is important to note the fundamental difference between the "tochacha" and the main speech of Sefer Devarim. The main speech describes the MITZVOT which Bnei Yisrael must keep upon entering the Land, while the "tochacha" describes Bnei Yisrael's REWARD should they OBEY these mitzvot and their PUNISHMENT should they DISOBEY. [This can help us understand why the "tochacha" FOLLOWS the main speech]

To understand the reason for this additional "brit" on Har Eival, let's consider the parallel between this ceremony and that which

took place at Har Sinai forty years earlier (see Shmot 24:3-11). There (as well), we find that Moshe:

- a) writes down the laws and reads them to the nation;
- b) erects a "mizbayach" and offers OLOT & SHLAMIM;
- c) conducts a covenantal ceremony.

[Note that a "tochacha" was presented at Har Sinai, as well, as recorded in Parshat Bchukotei - see Vayikra 26:3-46. See also Chizkuni's explanation of "sefer ha'brit" in Shmot 24:7!]

Considering that the vast majority of the people of this new generation (i.e. those who are about to enter the Land) were not present at the original ceremony, this **new** generation must 'relive' the HAR SINAI experience. Since it will now become their duty - to fulfill the destiny originally planned for their parents' generation - they too must undergo a similar experience.

[Note: In Sefer Yehoshua we find many other parallels between "dor yotzei mitzrayim" and "dor knisa la'aretz," most probably for the very same reason. See end of chapter 8.]

FROM HAR EIVAL TO HAKHEL

For a similar reason, we can explain the reason for recording the mitzvah of HAKHEL in Parshat Va'yelech. Needless to say, the covenant of Sinai is binding for all generations (see 29:12-14). Nevertheless, just as it was necessary to 'recreate' that experience forty years later for the new generation on Har Eival, the mitzvah of HAKHEL will recreate that experience for all future generations. Once every seven years, Am Yisrael must 'relive' MA'AMAD HAR SINAI as the men, women, and children gather at the Beit Ha'Mikdash on Chag ha'Succot for a public celebration to hear the Torah. The Torah will be read in public (see 31:9-13) just as it was at Har Sinai (see Shmot 24:4-7), and just as it was at Har Eival (see 27:3,8).

This interpretation is supported by the Torah's explicit reason for the mitzvah of HAKHEL:

"HAKHEL ET HA'AM - Gather together the nation, the men, the women, and the children... in order that they HEAR and in order that they will LEARN and fear their God, and they will faithfully keep all the words of this TORAH. And their children WHO DO NOT KNOW [i.e. those who were not at the last ceremony] will listen and learn to fear God, for all of the days that they are alive on the land which you are now crossing to inherit." (31:12-13)

OLOT & SHLAMIM - ALIYAH LA'REGEL

However, for our parallel to be complete, we would expect to find a mitzvah to offer korbanot of OLOT & SHLAMIM - just as was the case at Har Sinai and Har Eival. Why don't we find them in the Torah's commandment of HAKHEL?

One could suggest that this relates to the timing of HAKHEL - on SUCCOT. Recall that on SUCCOT every individual is obligated to offer OLOT and SHLAMIM to fulfill the mitzvah of "aliyah l'regel" (see 16:16-17 and Mesechet Shkalim).

Therefore, by performing this mitzvah on Succot at the Beit Ha'Mikdash, the element of korbanot of OLOT & SHLAMIM is present, and our parallel to Ma'amad Har Sinai is complete. [Recall as well our shiur Parshat Terumah that explained why the Mishkan/Mikdash itself is simply a model (and perpetuation) of Ma'amad Har Sinai!]

WHY HERE?

With this background, we can explain why Moshe orders the mitzvah of HAKHEL specifically now as he presents the Leviim and the elders the 'official copy' of the Torah. The mitzvah of HAKHEL is not 'just another mitzvah' in Sefer Devarim - it relates to the entire sefer! The purpose of this mitzvah is to periodically remind Bnei Yisrael of their obligation to keep ALL the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, which Moshe had just finished teaching. Therefore, it is given when the Sefer itself is given over the Leviim for 'safe-keeping'. [Ly'h, in next week's shiur we will explain why this mitzvah is followed by the SHIRA.]

A PARALLEL PURPOSE

The need to periodically teach these mitzvot at a NATIONAL gathering emphasizes yet another significant aspect of Matan Torah. The ultimate purpose of the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim is not only to enable each individual to develop his own, personal relationship with God, but also to create an "am kadosh" (a holy nation) in the Land of Israel - a nation that can properly represent God to the other nations.

This perspective is supported by yet another textual parallel between the mitzvah of HAKHEL and the description of "Ma'amad Har Sinai," as depicted earlier in Sefer Devarim (4:5-14). Precisely in the same 'parshia' where Sefer Devarim explains the ultimate, national purpose for keeping these mitzvot, we find a parallel description of Ma'amad Har Sinai:
"See, I have taught you 'chukim & mishpatim'... for you to keep in the Land which you are about to enter and conquer. Keep them and do them, for they are the proof of your wisdom and discernment IN THE EYE OF THE NATIONS, who, upon hearing these laws, will say... For what a great nation that has God so close to it... and what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as this Torah..."

That parsha then continues with a commandment not to forget Ma'amad Har Sinai:

"But take utmost care ... NOT TO FORGET the things you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your memory as long as you live, and MAKE THEM KNOWN TO YOUR CHILDREN AND CHILDREN'S CHILDREN - The DAY YOU STOOD BEFORE GOD AT HAR CHOREV ("ma'amad har sinai") when Hashem told me GATHER THE PEOPLE TOGETHER that I may let them hear my words..." (4:9-11)

Now we will study this parallel - using transliterated Hebrew - by carefully reading the psukim concerning Har Sinai & Hakhel [note the repetition of several key words]:

AT HAR SINAI (4:10-12):

"yom asher amad'ta lifnei Hashem Elokecha b'Chorev b'emor Hashem alei HAK'HEL LI ET HA'AM v'ASH'MI'EIM et dvarei asher YIL'M'DUN L'YIRAH oti KOL HA'YAMIM, asher heym CHAYIM AL HA'ADAMA v'et B'NEIHEM y'LAMEIDUN."

AT HAK'HEL (31:12-13):

"HAK'HEL ET HA'AM, ha'anashim v'ha'hashim v'hataf ... l'maan YISHM'U u'l'maan YIL'M'DU v'YA'RU et Hashem.... u'B'NEIHEM asher lo ya'du, YISHM'U v'LAM'DU l'YIRAH et Hashem KOL HA'YAMIM asher atem CHAYIM AL HA'ADAMA."

[It is easier just to compare them by yourself in the actual Hebrew.]

Similarly, the Torah in Devarim 18:16 refers to the day of Matan Torah as Yom ha'KAHAL. [Note also "k'halchem" in 5:19.]

Both these textual and thematic parallels point to a clear connection between the mitzvah of HAKHEL and Ma'amad Har Sinai.

JEWISH CONTINUITY

This background in "pshat" can possibly help us better understand the Midrash that every Jewish "neshama" was present at Ma'amad Har Sinai. One could explain that as members of the Jewish nation and our shared eternal destiny, each and every one of us was indeed present at Har Sinai. Nonetheless, to impress upon each new generation the importance of Ma'amad Har Sinai, there remains a need to recreate that experience (ideally through the mitzvah of HAKHEL).

Today, in the absence of the Beit Ha'Mikdash, we cannot fulfill the mitzvah of HAKHEL. Nevertheless, we can still utilize our 'Tishrei gatherings' [in 'shul' - the "mikdash m'at"] on Rosh Ha'shana, Yom Kippur, and Succot to help achieve (at least partially) the important goals of HAKHEL - at both the individual and national levels.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note the opening and closing psukim of Sefer KOHELET. Based on those psukim, can you find a conceptual relationship between Sefer KOHELET and the mitzvah HAKHEL? [Keep in mind Devarim 31:12-13!]

Does this help explain our minhag to read sefer Kohelet on the shabbat of Succot?

Can you find a relate Sefer Kohelet to the time of year of Succot?

B. Review the HAKHEL psukim again and pay attention to the emphasis on "yirat Shamayim." Compare this emphasis with the purpose of Ma'amad Har Sinai as described by Moshe himself in Shmot 20:17. Notice the two distinct functions Moshe mentions. How does the element of "nasot etchem" come into play at HAKHEL? Compare Rashbam's interpretation with the Rambam's comments towards the end of Hilchot Chagiga 3:6 ("l'chazek dat ha'emet").

(4:5-8) Additionally, see Dvarim 14:23. Could "ma'aser sheni" serve as a "miniature" form of HAKHEL? [See Ramban 14:22 and Rashbam 14:23.]

C. The m'forshim offer different bases for the relationship between HAKHEL and shmitta. Of particular interest to us is that of Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, who compares the cessation of agricultural work during shmitta to the wilderness, which he views as the perfect setting for the preparations for Matan Torah. Note the machloket among the m'forshim on Chumash as to whether Hakhel takes place at the beginning or end of the shmita year, and the various reasons given therefor.

How does this relate to the parallel to Har Sinai?

Relate to the fact that if one was not permitted to work his field for an entire year (during shemitah), it was likely that he could dedicate that year to Torah study.

D. The Torah requires that specifically the melech read the Torah in public at Hakhel. Suggest various reasons based on the content of Sefer Devarim that would explain this halacha.

E. According to 'pshat,' it would appear that the Sefer Torah that Hashem commands to be placed next to the Aron is only Sefer Devarim. Note the machloket rishonim on this topic (see 31:9 & 31:24-26).

[Be sure to see at least Ramban.]

1. Try to explain the reason for this machloket.
2. Why is this Torah placed next to the Aron? What does the Aron contain?
3. As usual, relate this to the shiurim thus far on Sefer Dvarim.

F. Based on the above shiur, why do you think the Rambam records the halachot of Hakhel in Hilchot Chagiga rather than Hilchot Shmita & Yovel?

Parshas Netzavim Vayeilech: Dimensions of Teshuvah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. PARASHAT HAT'SHUVAH

The second half of Parashat Netzavim (small as it is) focuses on national introspection and the consequent movement of religious renaissance – all of which will take place, the Torah (promises? – see Rambam, MT T'shuvah 7:5) (commands? – see Ramban on v. 11) us, as a result of our having experienced all of God's blessings AND curses:

1) When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you, 2) and you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice, just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul 3) then Hashem your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom Hashem your God has scattered you. 4) Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there Hashem your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. 5) Hashem your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 6) Moreover, Hashem your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

7) Hashem your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you.

8) *v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem* (Then you shall again hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today,

9) and Hashem your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For Hashem will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors,

10) when you obey Hashem your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

11) Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.

12) It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

14) For the matter is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (D'varim 30:1-14)

[Note: In this shiur, we will examine the problem raised by the "sequence of events" in this parashah. I hope to send out a special shiur for Yom haKippurim which will reexamine this parashah, focusing on a different set of issues.]

II. THE "SECOND TESHUVAH"

There are, of course, many deep and profound concepts embedded in this parashah. There is, however, a problem of "sequence" in this section the resolution of which will, hopefully, provide us with a greater understanding of the phenomenon of Teshuvah.

Following the order of events as outlined in the parashah:

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return "until" (Heb. *Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – we assume that this refers to the process of "Teshuvah" – return/repentance, including a recommitment to observing Torah and Mitzvot.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)
- 5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)
- 6) We will commit to observance (???) (v. 8)
- 7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

The obvious problem with this sequence is Step #6 – the "repetition" of the promise/command that we will return to God. Since the "return" (which is the premise of the whole parashah) is presented in v. 2 as the result of our introspection while in exile – and is the cause of our return to former glory and God's favor, what is the meaning of this second "return"?

III. S'FORNO'S ANSWER

As we have done before, we turn to Rabbenu Ovadiah S'forno for help. In his commentary to Sefer D'varim, S'forno suggests that the

phrase **v'Atah Tashuv** in v. 8 is not to be understood as “you will return”, following the general theme of the parashah (open the original and note how many times that root is used in this parashah).

Rather, he explains that this occurrence of the word means “you will be at peace”, as in the verse: **b'Shuvah vaNahat Tivash'un** – (you shall triumph by stillness and quiet) (Yeshaya 30:15).

In other words, the promise of the “second Teshuvah” is not about commitment born of reflection – which is the Teshuvah in v. 2. Rather, it is a promise that after we recommit to God, and God restores us and our fortunes, defeating our enemies – at that point, we will be able to hearken to God’s voice and fulfill His Mitzvot in a calm and secure manner.

This works well within the sequence, since we are promised that God will “circumcise our hearts” just before this “second Teshuvah”. As Ramban explains (in his comments on v. 6), this “circumcision of the hearts” means that we will no longer be tempted to abandon our commitment to God or our intimate relationship with Him.

At that point, following S'foro's explanation, we will move from the stirring, revolutionary movement of Teshuvah (upending our lives, in feeling, action and, ultimately, in geographic location and political reality) into a calm stasis of Mitzvah-observance. This comment is most enlightening – but, as might be expected, there is room to challenge. There are two “technical” problems with this explanation of “Tashuv”.

a) The verb root **Sh*W*B*, as mentioned earlier, shows up so often (7 times) in these 14 verses that it might almost be called anthemic of this parashah. To suggest that in this one instance it means something different – almost diametrically opposite – of the meaning ascribed in the other occurrences is not an easy theory to accept.

b) Although the noun “shuva”, meaning “calm” does show up in Tanakh, we have no instance of this root used as a verb to mean anything but “return”. S'foro's prooftext is, therefore, an incomplete proof (to say the least).

IV. A NEW RESOLUTION: TWO STEPS IN THE TESHUVAH PROCESS

If we could find a way to maintain the meaning “return” in our verse, yet explain this “second Teshuvah” in a way that makes sense sequentially, we would both solve our problem and avoid the linguistic challenge to S'foro's comment.

In order to explain this, we have to look back to the first instance of Teshuvah mentioned in the parashah – v. 2. Let's compare the two verses:

FIRST TESHUVAH (v. 2) **v'Shav'ta 'ad Hashem Elohekha v'Shama'ta b'Kolo** (you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice), just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul.

SECOND TESHUVAH (v. 8) **v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem** (Then you shall **Tashuv** and hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today...

If we look carefully at the first instance of Teshuvah, we note that there is no direct commitment to Mitzvot mentioned – just a readiness to “hearken to the Voice of God”. What does this phrase mean?

There is a wide range of circumstances that could conceivably cause someone – or a nation – to want to return to God. As outlined in the premise of our parashah (v. 1), the cause outlined here is the fulfillment of God's blessings and curses. The nation will look at the events which have transpired and will understand that it is their distance from God which has led them realize the awful curses – just as their intimacy with God was the source of those blessings they had previously enjoyed. Indeed, the Torah tells us that the people will say: “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst these evils have befallen us” (D'varim 31:17). The awareness of that “distance” (known as “Hester Panim” – the “hiding of the Divine countenance”), coupled with a realization of the terrible circumstances in which the nation is enveloped, will lead to a resolve to return “until God”.

Note that this odd phrase – **Shuva 'Ad Hashem** – to “return UNTIL God” shows up in several passages, including ours (v. 2), earlier in D'varim (4:30) and in the famous passage from Hoshea (14:2). What does this mean?

Again – when the sense of desperation and hopelessness is coupled with the realization of how far from God we have moved – the immediate and (hopefully) instinctive reaction is to try to “come back” – to restore some type of relationship with God and to return to Him. It is the Divine embrace, the security of God's Presence, which is the immediate and urgent goal of this type of “Ba'al Teshuvah”. This is, indeed, the type of Teshuvah mentioned in the first instance – “you shall return UNTIL God and hearken to His voice”; there is no mention here of specific actions or even of commitments.

It seems that this theory cannot even withstand the rest of the verse: The end of the phrase implies a commitment to Mitzvot: “just as I command you today”. This phrase, however, should not be confused with the commitment to Mitzvot mentioned later. Here, the phrase

implies that the Ba'al Teshuvah (in this case, the entire nation), will return and seek our a relationship with God, just as he {Mosheh – remember, this is Sefer D'varim} commanded them to do. In other words, the return to God is itself part of Mosheh's charge to the people.

When we look ahead to v. 8 – what we have dubbed “The Second Teshuvah” – we note that the tenor of commitment has changed. No longer are we returning “UNTIL” (*Ad*) God – we are now returning to hear His voice – meaning “to observe all of His commandments...”.

In other words, whereas the first step in Teshuvah (we now realize that there aren't two different types of Teshuvah – rather, there are two steps in the process) is exclusively the desire to return to God – to “reach Him” – the next step involves a full commitment to learning (hearkening to His voice – which here, by context, implies study of His laws) and observance.

We can now reexamine the sequence in our Parashah and find a remarkable statement about the power of Teshuvah (this is an edited cut-and-paste job from above; compare the two carefully):

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return “until” (Heb. *Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – i.e. the nation will experience a desire to come close to God.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)
- 5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)
- 6) We will return “fully” to God, studying His Torah and committing to complete observance of His commands (v. 8)
- 7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

What an amazing statement: In order for God to restore us, to purify our hearts and to achieve peace and security in our Land, all we need is to desire to return to God – to seek out His voice. Once He has fulfilled the “intermediary” promises, then we are fully expected to step up the commitment to complete Teshuvah, as indicated in v. 8. Only then will God fully take delight in us and grant us prosperity.

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Let It Go!

"*You are standing...*" (29:9)

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the great things about having been part of Ohr Somayach for more around three decades is that I have met some people who are clearly living on a different level to the rest of us mere mortals. One of these great souls distilled the essence of one's relationship with one's fellow into three principles: His first principle is, "I was created to serve others, and no one was created to serve me."

The second is, "I wouldn't do it to you. But if you do it to me – it's okay." This doesn't mean that a person should be a doormat and invite the world to trample on him, but *post facto* – if you did something to me that I could really take you to court for and get back at you – and I give up on that – I get forgiven for *all* my sins.

The source for this is the Gemara that says, "Anyone who 'passes over on his character traits,' meaning one

who resists the knee-jerk reaction that many have to resent and want revenge – and just lets it go – so, concomitantly, Hashem lets go on all our sins.

It's true that this level of saintliness is beyond the letter of the law, but it sure sounds like a good deal to me. *All of my sins?* Another source for this idea is the Tomer Devorah, which says that even though we constantly flout the Will of Hashem and use our G-d-given abilities to go against His Will, nevertheless, He constantly continues to give us the power to continue to do this and doesn't "hold a grudge."

During this week, before Hashem opens the Books of Judgment, I can think of no better exercise than to think of someone who has wronged us – and remove all resentment from our hearts. And with that we may approach the Heavenly Throne.

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TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Nitzavim-Vayelech and Rosh Hashana

Eruvin 30-36 and 37-43

Don't Lean on Me

*"If a person put his *eruv* (of food for *eruv techumim* to allow walking an additional two thousand amahs outside the city on Shabbat) above ten *tefachim*, his *eruv* is not valid, but below ten *tefachim*, his *eruv* is valid."*

By deductive reasoning, the *gemara* states that the *mishna* is speaking about a tree in the *reshut harabim* (public domain), and yet the part of it above ten *tefachim* is considered a *reshut hayachid* (private domain) by the nature of its dimensions. Another detail: The person making the *eruv techumim* has intent to "acquire his place of rest for Shabbat" on the part of the tree below ten *tefachim*. (See Rashi for a detailed explanation of how this makes the *eruv* valid below ten *tefachim* and invalid above that height.)

If the tree was in the *reshut hayachid*, however, the *gemara* says that both below and above would be valid for the *eruv*. There is a question raised on the use of a tree for an *eruv*. "One may not use a tree on Shabbat" is the objection raised in our *sugya*. The answer given is that since the relevant time period for the *eruv* to take effect is on Friday afternoon between sunset and total nightfall — a time which is not yet clearly Shabbat — our Rabbis did not decree a prohibition against using a tree during that time period.

A point raised by the *Rishonim* is why removing the new *eruv* from the tree is considered "using the tree"? If anything, when the *eruv* is on the tree it is using the tree, and when he removes it from the tree he is no longer using the tree! The main prohibition against using a tree on Shabbat or Yom Tov was enacted for the case of a person who is using the tree by *climbing* it, because of a concern that he might break off a branch of the tree while climbing it. One answer provided to explain the use of the tree in the case of an *eruv* is that if a person would be allowed to remove the *eruv* from the tree on Shabbat, he might also lean on the tree — an act which is a clear forbidden use of the tree. (Ritva, *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 336:1 and *Mishna Berura* s.k. 12)

Invariably, when I see this halacha of not using a tree on Shabbat and not removing anything from it, I am reminded of a story I heard involving one of the *gedolei hador* of the previous generation, Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, *zatzal*, lovingly known as "the Steipler." (1899-1985) What follows is the version of the story that was told to me in 1978 when I went to him for a *beracha* and for a few questions at the same time. When I reached his house, some family members and students warmly greeted me and explained that all communication from me to him needed to be in writing since he was deaf. Besides getting a *beracha* from him, it was an extremely inspiring experience just seeing him and being in his presence. Before I left, I asked one of the people in his house if he was always deaf — I couldn't imagine his being able to become such a great Torah scholar and *tzaddik* without being able to hear any voices or sounds from the outside world.

I was told (to the best of my understanding at the time and the best of my memory now) the following: The Steipler was forced into the Russian army as a soldier in the field. Despite this situation, of course he was

extremely careful to eat only kosher food and observe all mitzvahs, down to the last detail and beyond. On one Shabbat winter day he was on guard duty outside. The day started off warm and he removed his heavy outer coat and extra warming garments for his neck and head. While he was occupied at his post, a Russian soldier came along and hung his articles of winter clothing on the branches of a tree. Then the weather turned extremely cold, and became colder each minute. He had ruled that it was not permitted to remove anything from a tree on Shabbat except in the event of a life-threatening situation. The Steipler was certainly more than willing to suffer the pain of the frost and determined that his life was not in danger. He reassessed this conclusion as time went on, and he did not touch his winter garb until after Shabbat. He survived, but unfortunately the cumulative effect of the cold that day damaged his hearing.

• *Eruvin 32b*

Eliyahu: Both a Prophet and a Torah Scholar

“Seven halachas were taught at the beginning of Shabbat in Sura in front of Rav Chisda. At the end of Shabbat, the same teacher said these same seven halachas in Pumbedita in front of Rabbah.”

Who could this mystery teacher possibly be? Sura and Pumbedita were cities in Bavel that were too far from each other to travel by foot on Shabbat! At first, our *gemara* proposes that the teacher must have been Eliyahu Hanavi – Elijah the Prophet – since no human could cover this distance by foot on Shabbat. And in the context of the *sugya*, this would prove that there is no prohibition of *techumim* above ten *tefachim* on Shabbat. However, another possibility is suggested by the *gemara*, one which would negate proof of the halacha under discussion. “Maybe it was Yosef ‘the demon’.” (From Rashi it seems this was the name of a person who did not observe Shabbat and therefore was able to travel by some means from Sura to Pumbedita on Shabbat.)

The commentaries ask how the *gemara* could have suggested that it was Eliyahu Hanavi. We learn elsewhere in Shas that we cannot rely on the word of a prophet to learn halacha, even to be reminded of a halacha l’Moshe m’Sinai.

To answer this question, we need to distinguish between something said by a prophet as a prophecy that was taught to him by Hashem, as opposed to his own halachic ruling that he arrived at based on Torah sources, wisdom and logic. Something said by a prophet as prophecy cannot be accepted as halacha since “The Torah is not in Heaven.” However, when any Torah scholar, even a prophet, teaches a halacha based on sources and Torah reasoning, it may be accepted. When our *gemara* suggested that the teacher in both cities was Eliyahu Hanavi, it meant that Eliyahu Hanavi was teaching these seven halachic rulings that he arrived at based on his Torah wisdom as a great scholar, and they were not rulings that he was relaying as prophetic teachings. (Maharitz Chiyut, Tosefot Yom Tov and others, one of whom also suggests that our *gemara* may be the source for the custom of singing “Eliyahu Hanavi, Eliyahu Hatishbi...Eliyahu Hagiladi” at the conclusion of Shabbat.)

• *Eruvin 43b*

NITZAVIM

Questions

1. What is the connection between the verse "*atem nitzavim*" and the curses in the previous *parsha*?
2. Who were the wood-choppers and water-carriers?
3. Why can Hashem never "swap" the Jewish People for another nation?
4. One who ignores the Torah's warnings "adds drunkenness to thirst." What does this mean?
5. What two cities were destroyed along with S'dom and Amorah?
6. "The hidden things are for Hashem, our G-d, and the revealed things are for us..." What does this mean?
7. According to Rashi, how will the day of the ingathering of the exiles be "great and difficult"?
8. Where is the Torah not to be found? Where is it to be found?
9. When and where did the Jewish People become culpable for each other's sins?
10. How do the earth and sky remind us to keep the mitzvahs?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 29:12 - The Jewish People asked, "Who can survive such curses?" Moshe responded, "You've done a lot to anger Hashem, and yet '*atem nitzavim*' – you are still standing before Him."
2. 29:10 - Canaanites who joined the Jewish People under false pretenses.
3. 29:12 - Because Hashem swore to their ancestors that He would never do so.
4. 29:18 - He causes Hashem to reckon his unintentional sins alongside his intentional ones, punishing him for all.
5. 29:22 - Admah and Tsevoyim.

6. 29:28 - There is collective culpability only for "open" sins, but not for "hidden" ones.
7. 30: 3 - It will be as if Hashem needs to take each individual by the hand and lead him out of exile.
8. 30:12-15 - The Torah is not found in Heaven, nor is it across the ocean. Rather, it is "very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart."
9. 30:28 - When they crossed the Jordan and accepted the oath on Mount Eval and Mount Grizim.
10. 30:19 - The earth and heavenly bodies, although receiving neither reward nor punishment, always obey Hashem's will. How much more so should we, who stand to receive reward or punishment, obey Hashem.

Q & A

VAYELECH

Questions

1. Moshe said, "I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in..." How do we know this does not refer to physical inability?
2. Which of Moshe's statements to Yehoshua was later contradicted by Hashem's command?
3. Why does the Torah refer to Succot of the eighth year as though it occurred during the *shemita* year?
4. Why does the Torah command that babies be brought to the Torah reading?
5. What does it mean that Hashem "hides His face?"
6. What function does the song *Ha'azinu* serve?
7. Which verse promises that the Torah will never be totally forgotten?
8. What is the difference of opinion regarding the placing of the Torah scroll which Moshe gave the *levi'im*?
9. On the day of Moshe's death, why didn't Moshe gather the people by blowing trumpets as he normally would have?
10. Moshe said, "For I know that after my death you will act corruptly," but, in fact, this didn't occur until after Yehoshua's death. What does this teach us?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 31:2 - Because verse 34:7 says "His (Moshe's) eye never dimmed, and his (youthful) moisture never departed."
2. 31:7 - Moshe told Yehoshua to share his leadership with the Elders. Hashem later commanded Yehoshua to rule alone.
3. 31:10 - Because the laws of the seventh year still apply to the harvest.
4. 31:12 - To give reward to those who bring them.
5. 31:17 - He ignores their distress.
6. 31:21 - It warns what will befall the Jewish People if they abandon Torah.
7. 31:21 - "For (the Torah) will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring."
8. 31:26 - Whether it was placed outside but adjacent to the Ark, or inside next to the Tablets.
9. 31:28 - Blowing the trumpets expressed Moshe's dominion, and "there is no dominion on the day of death." (*Kohelet* 8)
10. 31:29 - That a person's student is as dear to him as himself. As long as Yehoshua was alive it was as though Moshe himself was alive.

WHAT'S IN A WORD

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Nitzavim-Vayelech & Rosh Hashana

The Strong Ones

As Moses passed the torch of leadership to his protégé and successor Joshua, he said to the younger padawan, *Chazak V'Ematz* – “Be strong and be strong” (Deut. 31:7, 31:23). After Moses’ passing, G-d Himself reiterated that messaging, using this expression four more times when speaking to Joshua (Josh. 1:6-18). Generations later, when King David gave a pep talk to his son and future successor Solomon, he too said, *Chazak V'Ematz* (I Chron. 22:13, 28:20). What is the deeper meaning of this seemingly redundant expression that uses two words for “strength” – *chozek* (*chizzuk*) and *ometz* (*imutz*)? What other words in Hebrew mean “strength” or “power,” and how do they differ from the words that opened our discussion?

Rabbi Avraham Bedersi HaPenini (a 13th century Spanish sage) and Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) both explain that *ometz* refers to an above-normal amount of “strength,” while *chozek* remains the standard term for “strength.” For example, if a person grew especially weak, but was then nursed back to health and was now “strengthened” to be as strong as a normal person, the word *chozek* is appropriate. In such a case, the term *ometz* cannot be applied because the “strength” in question is no more than that which a regular person possesses.

The Vilna Gaon (to Josh. 1:7, Prov. 24:5) explains that *chozek* refers to outer “physical strength,” while *ometz* denotes strength “in the heart.” This explanation is echoed by the Malbim in his work *Yair Ohr* on synonyms in the Hebrew language. But, elsewhere, the Malbim (to Isa. 28:2) seems to take a different approach. There he explains that *chozek* refers to a sort of temporary strength. With time, such strength tends to atrophy, slowly, but surely, losing its potency. On the other hand, *ometz* refers to a more resilient form of strength that

constantly recharges itself and never weakens or falters.

In his work *HaRechasim LeVikah* (Gen. 25:23), Rabbi Yehuda Leib Shapira-Frankfurter (1743-1826) departs from this model and speaks about three types of “strength.” In his assessment, *gevurah* refers to “physical strength,” *ometz* refers to the “strength in one’s heart” (i.e. one’s spiritual resolve), and *chozek* refers to the “strength of will” (i.e. courage). To illustrate the difference between the latter two he explains that *chozek* is necessary for entering a battle or any dangerous situation without being scared, while *ometz* is the courage to remain in battle and not run away when things heat up.

The Talmud (*Berachos* 32b) explains that when G-d told Joshua *Chazak V'Ematz* through Moshe He meant to encourage Joshua in two specific areas. With the word *chazak* He intended to motivate Joshua to strengthen himself in Torah study, while with the word *ematz* He meant to encourage Joshua in the performance of good deeds. How does this fit with what we have learned? Rabbi Wertheimer explains that the greater a Torah Scholar one becomes, the more effort he must exert into being able to perform good deeds. Such a person must harness super-human efforts to fortify his will, to make sure he continues performing good deeds and does not simply lose himself in the more theoretical world of study. In light of the above, the strength of will required to do this is most appropriately termed *ometz*.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) traces the word *ometz* to the two-letter root MEM-TZADI, which means “sucking” or “squeezing.” Other derivatives of this root include *mitz* (“juice”) and *metzitzah* (“sucking”). *Ometz* relates back to this root’s core meaning because it refers to a person

mustering all his strength and “squeezing” out every last ounce of energy. Red horses are described as *amutzim* (Zech. 6:3) because they exert so much effort that their blood rises to the surface of their skin as if it was “squeezed out,” and this causes even their hairs to be colored red.

Rabbi Dr. Asher Weiser (editor of the Mossad HaRav Kook edition of Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the Pentateuch) argues that the word *ometz* is related to the similar word *otzem* (“strength”). He establishes this connection by noting that the ALEPH of *ometz* is interchangeable with the AYIN of *otzem*, and the other two consonants switch places by way of metathesis.

How does *otzem* mean “strength”? Rabbi Yehuda Leib Edel (1760-1828) explains that *otzem/etzem* refers to growth in the sense of added quantity (see Ex. 1:8, 1:20, Deut. 7:1, Joel 2:2, Ps. 35:18). In other words, *otzem* refers to “strength through numbers.” From that import, the word expanded to refer also to “inherent strength,” i.e. added *quality*, not just *quantity*. Alternatively, he explains that *otzem* in the sense of “strength” is borrowed from the word *etzem* (“bone”) because the bone is physically the strongest component of one’s anatomy.

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935-2017) notices a common theme among all words that contain the two-letter string AYIN-TZADI. The word *eitz* denotes a “tree,” which contains within itself everything that will be created from it. In fact, this relates to the self-referential word *etzem* (“self”), which contains the sum total of one’s potential. We encounter this idea again in the word *atzuv* (“sad”), which describes a person who retreats into himself and fails to expand outwards; and the same is true of the *atzel/atzlan* (“lazy” or “indolent” person) who keeps all his potential bottled up inside of him and does not bother to act on it. *Otzer* (“stop”) similarly refers to holding something back from further expanding, thus keeping its potential for growth locked up inside. The Hebrew word for “advice” (*eitzah/yoetz*) similarly uses this two-letter combination because an honest advisor can only offer his counsel to the extent that he grasps the entirety of the situation — the *etzem* of what is being considered. In line with this, Rabbi Shapiro explains that *otzem* refers to one’s potential strength that is pent-up within him but has not yet been outwardly expressed. (Rabbi

Pappenheim offers a similar exposition on the biliteral root AYIN-TZADI.)

Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843-1916) writes that a tree is called *eitz* because of its “hard” or “strong” trunk. He further writes that *atzuv* is related to *eitz* in the sense of “wood” because it is a “dry” emotional state in which one is bereft of life and happiness. In a fascinating twist, Rabbi Marcus connects the words *otzem* and *eitz* to *oz* — all of which mean “strong/hard” — by noting the interchangeable nature of TZADI and ZAYIN.

Rabbi Wertheimer compares the word *oz/izuz* in the sense of “strong” to the word *az*, which also means “strong” or “bold.” He explains that the AYIN-ZAYIN combination refers to the strength of one’s spirit/resolve in that he cannot be easily dissuaded or deterred by others. A person’s *oz* is so palpable that it can be physically reflected in his face (see Ecc. 8:1), and it is therefore poetically called a “garment” in which a person dresses (see Prov. 31:24).

When Moses sent spies to scout out the Holy Land before the Jewish People’s attempt at conquest, he asked them to examine whether the Canaanites were “strong (*chazak*) or weak” (Num. 13:18). But, when the spies returned, they said that the Canaanites were “strong” (Num. 13:28) using a different word — *az*. Rabbi Wertheimer accounts for this word switch by explaining that the spies were originally charged with determining whether or not the Canaanites were *physically* strong (*chazak*). Instead of doing this, they decided to examine the Canaanites’ psychological resolve, concluding that they were so strong-willed and motivated to fight that their determination could be seen on their faces (*az/oz*).

Interestingly, Rabbi Naftali Hertz (Wessely) Weisel (1725-1805) writes that the primary meaning of *oz* always refers to Divine supernatural powers/abilities (in contrast to *gevurah*, which can also refer to powers/abilities within the normal course of nature). Rabbi Yehuda Edel cites Rabbi Weisel, and adds that this is what it means when it says, “G-d gives *oz* to His nation” (Ps. 28:11). In other words, He elevates the Jewish People above the rules of nature to the realm of the supernatural. According to this, it is only in a borrowed sense that *oz* can refer to anything that is “strong” or “powerful.”

When the Psalmist exhorts the reader to “Give *oz* to G-d” (Ps. 68:35), this does not literally mean that a mere mortal can actually strengthen G-d. Rather, it means that when the Jewish People follow G-d’s will, then He showers them with more abundance, *as if* they had given Him more energy (see *Eichah Rabbah* 1:33). Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1873-1936) offers a powerful insight related to this idea. Obviously, we cannot *actually* power G-d, and yet He gives us the opportunity to feel like we are doing so in order to teach us a lesson. When you do a favor for somebody, you should allow him to do something else for you in return so that the beneficiary of your favor does not feel forever indebted to you for doing him that favor. In the same way, when G-d does us the ultimate favor of giving life and sustaining us, He also gives us a chance to feel like we can do something for Him in return by following the Torah and giving Him *oz*.

The word *takif* is the standard Aramaic translation for *chozek* and *oz* in the Targumim. It is also a Hebrew word that appears in the Bible (see Est. 9:29, 10:2, Ecc. 4:12, Dan. 4:27). Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *takif* to the two-letter root KUF-PEH, which means “complete circle.” Other words derived from this root include *hakafah/haikef* (“circumference,” “encircle”) and *kafah/kafui* (“frozen,” because first the outer perimeter surrounding the liquid freezes first and only afterwards does the rest of it freeze over). Interestingly, Rabbi Pappenheim relates the word *kof* (“monkey”) to this two-letter root, but

admits that he does not know how to explain the connection.

Rabbi Pappenheim further explains that *chozek* refers to strength in one’s ability to *withstand being overpowered* by another, while *tokef* refers to strength in the sense of one’s ability to *actually overpower* others.

Rabbi Pappenheim’s etymology of the word *takif* is reminiscent of his explanation of the word *chayil* (“strength”), which he similarly traces to the two-letter root CHET-LAMMED (“circular motion”). Accordingly, *tokef/takif* refers to a level of strength/potency whereby one can totally surround and overpower another.

Rabbi Edel explains that when we describe God as *takif*, this invokes His all-encompassing (i.e. all-around) power/sovereignty. The Aramaic expression *matkif* commonly found in the Talmud refers to one sage “attacking” or “overpowering” another sage’s position with a persuasive argument.

Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino (a late 15th century Italian scholar) writes in *Ohel Moed* (his lexicon of synonyms) that there are 36 words in Biblical Hebrew for “strength” or “power”! Although Yonah Wilheimer (1830-1913) – the Viennese publisher of the 1881 edition of *Ohel Moed* – notes that this is somewhat of an exaggeration, it remains true that we have only scratched the surface of this topic...

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rcklein@ohr.edu

We wish all of Ohrnet Magazine’s readers and friends “*Ketiva v’chitima tova*” — May you be written and sealed in the book of life and have a good and sweet new year!

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BLESSING THIRTEEN: “FACING” REALITY

“Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who crowns Israel with splendor.”

Our Sages explains that the “splendor” mentioned in this blessing refers to the *Tefillin Shel Rosh* – Tefillin that are worn on the head. In a certain sense, donning the *Tefillin Shel Rosh* in the morning is the final moment in our preparations for beginning our day. We have clothed ourselves physically and now we “clothe” ourselves spiritually. The Tefillin sit on the “crown” of the head and, as taught by the Rabbis, they open up a conduit between us and Hashem, one that gives us the opportunity to connect to Him in a significantly enhanced manner. Tefillin are a means of connecting our intellectual selves to the spiritual dimensions. Anecdotally, in 2002 an article appeared in the Chinese Journal of Medicine mentioning Tefillin. The writer explained that the spot where the Tefillin sit on the cranium is precisely the same location where acupuncture needles are inserted in order to increase spirituality and to purify thoughts.

The head is the seat of the intellect, and Judaism teaches that it is not by chance that the head is also the highest part of the body. The Maharal of Prague explains that humans, unlike animals, are created to walk in an upright position because it is a reflection of our spiritual potential. We are the only creation that has the ability to be both physical and spiritual. Our feet represent the more physical part of us, firmly placed on the ground. The head represents the spiritual side of us, pointing upwards towards the spiritual realms.

Interestingly enough, it is the face that reflects our emotions. Physiognomy – the means of assessing the character of a person by studying their facial features – has always been around. Since the beginning of time it has been used to judge the emotional state of a person and to make broad judgments about a person’s character. It was extremely popular among the ancient Greeks, and during the Middle Ages, and in the eighteenth century it became the biggest fad of

its era. In fact, it is still studied today. It should come as no surprise that Judaism also teaches that the face is the most expressive part of the body. It reveals our thoughts and feelings – even when, sometimes, we wish that it wouldn’t! In Hebrew the word for face is “*panim*”. The word *panim* comes from the word “*pnim*” – inner. Revealingly, the word “*panim*” is plural, because the face is the meeting point between the two worlds that we inhabit simultaneously: our inner persona and our outer one. Our faces reveal our inner identity to the outside.

The Rabbis teach that the face is the portal to the soul. That is why the face of a truly spiritual person will reflect their innate sense of Divine connection. The saintly Chofetz Chaim used to ask why people polish their gold and silver and jewelry. He pointed out that they were not worth any more afterwards than they were before they were polished. So why bother? And he would answer that the polish reveals the true splendor of the article. Without polishing them it is impossible to appreciate their true beauty.

So, too, a person who spends their entire life “polishing” their soul and perfecting their character will be readily identifiable to the spiritual connoisseurs of this world. This is why truly spiritual people often have an otherworldly glow to their faces. What we are seeing is their *pnimiut* – their inner essence.

Now we have reached the point in our journey through the Morning Blessings that our connection to G-d is so real and palpable that it is inescapable. And at this momentous occurrence we recite the blessing, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who crowns Israel with splendor”. Because there really is nothing more glorious – more *splendorous* – than knowing that our relationship with G-d can both transcend the physical and affect the physical at the same time.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Faith in Fortune

As a prelude to the final song (*Haazinu*), Moshe foretells of the nation's defection from Torah, and its consequences. He explains the effect the song may have on these occurrences. When the nation will "eat, be satisfied and grow fat" and turn to other gods and serve them — then, after the *tzarot* (troubles) will come to pass, the song of *Haazinu* will testify against them as a witness.

Notice the factors that bring about defection — *the nation will eat, be satisfied and grow fat*. The case of defection is the luxury that comes from the abundance of everything good. The spiritual and moral regimen by which the Torah sanctifies physical corporeality is not compatible with lush, self-indulgent sensuality.

This is the rock on which Israel's faithfulness, and hence also its happiness, have been wrecked several times. This is the ultimate task that Israel must fulfill: To be faithful to G-d and to His Torah, *even* in the midst of affluence and good fortune. This is a vision that will be realized only when we are ripe for our final redemption. Then, prosperity will come to us without endangering our spiritual health.

However, until such time, the message of the song of *Haazinu* will play a significant role in maintaining the focus necessary to get our spiritual bearings. As a result of its defection, Israel will be plagued by many sufferings — *tzarot*, literally, that which *confines and constricts*. Their effect will be to constrict insatiable desire and restore a person (or nation) unto himself. The people will then be ripe to hear the message of the *shirah*: Instead of blaming G-d for its fate, the people will understand that its fate is the consequence of its waywardness.

This understanding will penetrate in a process described in the Torah: *You will bring [these thoughts] to your heart* (*Devarim 30:1*). It is not enough to perceive facts and events on the outside. These must be "brought back" to the inner mind to reflect upon them and draw the appropriate conclusions. The blessing and curses that will befall the Jewish People, foretold thousands of years in advance, will be taken to heart — brought back to the inner mind to deliberate and reflect on them, leading to a full return to G-d and His Torah.

- Sources: Commentary, *Devarim 31:21-22, 30:1*

STRATEGIC TESHUVA

Creative Ways to Help Yourself Do the “Right Thing”

by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

We all have some bad *midot* (character traits) and some bad habits. When we consider doing *teshuva* for them, we are apt to think as follows: "I am really out of control. Why do I do those terrible things? I should be stronger! How can I increase my self-control so that I can overcome those strains, temptations, etc.?"

That sort of thinking can be useful. But it is not the only helpful approach. Another technique is this: "When do I fail like this? What is there in the environment? What else has happened that day? Under which *specific circumstances* do I fail? And, what can I do to change those circumstances?" The technique of changing the circumstances in which we generally fail is what I call "Strategic Teshuva."

Midot and habits generally have "triggers." For example, certain people provoke an angry, aggressive response. Other people may not pose a problem. Or the "trigger" might be specific activities, such as driving in heavy traffic ("road rage"), caring for fighting siblings, waiting in line at the bus terminal, filling out government forms, and so on.

The same is true for other temptations. Laziness comes naturally when one is surrounded by computer games, bad literature, inviting beaches and - most important - other lazy people. (A boy from Los Angeles told me it took him six years to get his bachelor's degree because certain courses interfered with his beach schedule!) Illicit pleasures attract most strongly when they are readily available and when others in the neighborhood indulge.

Our first responsibility is for our *actions*. When the "triggers" of the bad habits and *midos* occur, it is extremely difficult to stop the habits and *midot* from acting. One solution is to try to *avoid* the triggers. Change the environment. Move your residence if you can. If you can't, spend as much time

in another environment which will provide respite from the temptation. (The most effective positive environment is doing *mitzvot* with other people: Learn in a *beit midrash*, visit the hospital with others, plan a *chesed* project with others, teach Torah in a school, etc.) Certain activities cause tension which triggers anger. If you cannot avoid those activities, alternate with relaxing activities.

A second solution is to *add* something to the environment which will make it easier to do the right thing. If you have trouble getting up for *davening* in shul, find a study partner for ten minutes before *davening*. Then, when the alarm rings and you reach over to push the snooze button, you will think: "But what if my study partner comes and I'm not there?! How embarrassing!" – and you will get up!

In many cases you can make a contract with yourself: If I succeed in overcoming the temptation (enough times) then I will allow myself something I very much enjoy. This is what psychologists call a "behavior contract." Thus I have a personal incentive to do the right thing. For example: "If I get through the meeting without getting angry, I will allow myself to buy that picture for the wall/go to that restaurant/etc."

The key is to control the environment by avoiding some things and creatively adding others so that it will be easier to do the right thing.

Now, some people think that this cannot be right. This means that we are only running away from our problems, not solving them! The problem is precisely this: I am not able to *overcome* those temptations. How do I solve that problem? By *avoiding* them, or by adding extra incentives?

There are two answers. First, who says that the only problem is to overcome the desire? On the contrary:

Our first responsibility is for our *actions*. Suppose someone cannot control a desire to steal from Macy's. If he shops only in Bloomingdale's, or he rewards himself for not stealing from Macy's, he has not overcome the desire - but at least he is not stealing!

Second, often we can only overcome the desire if we have a respite from the wrong actions. As long as the bad habits and *midot* are active it is very difficult to gain control.

Therefore, avoiding the triggers and adding payoffs may be the only way to gain control. Yes, the *ultimate* goal is to become immune to the temptations. But this may require two stages: First avoiding the triggers and adding payoffs; and then developing the psychological strength to resist. Trying to do without the first stage may make the second stage impossible.

Think of addictions. You cannot simply tell the addict: "Stop using that stuff!" He can't stop, and all the therapy in the world will not help *while he is still on the drug*. But if he enters a sanitarium where the drug is unavailable, then the therapy can help him become immune to the temptation to use drugs.

Strategic *teshuva* may thus be the necessary first step to complete *teshuva*. But it is more than that. If that is all that you can manage at the moment, then strategic *teshuva* is enough to gain *kappara* (atonement). Hashem does not ask more of us than we can do. If you avoid the triggers, add incentives and start to work on immunity, then in the meantime you have *kappara* for all the past mistakes even before you achieve immunity. Isn't that worth it?

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Nitzavim

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers together all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations not yet born. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality.

Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will be a result of the failure to heed Hashem's mitzvahs. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all – the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them, in favor of idols which can do nothing. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually G-d will bring them back to Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility. Rather, its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. The Torah portion dramatically concludes with Moshe's comparing the Jewish People's choice to follow the Torah to a choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

On this, the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent throughout the camp, bidding farewell to his beloved people, encouraging them to keep the faith. Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, Hashem is with them, and will vanquish their enemies. Then he summons Yehoshua, and in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as the leader of the Jewish People. In this manner, he strengthens Yehoshua's status as the new leader.

Moshe teaches them the mitzvah of *Hakhol*. Every seven years, on the first day of the intermediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather together at the Temple to hear the King read from the Book of Devarim. The sections that he reads deal with faithfulness to G-d, the Covenant, and reward and punishment. G-d tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should therefore summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where G-d will teach Yehoshua. G-d then tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land, the people will be unfaithful to Him, and begin to worship other gods. G-d will then completely hide his face, so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, and that they will be hunted by all. G-d instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song – *Ha'azinu* – which will serve as a witness against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to Bnei Yisrael. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah, and instructs the *Levi'im* to place it to the side of the *Aron* (Holy Ark), so that no one will ever write a new Torah scroll that is different from the original – for there will always be a reference copy.

*Ohr Somayach announces a new
booklet Harmony of a Nation –
Overcoming Baseless Hatred by
Rabbi Chaviv Danesh*

https://ohr.edu/Sinat_Chinam.pdf

The students, alumni, staff and events of Ohr Somayach

by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

Rabbi Michael Rovinsky

Born: Dallas, Texas

St. Louis, Missouri

Smicha: Kol Yaakov Yeshiva and Ner Yisroel Yeshiva

Johns Hopkins University, MBA

Licensed Clinical Therapist

Masters Degree in Education

NCSY (National Council of Synagogue Youth), a *kiruv* project of the OU, has touched the lives of more than a quarter of a million Jewish high school youth over the last sixty years. It has sent many of its participants to *yeshivot* and seminaries in Israel. Over 20 years ago, encouraged by NCSY, Rabbi Nachy Brickman, a former NCSY Regional Director, established the Derech Program at Ohr Somayach. It still attracts many NCSY graduates.

In 1980, a young NCSYer from Dallas, Texas came to Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem. His name is Michael Rovinsky.

Michael's parents were and still are among the pillars of the Dallas Jewish Community. The family belonged to a Conservative synagogue. At the suggestion of a friend, they sent Michael to the local Orthodox Day School for elementary and junior high school. Because of Michael's positive experience there, he maintained a connection to some of his *rabbeim* and got involved in NCSY while in public high school.

Michael's father is a successful mechanical engineer with his own consulting company. The plan was that Michael would become an engineer and eventually take over the business. Hashem had other plans.



While his parents approved of Michael's choice of Ohr Somayach as a place to spend the gap year after high school, they thought it would be just that — one year. But after exposure to Rabbis Yaakov Bradpiece, Eli Merl, Moshe Pindrus and others, Michael decided that one year was not enough. While tutoring weaker students, he also discovered that he had a love of teaching, a love that continues until today. He prevailed on his parents to let him stay for another year. You can probably guess what happened after that second year.

Michael returned to the States and went to Yeshivat Kol Yaakov in Monsey, NY for the next two years and then to Ner Yisroel Yeshiva in Baltimore. He got married and stayed for another six years in their Kollel.

During his second or third year in Kollel, he got a call from a local modern Jewish high school. There was a class of the weakest, least interested, and almost uneducable kids, whose *rebbe* had quit in the middle of the term. They asked if he was interested in taking it over. He was. During his *bein hasedarim* at the Kollel, he taught the toughest youth in the school. He was good at it. And it reawakened his love of teaching. Instead of manipulating and restructuring

the physical world as an engineer, he wanted to dedicate his life to helping other Jews discover their inner spirit and to channel it towards the true purpose of their creation.

In 1990, his seventh grade *rebbe* from day school in Dallas. Rabbi David Leibtag, called him and asked if he would be interested in moving back to his hometown to become the *limudei kodesh menahel* and a *rebbe* in the day school there. He was. By this time Michael had acquired some secular degrees, including an MBA from Johns Hopkins University, and he had become a *mohel* after training with Rabbi Moshe Rappaport of Baltimore. His training also included a stint in Jerusalem with the famous *mohel*, Rabbi Yosselle Weisberg, *zatzal*.

His parents were very happy that he was coming home with their grandchildren, and were very proud of his accomplishments.

Michael, who is quite outgoing, articulate and a very professional *mohel*, quickly developed a huge following in Dallas and his services as a *mohel* were in great demand. Surprisingly, his clientele included not only the wider Jewish community, but also many non-Jews, including medical professionals, who preferred him to less experienced urologists.

Before long he had become probably the busiest *mohel* in the United States. He has been invited all over the world to perform *milah*. He recently did one in Rome for a non-Jewish family and was also invited to travel to Ecuador and the United Arab Emirates. Hundreds of professional midwives and OBGYNs around the country recommend his services to their patients.

In 1993, Michael was offered the position of Executive Director of the Epstein Hebrew Academy in St. Louis and to be a fifth grade *rebbe*. Before he left; the Dallas Jewish Community extracted a promise from him to come back regularly to do *milah*. Today, Michael averages at least one day per week in Texas doing *brisim*, as well as going to other cities around the US for circumcisions and *brisim*. In fact, when I spoke to him recently, he was on the road where he was scheduled to be doing over 60 *brisim* and circumcisions over the next three days.

In addition to his incredibly busy schedule, he has become the “go to” person for those wishing to train as a *mohel*, due to the volume of babies his *talmidim* can be exposed to. He is also the Director of the Association for the Advancement of *Bris Milah*, an organization which strives to provide every Jewish child an opportunity for a *Bris Milah*.

His connection to NCSY is still strong. He has been the St. Louis City Director of NCSY for the last 20 years. He also runs the Jewish Student Union, the OU’s Jewish outreach programs in secular high schools in St. Louis, and sends many graduates to summer programs and *yeshivot* and seminaries in Israel.

How can one man juggle so many responsibilities without dropping any? As many of his admirers say, “He’s a cut above the rest.”

SPECIAL ROSH HASHANA Q & A

Question

1. Why do we blow the shofar during the month of Elul?
2. Where in the written Torah text does it tell us explicitly that the first day of Tisrei is Rosh Hashana?
3. We eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet year. Why do we choose apples above other sweet fruits?
4. What two blessings do we say before sounding the shofar?
5. Which Book of Tanach does the beginning of the Tashlich prayer come from?
6. What three barren women were "remembered" by Hashem on Rosh Hashana?
7. A person's yearly allowance is fixed on Rosh Hashana, except for three types of expenses. What are they?
8. We refer to the binding of Isaac in our prayers when we say: "Answer us as You answered Abraham our father on Mount Moriah..." What was Abraham's prayer on Mount Moriah?
9. Why, even in Israel, are there two days of Rosh Hashana, whereas other festivals in Israel are celebrated for only one day?
10. What halacha applies to the shehechiyanu blessing on the second night of Rosh Hashana which does not apply on the second night of any other holiday?

Answers

1. After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe went up to Mount Sinai to receive the second set of Tablets on Rosh Chodesh Elul. On that day, the Jewish People sounded the shofar to remind themselves to stray no more after idol worship. Also, the sound of the shofar strikes awe into our hearts and inspires us to return to the ways of Torah. (*Mishna Berura and Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim* 581)
2. Nowhere. The Torah calls it "a day of shofar blowing." (This is one of many examples showing how our observance depends on the continuous oral tradition dating back to Mount Sinai.) (*Bamidbar* 29:1)
3. Isaac blessed Jacob with the words: "The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed..." (*Bereishis* 27:27). The Talmud identifies this "field" as an apple orchard. (*Ta'anis* 29b, *Biyur Hagra*)
4. "Blessed are You... who has commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar," and the shehechiyanu blessing. (*Orach Chaim* 581:2)
5. The Book of Micha (7:18-20).
6. Sara, Rachel and Chana. On Rosh Hashana it was decreed that these barren women would bear children. (*Tractate Rosh Hashana* 10b)
7. Expenses for Shabbos, Yom Tov, and the cost of one's children's Torah education. (*Ba'er Hetaiv Orach Chaim* 242:1)
8. He prayed that Mount Moriah should remain a place of prayer for all future generations (*Onkelos* 22:14). Also, he prayed that his sacrifice of the ram should be considered as though he had actually sacrificed Isaac. (*Rashi* 22:13)
9. Before our current exile, we did not have a fixed calendar as we do today. Rather, the Supreme Torah Court in Jerusalem determined our calendar on a month to month basis. They did this on the first day of every month, based on witnesses testifying that they had seen the new moon. Therefore, the people outside Israel had insufficient time to find out the exact date in time for the festivals. The "two-day festival" arose to correct this situation. In Israel, however, the people lived close enough to Jerusalem to find out the exact date of all the festivals except Rosh Hashana. Since Rosh Hashana occurs on the first day of the month, even those living in Jerusalem sometimes needed to observe it for two days, if the witnesses failed to arrive.
10. On the second night of Rosh Hashana it is customary to wear a new garment or to have a new fruit on the table when saying the shehechiyanu blessing. Thus, the shehechiyanu blessing applies not only to the holiday, but to the new garment or new fruit as well. (This is done in order to accommodate the minority of halachic authorities who rule that no shehechiyanu blessing be said on the second night of Rosh Hashana.) (*Taz* 600:2)