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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 more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

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

As Israel's primary focus turns from Hamas to the evils of Iran, Gaza, Hezbollah, and their allies, we pray that Hashem will protect us during the coming year of 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world.

As I write, Rosh Hashanah is less than a week away.* How has the year gone by so quickly? Rabbi David Fohrman, as usual, provides a key insight to Moshe's message to B'Nai Yisrael on the final day of his life. Moshe has just concluded his long description of the blessings of following the mitzvot and the horrifying curses that will chase us if we ignore the mitzvot (Ki Tavo). As part of the ceremony of bikkurim (bringing some of the first fruits to the Kohenim), B'Nai Yisrael are to be glad before Hashem (26:11; 27: 7). Moshe adds that part of the joy of having plenty and being able to share that joy with Hashem includes sharing with others. We are to share this joy and plenty with the Levite and the proselyte in our midst (26:11). We are also to share with the orphan and widow (26:12). We are to testify to Hashem that we have met these obligations.

Nitzavim and Vayeilech continue with this message from Moshe, as he reminds B'Nai Yisrael that this covenant is binding on all generations of Jews. The message of our obligation to share with the priests, widows, orphans, immigrants, and other needy members of our community comes through in numerous parts of the Torah. To select only one example, Mishpatim, which provides 51 concrete examples of mitzvot from the Aseret Dibrot (Rambam's count), focuses primarily on laws that protect the weak and needy in society. The messages of the prophets also focus heavily on chiding the people for not assisting the needy enough.

In our community, **Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington,** which devotes itself to chesed every day, has had an explosion of requests for assistance in recent years. This outstanding organization and its many volunteers assist the needy in our community, those whom the Torah and our prophets have been asking B'Nai Yisrael to remember for more than three thousand years. Our tradition of chesed goes back to Avraham Avinu. Many Jewish communities throughout the world follow the examples of Avraham, Moshe, and Jewish tradition in helping the needy. As we prepare for the High Holy Days, hopefully many of us will increase our levels of support for Bikur Cholim – both in terms of financial donations and volunteer work. You can join Bikur Cholim by donating now and signing up for the Hope and Healing Gala. This is our Annual Campaign, during which we aim to raise the funds necessary to sustain all of our free services and programs.

A part of every Jew was present at Har Sinai for the Revelation. Our people have always had a tradition of chesed – kindness – toward the needy. As we approach the judgment of the balance between our mitzvot and our sins, chesed is an important part of earning another year of life. Our beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, reminded our congregation frequently of our obligation to support the needy in our community (locally and elsewhere). Hannah and I have always tried to teach this lesson to our children and now to our grandchildren.

In his Rosh Hashanah message, Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander asks:

> *[H]ow ever can we approach these Days of Awe, when every day of this year has felt so awful? Why must the King return to the palace when we so desperately need his presence in the fields with our soldiers, our hostages, our displaced families and our broken people?* [He recommends that] *we pray that God will see the extraordinary efforts we've made in our fields this year. Perhaps He will then agree, just this year, not to retreat to the King's palace, but continue to plant His divine throne in these new fields and stay with us here. Or perhaps God will return to the heavenly abode, but will transform it, from what is perceived by so many of us this year, to be an impenetrable palace to an inviting homestead where the God of mercy welcomes us all.*

With Hashem's help, may 5785 be a year of teshuvah, tikva (hope), and renewed blessings for Israel and for our people throughout the world.

Shabbat Shalom. Kativah v'chatima tovah.

Hannah and Alan

* Because of a lack of time, I am using my message from last year as a starting point rather than writing an entirely new Dvar Torah. I am likely not to be able to post again until after Yom Kippur.

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah, Raizel bat Rut; Chai Frumel bat Leah, Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech: "Not in the Heavens"

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

From ancient times to today, Jewish tradition has emphasized the importance of human engagement with the divine words of Torah and its continuity. This concept is rooted in this week's parsha, which reminds us that Torah is not *"up in*

the heavens" or *"across the ocean,"* but is in fact, *"very close to us, wherever we may find ourselves"* (Devarim 30:11-14).

This approach is demonstrated exceptionally well in the teachings and life of the Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of all time. His student, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, recounts how the Vilna Gaon would refuse divine assistance from maggidim (celestial beings) in his own Torah studies, stating:

> *I do not want that my knowledge of God's Torah be communicated by any type of medium. Only what my eyes should be able to perceive [the wisdom of Torah] according to what God wishes to reveal to me [through my studies]. God should give me a portion in His Torah through my toils, struggles which I pursue with all my strength.* (Introduction to *Sifra di-Ẓeni'uta* from Rav Chaim of Volozhin)

For the Vilna Gaon, the essence of Torah is now in the hands of mankind, with God's wisdom and words sanctified through our own discovery.

The Talmud further reinforces this notion of human authority, albeit within established protocols of our tradition. In the famed story of *'the oven of Achnai,'* (*Bava Metzia* 59b) the sages push the bounds of these verses even further, insisting that these verses are not merely about accessibility to Torah, but about who has authority over Torah. When R' Eliezer enlists the help not only of miracles and wonders, but even of a Bat Kol, a heavenly voice, to demonstrate that his interpretation of the Halakha is correct, his interlocutor R' Yehoshua declares *"it is not in the heavens!"* This bold statement asserts that the authority to interpret and apply Torah has been entrusted to humans.

This trust and authority to interpret and reapply Torah goes beyond just studying and observing Jewish laws. When we have knowledge of the halakhic theorems which Jewish ideals and law are predicated upon, God entrusts us to take part in crafting the Torah to engage in every generation, demonstrating God's desire for partnership with us in building up new levels of Torah, guaranteeing the immortality of our covenantal relationship. Particularly in the face of new and emerging challenges that arise over the course of human and Jewish history, God seeks out our active participation in the development of the Torah.

In fact it is in the face of new challenges that this responsibility becomes especially crucial. This past year, we have witnessed and experienced unprecedented circumstances that have required innovative halakhic thinking as poskim and as a people. How should Shabbat observance be managed, with soldiers, doctors, social workers, and so many others required to move from one place to another, in what is now the second longest war in the country's history? Am I allowed to travel back home from telling a family that their soldier son was killed in battle, if Shabbat has already begun? Can I eat kosher food that was brought to the base by a family that traveled on Shabbat? How do I search for chametz before Pesach if there are soldiers who keep such foods with them in our barracks? What are our obligations and prioritizations towards charitable giving, with thousands of Israelis still wounded, displaced, emotionally scarred, laid off, and grieving?

These and so many more questions I have heard over the last year aren't directly addressed in the canon we've inherited, leaving it to us, with God's permission and help found in the rabbinic literature, to forge new pathways in Torah as we face realities that are directly related to the messianic age. We continue this work daily. While this opportunity arises from tragedy, it simultaneously demonstrates the beauty of the enduring relevance and eternality of our Torah traditions, and how they hold a message for every generation.

The final words in Talmud regarding the oven of Achnai incident are as follows:

Years after, Rabbi Natan encountered Elijah the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time, when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration [that we don't follow the word of God in heaven]? Elijah said to him: *"The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: Nitzchuni banai Nitzchuni banai."*

These final words can be translated in one of two ways. The first is that *"My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me." Indeed* our parsha reminds us that the axiom of rabbinic protocols takes precedence over

divine pronouncements. Or that final comment can be *translated "My children have immortalized Me; My children have immortalized Me."* Reading it this way, we see how by taking responsibility for the development of the Torah we help guarantee its immortality and the future of our covenant with the Divine.

As we approach a new cycle of Torah reading after the holidays this year, we hope for resolution to the many halakhic dilemmas, the return of our hostages, calming of tensions, and healing for our people. Through our continued engagement with Torah, may we fulfill our role as partners with God in bringing more light into our world.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Rosh Hashana: Still in the Field

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

In a typical year, as Rosh Hashana approaches, we would be concluding the month of Elul, a time characterized by the concept of *"Hamelech Basadeh"* or *"The King is in the Field."*

But this year has been far from typical.

The metaphor of the "King in the Field" was introduced by the Alter Rebbe - Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Hasidism, in his work *"Likkutei Torah."* The Alter Rebbe suggests that during Elul, God's presence is more accessible, like a king who leaves his palace to meet his subjects in their everyday environments or "fields." *)Likkutei Torah,* Parshat Re'eh 32:1(

There he poses a question: if Elul is a sacred month of preparation for the Days of Awe, dedicated to divine closeness, why isn't the whole month observed as a Yom Tov? Why do we continue our daily routines instead of ceasing all creative and professional activity, as we do on Shabbat and the festivals, in order to focus our minds and our souls on the sanctity that permeates the month? If Elul is a time for spiritual refocusing, why not observe a month-long Holiday or Shabbat experience?

The Alter Rebbe's answer illuminates the unique nature of Elul. Elul offers us an opportunity to encounter God in the midst of our everyday lives, he explains. God meets us in "the field" - our workplaces, our homes, our daily tasks, witnessing our efforts at self-improvement within the context of our real lives, inviting us to take steps toward holiness while still engaged in the mundane.

This Elul, the metaphorical "field" in which God usually would find us has been dramatically altered, as it has been one of the most challenging years that many of us have ever faced. This year, instead of our usual routines, we found ourselves in literal fields, the groves and orchards of our land, picking and pruning where farmers were not available.

We've been in the "field" of military bases and the frontlines of war, whether in uniform ourselves or in support of those who are. We've been in hotels and schools and community centers, helping and holding displaced families as they face uncertainty and instability. And too many times, we've been in the worst of fields, returning to the cemeteries for one funeral after another.

This year has been busier, more taxing, more overwhelming than any we can remember. Our familiar responsibilities have been set aside; God has found us laboring in these new "fields," doing all that we can to support one another through crisis and uncertainty.

As Rosh Hashana approaches, we might ask: How ever can we approach these Days of Awe, when every day of this year has felt so awful? Why must the King return to the palace when we so desperately need his presence in the fields with our soldiers, our hostages, our displaced families and our broken people?

This Elul, let's pray that God sees the extraordinary efforts we've made in our fields this year. Perhaps He will then agree, just this year, not to retreat to the King's palace, but continue to plant His divine throne in these new fields and stay with us here. Or perhaps God will return to the heavenly abode, but will transform it, from what is perceived by so many of us this year, to be an impenetrable palace to an inviting homestead where the God of mercy welcomes us all.

May our efforts and sacrifices in the various fields this year merit us a softer loving day of judgment. And may we all find our way home with God - to a place of safety, calm, comfort and divine closeness -- in the New Year to come.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

A special thank you to Rabbi Brander for accommodating my printing schedule and permitting us to post his Rosh Hashanah message before its official release date.

Netzavim: A Higher Holiday

By Rabbi Label Lam * (2007)

> *Remember us for life, O King Who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life – for Your sake O Living G-d.* (Inserted into Prayers during the Ten Days of Repentance)

A young lady asked me a question after a class the other night, "Rabbi, what do I ask for on Rosh HaShana?" It was a very sincere and honest question that deserved a direct answer, so I told her, "Nothing!" She was a little stunned, and that gave me an opportunity to explain. On Rosh HaShana many critical things are scripted that affect all aspects of and life itself. The livelihood of a person is determined on Rosh HaShana. Who will live and who will die? That too is reckoned on the awesome day of Rosh HaShana. How do ready ourselves? It could well be that Rosh HaShana is more like a job interview than anything else. We want desperately to gain an active role in G-d's universe and accordingly our appeal is to be organized. There is a secret to the art of prayer that advises us how to maximize our bargaining position when so much lies in the balance.

If one wants to succeed in any field they would be well advised to seek out someone who has already achieved in that endeavor. If you want to know how to golf better stalk the Tiger)Woods(, and if you want to know about investing, chart the moves of Mr. Buffet. If you want to know how to pray, then study the words uttered from the holy lips of Chana. From the excellence of a single prayer, she was granted a child, Shmuel, who altered landscape of Jewish History for all time. The Talmud therefore analyzed carefully the many details and factors surrounding that episode we read about on Rosh HaShana. It's no surprise then that many of those features are fixtures in our daily prayers. The verse testifies, *"She was feeling bitter and she prayed to HASHEM, weeping continuously. She made a vow and said, "HASHEM, Master of Legions, if You take note of the suffering of Your maidservant, and give Your maidservant a male offspring, then I shall give him to HASHEM all the days of his life, and a razor shall not come upon his head."*)Shmuel 1:10-11(Chana made what may amount to an irresistible prayer. What did she say that was so magical? She dedicated her son before he was ever to be born. Chana requested a child not for herself but for HASHEM's sake.

When my son Shmuel was born 19 years ago on the eve of Rosh HaShana, I was reminded of Chana's words when speaking at his Bris. When the Talmud Chulin wants to rank the greatness of Avraham and Dovid and Moshe, they order them according to their words. King David said, "I am a worm and not a man." Still a worm is a living thing. Avraham said, "I am dust and ashes." He considered himself something much less. Moshe said about himself and his brother Aharon, "We are what." "What" is substance-less, and therefore they are considered greater in selflessness. The Talmud tells us, though, that Shmuel was equal in stature to both Moshe and Aharon, because the verse states, "Moshe and Aharon with His service and Shmuel with the calling of his name." Shmuel means two things. "I requested him)Shoel M(– from HASHEM." His name, his sake is for HASHEM (SHMO-E-L) Moshe and Aharon shrunk through service but Shmuel was dedicated and nullified prior to conception and with the calling of his name.

When Chana's child was yet a child, she delivered on her promise. She brought her son Shmuel to Eli the Kohen, showing that she meant business. Anyone's prayer for a child, a spouse, a house, or whatever is certainly amplified by a sincere desire to serve HASHEM – This life, these resources are pre-dedicated. This may be the secret of the irresistible prayer and the key to **a Higher Holiday.**

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-netzavim/

Nitzavim-Vayelech – The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – Where Can an Aron Kodesh Be Put?**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah *

> *Take this book of the Torah, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you* (Devarim 31:26).

QUESTION – Chicago, IL

Does an aron kodesh need to have legs that connect it to the ground? Or can it be mounted onto a wall?

ANSWER

I don't see how that should be different from an aron built into the wall which is common. The more ancient arons were not freestanding [citation links in original].

The Rema on OH 154:3 does note certain requirements for what can constitute an aron [Hebrew in original].

In this passage, notice that the issue here for what can count as an aron is about if it is a storage room / vault, and not a place of honor. There is no fundamental concern with being freestanding or built into the wall. See *Mishnah Berurah* OH:154:3:16, where it says that just a niche in a wall is considered to be only for שמירה (storage), but if a wood box is built into it, it is considered a place of kavod and therefore can be an aron kodesh — [quotes source in Hebrew].

* Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY.

** This question is taken from a WhatsApp group in which Rabbi Linzer responds to halakhic questions from rabbis and community members.

https://library.yctorah.org/2024/09/ryrnitzavimvayelech/

Intention in Tension

By Rabbi Haggai Resnikoff *

Years ago I gave an Elul class at YCT, applying behavioral principles to teshuva. Ironically, I never actually adopted any of the behavioral measures I suggested. I don't snap a rubber band when I say lashon hara, or reward myself with a chocolate kiss when I refrain. Knowing how to change doesn't mean that I'm willing to do what it takes. I intend to change, I promise myself and God that I will change, but I rarely take steps to see it through.

Amazingly, intention to change seems all that is demanded of us by Parashat Teshuva, the passage in Parashat Nitzavim that the Sages associate with the mitzvah of Teshuva (Dev. 30:2-3):

> *You will return to God, and you and your children will hear God's voice with all your hearts and souls, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. God will bring you together again from all the peoples where your God has scattered you.*

After thorough punishment (Devarim 28:15-48), Jews must return to God. How? By hearing God's voice. Usually this phrase refers to obedience, so perhaps behavioral change is necessary after all. However, after the Torah describes the redemption, it says (30: 6-8),

> *Then God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring — to love God with all your heart and soul…Then you will again heed God and obey all the divine commandments…*

As part of the teshuva transformation, God will circumcise our hearts and we will finally do Mitzvot. There is, at least the suggestion, that doing Mitzvot is not a condition of teshuva, just hearing God's voice.

The Rabbis confirm this in a midrash about Cain and Adam. They say (Vay. R. 10:5):

> *When [Cain] left [God], he met Adam [his father]. He asked, 'What was decided?' He said to him, 'I did teshuva and was reprieved.' When Adam heard this, he began striking his face. He said, 'Such is the power of teshuva, and I didn't know!'*

It is still too soon for Cain to have taken any action or changed behavior. His verbal conciliation was, apparently, sufficient. How can it be that easy?

In my experience, real intention can lead to change. But I am referring to constant, habitual intention: *tefillah be-kavana* (intention in prayer).

One example: *Chonen HaDa'at* ("Give Knowledge"), the fourth blessing of the Shemonah Esreh, sometimes troubles me. The Talmud (Ber. 29a, Meg. 17b) says that we request aid distinguishing right from wrong. But I've got a dirty secret. I actually know right from wrong. The *kol demama daka* (small, quiet voice) inside my head, regularly tells me what's right. I just frequently rationalize it away. So…What am I praying for? What's the point of knowing right from wrong if I so often choose to do wrong?

King Solomon set the standard for requesting wisdom of God (1K 3:9). He asks a heart that listens and understands others. When I get to *Chonen HaDa'at* now, I think about the person who has driven me craziest lately. I try to understand them, and I ask for help. This is where teshuva comes in! The more I focus on this, the kinder my temper becomes. It's also easier for me to apologize to those who need it. Taking time daily to understand others actually makes me easier going in practice. The regular repetition of my intention keeps it clear and present in my mind.

Teshuva is not one moment. It's an intention fueled by multiple daily reminders in Tefillah. I may not be ready to embrace proactive teshuva. But I use my habits, especially tefillah, to reinforce my intention to change and let that consciousness bring teshuva to me.

* Dean and Rebbe at YCT.

https://library.yctorah.org/2024/09/nitzavimvayelech5784/

Standing before the Almighty: Thoughts for Nitsavim/Vayelekh

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.

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 during its current fund raising period. Thank you.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3279

The Truth and Nothing but the Truth:
Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim, September 12, 2009

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The first section of this Shabbat's Torah reading expresses God's concern lest the Israelites revert to idolatry. As in so many other sections of the Torah, we are warned not to worship false gods. This is a grievous sin with terrible consequences.

But why would the Israelites – or anyone else – worship idols of wood or stone, silver or gold? What could be more foolish? Why was it necessary for the Torah to make so many strong statements against idolatry and its evils? Shouldn't we be intelligent enough to see the nonsense of idolatry on our own? What exactly is the temptation that would draw us in this wrong direction?

The Torah understands that people are gullible. When they are fearful or confused, they will believe almost anything. In desperation, people may turn to a physical entity that they think is "good luck" or to which they attribute magical powers – even divinity. They worship objects of wood and stones, silver and gold. The line between true faith and idolatry isn't always easy to distinguish.

What is the essence of idolatry? It is the attribution of false value to an object. Idolaters think that if they worship an idol, bow to it, bring it offerings – then it must be god! They convince themselves that a falsehood is actually true. Since others also foster the falsehood, this gives it the appearance of being true. The evil of idolatry is: believing in falsehood, abandoning truth. The Torah warns us not to fall into this trap. This applies not only to idols, but to everything and everyone. Demagogues and p.r. experts try to make us believe things we know to be wrong or unnecessary; a great many people succumb to these falsehoods. The Torah commands us to cling to truth, to reject lies.

In our society, there are many pressures on us to believe we simply must have this or that material thing in order to be successful and happy. There are many pressures on us to believe that this person or that person is wise or great, because of titles and honors that are bestowed on him/her. It is easy to fall into line with the crowd, and suspend our own clear judgment. The Torah warns us: do not be an idolater, do not veer from truth, do not falsely evaluate things or people.

The Talmud (Hagigah 14b) tells of four great sages who entered the "pardes," i.e., the world of profound speculation. Rabbi Akiva, one of the four, warned the others: "when you reach the domain of pure marble, don't call out 'water, water'; as it is written (Psalms 101:7), one who speaks falsehoods will not be established before My eyes." Rabbi Akiva knew how easy it is to mistake clear marble for water, a metaphor for how easy it is to succumb to falsehood instead of clinging to truth. The marble looks so much like water: but it is not water, it is cold stone. If you wish to pursue truth, you need to evaluate people and things as they really are – not as they appear to be.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

https://www.jewishideas.org/truth-and-nothing-truth-thoughts-parashat-nitzavim-september-12-2009

Parshas Ki Savo – Know Yourself

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The farmer of the Torah is a truly blessed man. In addition to the crops that he is most grateful for, he is a person of clarity. When he comes to the Beis HaMikdash with his Bikurim (first fruits) each year, he declares his thanks by expressing his narrative of history. He recalls those who tried to destroy us, and he recalls our humble origins as slaves in Mitzrayim. By recalling those who tried to destroy us he has the clarity to know that there is evil in the world. By recalling our humble origins, he has a better chance of avoiding haughtiness; there is a greater likelihood that when he encounters those who are in need, he will be sensitive to their plight and use his wealth to help them.

One of the areas that the farmer of the Torah has clarity in is regarding what other people say. As part of his statement of thanksgiving, he declares, *"The Mitzriyim made us bad."* The Oznayim LaTorah wonders*, "Wouldn't it be more appropriate to say that the Mitzrim did bad to us?"* He explains that what the farmer was saying is that in order to do bad to us, the Mitzriyim first had a great propaganda campaign to make us bad. Otherwise, they could never have done this strange thing of enslaving us. *"The Mitzriyim made us bad,"* is an expression of the farmer's clarity that whatever propaganda the Mitzriyim said about us in order to justify their evil, is just propaganda and has no relevance to reality and our worthiness.

This style of *"They made us bad,"* was used most noticeably by the Nazis. They scapegoated all the problems on the Jews, blaming them for both capitalism and communism, as well as all the other ills that Germany was suffering from at the time. Then they degenerated to use of derogatory pictures and terms like *"vermin."* Once all that was in place and they had made the Jews *"bad,"* they were able to proceed with their evil.

There is a story of a nine-year-old boy who was with his grandfather in a ghetto during a Nazi roundup. He and his grandfather watched the atrocities of the Nazis as they shot and beat people as they rounded them up onto the trains. With youthful clarity the boy said to his grandfather*, "They are Esav (evil) and we are Yakov (good). I am glad that we are Yakov."*

In our time we once again witness this style of evil people first using propaganda to justify their actions. They hold court cases and violent rallies, which play on the niceness of western man who begins to think, *"If they are so vocal there must be something to their complaints."* Even the most noble of our friends falls into the propaganda trap by saying*, "Oh, yes, Israel has a right to defend itself,"* as if self defense is a novel concept which needs to be explained. The enemy killed and has declared its intense intent to kill more. The clarity of the farmer is refreshing. *"They made us bad."* It is a war between good and evil which has morphed into a propaganda war.

One of our greatest tasks in life is to have personal clarity. That means that regardless of what other people say, and however the winds, moods, values, and hormones of today blow, we can have personal clarity. This applies even in our personal lives, even when we work with people who are kind, and have no personal agenda.

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin recounts in *Gateway to Happiness* a story of a wonderful person who was praised publicly and blushed. His Rebbe noticed that he blushed and said, *"You have not reached your potential of personal awareness. When you do, it will not matter personally what they say about you, good or bad. Either you have the qualities, or you don't. It makes no difference what they say."*

To reach that place of personal clarity we do need to have mentors and trusted friends. When they assess and advise us, we take good heed. But the statements of those who are not qualified to pass judgment will not steer us off course with their foolishness. We know our worthiness; we strive for kindliness, righteousness, and internal greatness.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Netzavim - Choose Carefully

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

As we approach the High Holidays, we have a heightened focus on personal growth and self development. We begin to review the past year, even our entire lives, and to consider our actions and our path in life. It is a time for introspection, a time for repentance, and a time for growth.

As we find areas where we wish to improve, we can also be easily overwhelmed by the ongoing challenges we each face in life. We all have areas where we simply find ourselves deficient in our level of observance or our interactions with other people. Whether it is a lack of appreciation for prayer, blessings, or certain mitzvos, or if it is a tendency to be short tempered, to sometimes bend the truth, or any other shortcoming, we all have areas where we wish we could be better people.

Perhaps, there are even areas where we have become complacent with our deficiencies. We look at others who excel in those areas and are amazed by them. Yet, as the same time say, “That will never be me.”

However, if we consider the fact that G-d has challenged us to introspect, grow and change every single year, it would seem that becoming someone different should be within our reach. In fact, the Sforno finds this message in this week’s parsha. G-d promises us that a day will come when there will be a future redemption, accompanied with a mass repentance throughout our nation. G-d then tells us, *“this mitzvah that I am commanding you”* is always within our reach and *“in your heart and mouth”* to achieve. The Sforno explains the mitzvah being discussed here is the mitzvah of repentance. We have the ability to change. (Devarim 30:1-14)

How, then, are we to approach these areas that seem beyond our reach? We have tried to conquer these areas previously, but to no avail. It just simply is not who we are.

Rav Yitzchok Blazer, one of the prime students of Rav Yisroel Salanter, addresses this question in his work *Sha’arei Ohr.* He says the answer can be found in the next section of the parsha. The Torah continues with what one could call a summation of the essence of Torah - our mission in life, a promise of the reward for success, a warning of the dangers of failure and a call to action. Hashem tells us that He has placed life and death before us, good and evil. We are commanded to love G-d, follow in His ways and heed His will, and if we do so we will be rewarded with success and years of life. If we fail, though, and serve other gods, we will be exiled and go through difficult times. G-d calls Heaven and Earth to bear testimony that He has given us this choice of life and death and placed blessing and curse before us. He then charges us to *“choose life”* by loving G-d, clinging closely to Him and heeding His will, so that we and our families will be blessed with life. (Devarim 30:15-20)

Rav Yitzchok Blazer explains that the call to action of *“choose life”* is not simply an encouragement to choose wisely. G-d is also teaching us how to choose the better option. G-d is telling us that we must go through the process of choosing.

When we are faced with two valid options in life, then we carefully weigh and measure each option. We carefully consider the benefits and costs of each option and balance them against each other.

G-d is telling us that in order to really change who we are, we must approach this decision the same way we would approach any decision. We have to stop and review the obvious. We must consider the loss and damage in our current way of life and balance it against the benefits of staying the way we are. We must also consider the loss and difficulty of change and balance it against the value and benefit of making real change. When we go through this process, and continually make this calculation, G-d is promising us that over time we will see real change. If we study and review our purpose and goals in life on a daily basis, we will become who we want to be. May we merit to see real change in our lives and to be who we want to be.

We wish everyone a year of health, blessing, success and joy! Shana tova!

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel this year.

Netzavim-Vayeileich

by Rabbi Herzl Hefter *****

]Rabbi Hefter did not send in a Dvar Torah for Nitzavim-Vayeileich. Watch this space for his future Devrei Torah[

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Parashat Nitzavim: Seek God, Find…

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

On the Ten Days of Penitence, the days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, God is closer to us. Just as a king or a president might be shut in his residence all year, enabling commoners to see him and talk to him for only a short period, so too God remains aloof and distant all year long, until He grants us a visit during these ten days. This statement always seemed problematic to me, because I perceive God as omnipresent and I think that making this analogy borders on anthropomorphism, attributing human traits to God. I would therefore like to analyze its origins and meaning.
The saying that God is closer to us on these ten days appears in the Talmud)Yevamot 49:2(and is based on a verse in Isaiah)55:6(: *"Seek God when He is present, call out to Him when He is nearby."*

However, this statement contradicts not only our logic and common sense, but also other biblical sources, for example)Psalms 145:18(:

> *"God is close to all those who call out to Him, who do it with sincerity."*

Or, for example, the following source, which uses much stronger words to convey the message that God is not only extremely close to us, but that we cannot escape or break away from this intimacy)Psalms 139:7-14(:

> *Where can I run away from Your spirit, escape Your presence? If I scale the sky, there You are and if I descend to the netherworld, I will find You. If I take off on the wings of dawn and dwell in the bottom of the ocean, there too Your hand will guide me…*

And as if that contradiction is not enough, I have, as Jews always do, a diametrically opposed question: Isn't it true that God is never close to us? Didn't Isaiah say that, in the very same chapter quoted above, only two verses later)55:9(?

> *As the skies are far removed from the earth so are My ways and My thoughts far removed from yours.*

And, also in Isaiah)6:3(:

> *The Lord of Hosts is transcendental, far removed and distinguished.*

How do we reconcile the contradicting biblical and rabbinic sources which describe the full gamut of the relationships between us and our Creator, from complete detachment, through narrow windows of encounters to an inextricable intimacy?

To solve this mystery, I had to start searching who, besides God, would always be with me, no matter where I go or how cleverly I disguise myself, and the answer was very simple: me! By seeking God we seek ourselves. That is the deepest yet simplest message of Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur and the whole process of Teshuva – repentance.

You see, we come into this world as pure, innocent creatures, and the actions or reactions of those surrounding us – family, caretakers and friends – influence and shape our personality. If we are lucky enough to have been born in a peaceful country in the developed world, we may believe at a young age that the world is a beautiful place, devoid of evil, except for that bug bite or a lost toy, but as we grow older, we intercept signals of cruelty and wickedness such as bullying, foul language, apathy or violence. Some are able to rise above these negative manifestations of human nature and to craft a wholesome, positive and loving personality, yet others fail to do so, if even in the slightest manner possible.

Research conducted on bullying among school children followed, over several years, kids on a school bus. The researchers focused on a girl who tried to stop bullies from harassing a younger kid, and what they found is quite terrifying in what it reveals about human nature. As years passed by, the girl became less and less involved as she realized that she was not making an impact on the bullies. She gave up and accepted the cruel reality. Her behavior is a paradigm of our response to evil which we think is beyond our control, and too often we hoard our own actions and bad habits under that rubric, arguing that we have tried and failed to change them so we might as well accept and live with them.

Innocence, purity, rejection of evil, and commitment to a life of creativity and activism are all aspects of the Image of God with which we are blessed upon birth, and as we drift away from them, we leave God, and our true self, behind. This is the axis on which human life oscillates. It starts with the extreme closeness and intimacy with God which young kids possess but only a few pure, unadulterated souls manage to maintain as they grow older. On the other extreme, we can find the transcendental and remote God, enclosed in His palatial ivory tower – *Holy, Holy, Holy.* But God is only in that state when we don't seek Him out, at which point He proclaims: *"As the skies are far removed from the earth so are My ways and My thoughts far removed from yours."*

Between those two extremes lies the vast expanse of human experience, and as we blaze our path through the vicissitudes of life, we find out that God and our inner pure self are only accessible if we look for them, as the verse quoted above states: *"God is truly close to all who seek Him honestly,"* and so is our soul. When the psalmist describes in

Ps. 139 his attempts to flee from God, he is actually referring to his efforts to avoid his true call and purpose in life, which culminate in the startling revelation that they are deeply imbedded in his soul and he cannot escape them:

"my soul knows very well")v. 14(.

This brings us back to the opening statement by the rabbis, that God is closer to us on the Ten Days of Penitence. This paradoxical, almost heretical statement should be viewed in light of a parallel maxim, found in the Jerusalem Talmud)Berakhot 5:1(:

"God is closer to us in the Synagogue and Bet HaMidrash."

The rabbis are saying that God's proximity to us is a function of the effort we invest in finding Him, because He is always near, and all we have to do is look. Praying with devotion and intention helps us find God and find our identity and self, and so does serious learning which goes beyond the abstract intellectual engagement and uses it to create a life imbued with spirituality and adherence to the Torah. In the same manner, God is more accessible to us on the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, because at that time we are affected by the general atmosphere of selichot, prayers and preparations for the holiday. This idea is beautifully expressed in the special prayer preceding the blowing of the Shofar:

"Please, Almighty God, remove the curtains which separate us from You."

This prayer describes us and God as situated on two sides of a curtain, very close to each other, yet unable to see each other. The Teshuva, repentance, is the ability to take action, search for meaning and self, and thus remove the curtain so we can be in the presence of God.

This presence is referred to in this week's Parasha by the word נצבים. Moshe requires the people to always be aware that they are facing God, and that awareness should guide their thoughts, words and actions, from the most sublime – ראשיכם, your heads, to the most mundane -- your basic, everyday provisions. This presence is what Moshe mentions later in the Parasha, as he explains that closeness to God is in our hearts)Deut. 30:11-14(. Now that we understand that our quest for the divine is inseparable from the quest for the humane and human which is hiding deep in our soul, covered by layers of disappointment and neglect, we can truly grasp the meaning of these verses:

This commandment which I place before you today)to find God – find yourself(is not inaccessible or far removed from you.
Ask not "who shall ascend the heavens to bring it to us?" for it is not in heaven
Ask not "who shall cross the ocean and bring it to us?" for it is not across the ocean
Rather it is very close to you, in your mouth and heart, all you have to do is act upon it…

At this point, I would like to suggest, based on what I have written so far, an alternative reading to a well-known verse)Deut. 4:29(:

You will seek out God from exile and you will find Him as you search with all your heart and soul.

If we move the comma just two words ahead, the verse will be interpreted thus:

"You will seek out God from exile and as you search Him, you will find Him in your heart and in your soul!"

Let us pray and hope that this year the sound of the shofar, simple, pure, powerful, will carry us to the lost realms of our childhood and help us retrieve a sense of the Image of God and our purpose in life, as seen through the eyes of an innocent child who still believes in the innate good nature of people and in his or her power to help themselves and others.

* * * * *

Inspiration, contemplation and prayer can be found everywhere. I feel that the following poem is intuitively connected to the discussion in the article. Lyrics and music are by one of my favorite Israeli artists, Yehuda Poliker, and the song describes the interaction between the adult self and the hidden child, here referred to as a shadow. I welcome your comments and thoughts.

My shadow and I embarked on a journey, the sun was halfway in the sky, at times I lead and at times the shadow on the path, clouds gathered in the sky, drops of water started rolling, my shadow recoiled in me, I continued my journey alone. The wind trembled, the fear trickled and permeated, my shadow shuddering inside, scarier than ever, he asks: "where are you taking me?" I respond: "where are you fleeing to?" why always protective walls? why shadow when there is light outside?

Let us fly far away, you will be my wings, to an imaginary bond, until now impossible, let us jump, take-off and fly, to the bond of shadow and body, why must we continue escaping, towards what we always wanted to forget
To forget the doors of confusion, the kid peeping through the keyhole, let us cross the border, to the freedom which was in shackles, and only melodies remind that outside you can be released of all fears, only when me and the shadow are together…

Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets** . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Nitzavim - Vayeilech: Standing Before God for Jews in Captivity

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

> *"Dip the apple in the honey, make a Bracha loud and clear. Shana Tova Umetuka, have a happy, sweet new year."*

We've all heard and sang these eponymous words. And why not? They are beautiful, innocent and give all the good wishes we want to feel at Jewish New Year.

However, knowing many of our brothers and sisters still languish in captivity changes our experience of this song. Instead of a lighthearted description of the day, it becomes a fervent prayer that freedom be granted to the hostages with the hope they, too, will join us next year to partake in the sweetness of Rosh Hashanah.

Our portion opens up with the phrase, *"You all stand before God today."* We will all be standing before God next Thursday and Friday blowing the shofar and praying for a sweet new year for us, our community and for all those still suffering in the hands of our enemy. The honey we put on our Challah will be bittersweet, as we remember those who we love are not with us. And our prayers and service this year are not just for us. They are also for them. Those who cannot attend, who we vow to remember, even if the world would like to forget.

A happy and sweet New Year to all of you at the AHC, and may Avinu Malkeinu)Our Father and King(inscribe all our fellow Jews in captivity, as well as the heroes of the Israeli Defence Forces for life and goodness.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah,

Rabbi Rube

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah
Elul: Teshuvah for the Generation of Rebirth

> *"For some time I have been struggling with an inner conflict, and a mighty force impels me to speak about teshuvah)penitence(. All my thoughts are focused on this topic. Teshuvah holds a primary place in Torah and in life. All the hopes of the individual and of society depend on it."*

So begins Rav Kook's introduction to *Orot HaTeshuvah)Lights of Penitence(,* perhaps his most popular work, first published in 1925. The compact book was beloved by its author, and Rav Kook himself would study its teachings during the month of Elul after morning prayers.

One student reported hearing Rav Kook say, *"I worked extensively on Orot HaTeshuvah. Whoever studies it properly will find light in every word."* He also declared: *"Orot HaTeshuvah should be be studied endlessly."*

What is so special about the book's outlook on teshuvah?

Teshuvah — a Return to Life

Orot HaTeshuvah illuminates the concepts of sin, punishment, and penitence. It explains that sin primarily harms the one who sinned, as it cuts him off from the roots of his very being, from the light of his soul. This estrangement is sin's worst punishment. Teshuvah, on the other hand, redeems the sinner from this darkness. It rejuvenates him, restoring his previous state of life and joy.

The word teshuvah literally means *"return."* It is not an escape from the world. On the contrary, it is "precisely through genuine, pure teshuvah that we return to the world and to life")*Orot HaTeshuvah* 14:30(.

Already in his introduction, Rav Kook described teshuvah as an underlying force that influences all aspects of life, not only the realm of the sacred: *"Teshuvah holds a primary place in Torah and in life."* Thus one who frees himself from unhealthy habits – this is also a type of teshuvah.

Additionally, Rav Kook posited that this powerful force is not limited to the failings and triumphs of the individual. It also applies to failures and successes of the nation and the entire universe: *"All hopes of the individual and society as a whole depend on it."*

National and Spiritual Revival

Rav Kook firmly believed that a secular national revival, the entire program of rebuilding the Land and the nation, could not succeed without a parallel revival in holiness, with lofty manifestations of this holiness expressed in both personal and public spheres.

But what path would lead the generation of rebirth to the gates of teshuvah? The routine approach is doomed to failure. One cannot reach out to the idealistic youth of such a generation, brimming with life, vigor, and creativity, with a severe demeanor and punctilious demands of small, everyday deeds — demands that they consider to be a sign of weakness and a feeble spirit.

No, the generation must be awakened via an optimistic spirit of greatness and courage. *"Teshuvah comes not to embitter life,"* Rav Kook taught, *"but to make it pleasant"*)15:6(. *"Teshuvah is essentially a return to our origins, to the source of supernal life and existence in their wholeness"*)12:8(.

In an article printed in HaYesod in 1934, he explained:

> *"Teshuvah is the great key to redemption. Many things inhibit teshuvah, but the major obstacle, particularly to collective teshuvah, is the misconception of Teshuvah as atrophy of the soul, as the enfeebling and debilitation of life. This false image also impairs the teshuvah of the individual. But more than anything, it hinders collective teshuvah, the teshuvah of the nation.*
>
> *"We must disclose the secret that the genuine teshuvah of the entire nation of Israel is a mighty, powerful vision that provides reserves of might and strength, imbuing all of our spiritual and pragmatic values with a lofty spirit of vigorous, surging creative energy from the power of the Rock of Israel. This living teshuvah flows not from isolated, fragmented souls, but from the treasury of the nation's collective soul, Knesset Yisrael .... In this way, the united soul of Israel is prepared to return to its former strength, as in days of old."*

)Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from *Mo'adei HaRe'iyah,* pp. 52,55; *Celebration of the Soul,* pp. 26, 28-29.(

https://www.ravkooktorah.org/KI_TAVO_67.htm

Nitzavim: Why Judaism? (5775, 5782)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

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.

This nation's parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, *"All that the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall heed."*)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:

> *Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath; with you who are standing here with us today before the Lord our God I make it, and with those, too, who are not with us today.* Deut. 29:13-14

"Those who are not with us today" 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 meHar Sinai, **"foresworn from Sinai."** *)Yoma* 73b, *Nedarim* 8a(

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 *"Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not 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.)Shevuot 39a(

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?]1[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.]emphasis added[

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.*]2[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 against you today. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life - so 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.]3[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)which, according to the "Marshmallow Test," is the surest sign of future success in life(?]4[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!"]emphasis added[

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.]emphasis added[

Judaism does not deny pleasure, for it 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; we find God 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 am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, 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[Isaac Arama, *Akeidat Yitzhak,* Deuteronomy, Nitzavim.

]2[*A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion*)New York: Free Press, 2000(. Published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now: The Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion*)London: HarperCollins, 2001(.

]3[*Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2.

]4[Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* Bantam Press, 2014.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

- Why was it so important that Moses renewed the covenant with the Children of Israel?
- Why do you think people so often choose to pursue wealth, power, and fame?
- How can you "choose life"?

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/why-judaism/

Nitzavim-Vayelech: The Last Two Mitzvahs

By Tzvi Freeman * © Chabad 2024

The Last Two Mitzvahs

There are 248 "do this" mitzvahs in the Torah)and 365 "don't do this" mitzvahs(.

Counting in chronological order, number 247, the second-to-last mitzvah that Moses delivers to the Jewish people, is the mitzvah of Hakhel: Assemble the people once in seven years and relive the giving of the Torah.

But why? What is it about this particular mitzvah that requires it be given on the last day of Moses' life?

Is it because it's a mitzvah you can only do in the Land of Israel?

There are plenty of agricultural mitzvahs that can only be performed in the Land of Israel. That didn't stop Moses from instructing the people in them long before.

Well, you'll say, this is different. It's a commemoration of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. As long as they are in the wilderness of Sinai, hearing Torah from Moses, removed from the mundane activities of seeding, harvesting and protecting their land, they don't need a commemoration. You don't sit down and look through your family vacation shots while you're still inside Disney World.

But now that Moses is handing things over to Joshua, who will take them soon into the promised land, now they need to be told, *"Don't allow yourselves to forget this experience. Replay it once every seven years!"*

Sounds good. But not very Moses-like.

In the wilderness, they were surrounded by the *"clouds of glory"* that protected them from sun and sandstorm. Moses told them that once they enter the promised land, they should celebrate the Festival of Sukkot. They were to dwell in temporary huts as a commemoration of the divine protection they had received in the wilderness. He told them that long before they were ready to leave, while those clouds still hovered over their heads.

And what about Passover? Even before they had actually left Egypt, as they were assembled in Ramses, Moses stood there, telling them, *"You're about to leave for the promised land. When you get there, you're going to have children. They will never have witnessed this great miracle. So you will have to make a Passover Seder every year to tell them the story, and eat matzah for seven days, too."*

So why doesn't Moses stick to form and right there and then at Mount Sinai tell the people, *"Remember this day! Relive it with your children! Make an assembly once every seven years!"*

Why is Hakhel the only commemorative mitzvah that has to wait until the eleventh hour, just as the experience it is commemorating is coming to an end?

A simple answer: Only now has it been established that Moses is not coming with us.

As long as Moses is in the picture, the experience of receiving the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai goes on and on. Even once farming the land, every year is guaranteed to be a Hakhel year.

But now it's official that Joshuah is replacing Moses. Moses pleaded with G d for an entry pass, but he was turned down. If so, a once-in-seven-years replay suddenly becomes vital.

That also explains the very last mitzvah that Moses transmitted, number 248: Everyone must write a Torah scroll for themselves.)Today, that mitzvah is fulfilled anytime you buy a Torah book for your home.(

With Moses around, who needs a book? If you're living by a water fountain, why buy bottled water?

Only without Moses on the scene do you need a hard copy, a tangible manifestation of the Torah he taught us.

So imagine now you're one of those people who came of age in the Sinai Peninsula, camping out day and night with Moses and 600,000 other Jews, many of whom held a vivid memory of the sights and sounds of G d's voice booming on the sixth of Sivan of that year they left Egypt.

Every once in a short while, the trumpets sound and everyone rushes to hear what Moses will teach next — teachings delivered to him from the same divine voice everyone heard at Mount Sinai. For months following, the entire camp is buzzing with discussion and debate over this new divine teaching.

Could you imagine making a commemoration of all this in the future?

No way. This was an experience that could never end! If it would end, how could such a nation possibly continue to exist? How could anyone continue forging this 248-connection/365-parameter bond with the Infinite without the total awareness of *"G d is speaking to us right now"* every day?

No, you would say, we're holding on to this for eternity. Moses can't leave us. Ever.

And now, G d informs you through Moses that He has other plans. You and the rest of the nation are going to have to go it on your own. Not entirely on your own — you'll have Moses' prodigy, Joshua.

And Moses, too — as the rabbis said, *"Moses never died. He just took over from a higher place."*1 Just like he led you then, he leads you now.

But visibly, with your very human eyes, it will be up to you to keep the inspiration alive.

So Moses says, *"To do that, to hold onto a glimmer of this experience of Sinai, this is what you will need to do:"*

> *"Once in seven years, relive Sinai. A representative of mine will stand there and read from this Torah I transcribed for you. And you, every one of you, men, women, children, the deaf and the blind, the learned and the illiterate, all as one, will hearken with awe, with trembling, so that love and fear will be planted in your hearts and grow with every mitzvah you do."*

Until we are all together once again in the final, eternal Temple in the promised land.

See *Likutei Sichot,* vol. 34, pg. 187.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Sifri. Talmud Sota 13b.

* Author of *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth* and, more recently, *Wisdom to Heal the Earth.*

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5800829/jewish/The-Last-Two-Mitzvahs.htm

Nitzavim-Vayeilech: A Supernatural Covenant

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

A Supernatural Covenant

> *You are all standing today before G-d, your G-d: the leaders of your tribes, your elders, your sheriffs, every man of Israel.*)Deut. 29:9(

Our sages tell us that these words mean that the survival of the Jewish people)our "standing"(depends directly on G-d's will)i.e., is "before G-d"(, rather than on the laws of cause and effect that He has embedded within nature. All other nations are subject to the laws and processes of nature, and therefore must master the natural arts of survival – including diplomacy and self-defense. The survival of the Jewish people, in contrast, depends solely on their loyalty to their covenant with G-d. If we remain true to G-d, our use of the natural avenues of survival will work, even in situations where they normally would not. If we abrogate the covenant, however, the natural avenues will not succeed, no matter how much effort we pour into them.

Therefore, no matter how dire the Jewish people's situation may seem, we can remain optimistic. Even if it seems as though, in the words of our sages, we are "a lone sheep surrounded by seventy wolves," we should renew and strengthen our commitment to our covenant with G-d. G-d will then crown our natural efforts with supernatural success.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos and wishes for a happy, healthy sweet new year.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on parshat Ma'sei, selected from our *Daily Wisdom,* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

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Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Shabbat Shalom

Volume 30, Issue 50 **Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech** **5784 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

To Renew Our Days

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to God – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, "Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan" (Deut. 3:25). Let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no: "That is enough," the Lord said. "Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter." Deut. 3:26

God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.[1]

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 commands, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as Hakhel, the command that the king should summon the people to gather during Succot following the seventh, Shemittah year:

"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 law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must 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

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings: covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The book of Deuteronomy as a whole is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is another example in the last chapter of the book of Joshua (see chapter 24 of the book of Joshua), once Joshua had fulfilled his mandate as Moses 'successor, bringing the people across the Jordan, leading them in their battles, and settling the land.

Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry, including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering among other things the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was in the course of this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,[2] sealed in a hiding place, to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly:

"Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant." 2 Kings 23:1-3

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read the Torah to the assembly, having positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah, culminated after Succot when the people collectively "bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord" (Neh. 10:29).

The other command – the last Moses gave the people – was contained in the words: "Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites," understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses 'request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. "That is enough … Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter." Is this the Torah and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands God was teaching Moses, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is – on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.[3]

God showed Moses, and through him us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and

England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address – every four years since 1789 – has been, explicitly or implicitly, a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of "covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind… It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance." America's duty, he said, is "to constantly renew their covenant with humanity… to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God."[4]

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moses 'way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality – not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). Moses died, but what he taught and what he sought lives on.

[1] There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically "in the midst of others" who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in The Kuzari, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.

[2] This is Radak and Ralbag's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history, and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses 'own Torah, written by his hand.

[3] See Jeremiah 31.

[4] Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Two Destructions and Two Redemptions

"You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even every person of Israel." (Deuteronomy 29:9)

Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma, explaining the connection between the multitude of grim warnings (tokhacha) unloosed in the prior portion of Ki Tavo, and this week's opening words: "You are standing." Our sages teach: since the Israelites heard one hundred curses minus two, in addition to the forty-nine in the book of Leviticus (chapter 26), their faces turned green and they didn't understand how they would be able to stand up to so many chastisements (curses). Moses thus began to comfort them: "You are standing here today. You have greatly angered the Almighty [after all, you constantly complained in the desert, you worshipped the Golden Calf, you refused to conquer Israel] but nevertheless you have not been destroyed and behold you are standing here today." In effect, therefore, our opening has to be taken as a divine statement of consolation: You may well suffer, but you will never be destroyed.

Rabbi Yedidya Frankel, the late Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, asks three significant questions on this Midrash. First of all, why did it take the second set of chastisements to cause the Israelites to "turn green," when the first set of forty-nine could hardly be described as benign experiences? Here is an example from Leviticus: "I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish, and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it" (Lev. 26:16).

Secondly, the Jewish people seem to be recoiling at the massive number of curses – forty-nine from Leviticus plus another ninety-eight from Deuteronomy. But the fact is that last week's portion goes out of its way to point out that the specific number of curses is hardly relevant because Israel will suffer every possible blow imaginable: "Also every sickness and every trauma, and every plague which is not written in this book of law, God will bring about against you until He destroys you" (Deut. 28:61).

And, in fact, the entire span of Jewish history bears out the horrible truth of this verse. For example, where in these warnings are the gas chambers of Auschwitz mentioned? And yet we were subjected to them! Hence, why does the added number of curses cause them to turn green?

Finally, asks Rabbi Frankel, from a stylistic point of view, why does the Midrash not utilize parallel language? If, with reference to Deuteronomy, the sages speak of "one hundred minus two" curses, apparently being interested in a round number, why with reference to the curses in Leviticus do they not say "fifty minus one"? Why then do they speak of forty-nine?

Rabbi Frankel brilliantly answers all of his questions by suggesting another interpretation of "one hundred minus two." It is not another way of representing the number ninety-eight. If we go back to the initial set of chastisements in Leviticus (Parashat Bechukotai), we discover that, after the curses and the warnings are presented, the Torah then includes two comforting promises: "Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the land" (Lev. 26:42). Two verses later we read, "And even this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, and I will not abhor them, to destroy them utterly in order to nullify My covenant with them" (26:44). They were to be punished, but they would remain alive as a people and would be restored to the Land of Israel.

What prompted the Israelites to turn green with fright was when they heard one hundred additional curses in Deuteronomy, but "minus two" – devoid of any comforting ending, without the two guarantees they had received with the prior set of curses. And if the chastisements of the book of Leviticus refer to the destruction of the First Temple and its subsequent exile, and the chastisements of the book of Deuteronomy refer to the destruction of the Second Temple and its subsequent exile (see Nahmanides, Lev. 26:16), the Israelites feared that there might not be a return and redemption after the second destruction. They feared that they would then be destroyed as a nation totally and irrevocably. To this end, Moses comforts them: "Atem Nitzavim – You are standing here," aren't you, despite the Egyptian exile and enslavement, despite your miserable backsliding in the desert! You are the people of an eternal covenant – and God's guarantee as to your eternality as a nation holds true for as long as world and history remain.

The manner in which Rabbi Frankel explains the Midrash is most optimistically comforting; we may suffer, but we will always survive! Of course, our collective tragedy is that even after the Holocaust, the total number of Jews in the world continues to decrease. Yet I believe that those who choose to remain Jewish today are all the more committed and are often much more serious than parents who took so much for granted. And it is precisely this minority of serious Jews which has been responsible for the preservation of our people.

If Josephus is correct that at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple there were five million Jews, then the natural birthrate of Jews should have easily reached 200 million by today. And even with all the deaths due to the rampant killings by our persecutors throughout history, we should still be left with one hundred million Jews today! But where are they? How did they disappear?

We must conclude that throughout our history, Jews have always defected, that we have lost many more Jews to the prevailing winds of assimilation than to the marauding swords of anti-Semitism. Sometimes the temptation to assimilate was too strong, and sometimes the sacrifice needed to remain Jewish was too difficult to bear. This is our destiny. Whoever is a Jew today is the product of generations of the most serious Jews in our history, the survival of the most committed. Moses may well be speaking to us today, after the Holocaust and in the wake of secular assimilation: "You are standing here today, all of you, before the Lord your God" – despite all your disasters and defections. Take heart!

An American magazine called Look, circulated in the millions, published a lead article in the early 1950's on the "Vanishing American Jew." Look magazine has long since vanished, but the American Jew is still holding strong. We are still standing here today – especially those of us in the burgeoning State of Israel – where our population has grown from 600,000 to six million in six decades – despite the ongoing struggle with the Arab states vowing our disappearance.

And my revered teacher and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, extracted one more crucial lesson from our Torah portion. There are two chapters of dire warnings and bitter tragedies in our Bible: chapter twenty-six in the book of Leviticus and chapter twenty-eight in the book of Deuteronomy. Many of our commentaries, most notably Nahmanides, link the chapter in Leviticus to the destruction of the First Temple and its concomitant exile, and the chapter in Deuteronomy to the destruction of the Second Temple and its concomitant exile. The first Babylonian exile was rather short in duration, barely fifty years, and was largely limited to one geographic area. Hence, the biblical chapter in Leviticus concludes with God's guarantee of Israel's eternity and our imminent return.

The second Roman exile caused our nation to be scattered all over the world and endured for close to two thousand years. And although it is true that there is no immediate guarantee of restoration – indeed, the restoration was long in coming – the opening words in Nitzavim, barely one chapter later, promise our eternal survival – and chapter thirty prophesizes our restoration:

"Even if you will be scattered to the ends of the heaven, from there will the Lord your God gather you and from there will He take you up. And the Lord your God will bring you to the land which your fathers have inherited, and you shall inherit it, He will cause you to do well, and you shall be more numerous than were your ancestors." (Deut. 30:4–5)

The major difference is that whereas the first destruction is followed by a divine guarantee of almost immediate restoration, the second destruction will be much longer and will require Israel's "return" (teshuva) as its prerequisite. Hence before the divine promise of restoration "even from the ends of the heavens" comes the divine command: "And you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice" (Deut. 30:2). And "return" means two things: to the Land of Israel and to the Torah of Israel.

The first time, it was mostly up to God; the second time, it is mostly up to us!

Likutei Divrei Torah

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Lessons of Equality

For some time, certain ideas have dominated my consciousness. Don't worry, these are not obsessive thoughts, and I am not a candidate for a psychiatric diagnosis. Rather, whenever I prepare a speech lately, or sit down to write a column such as this, I can't help but think about a particular set of political principles.

The principles I ponder are the principles of democracy. The lessons of the equality of all human beings and the concepts of freedom and tolerance have been demanding my attention. Why now? Why at this time of year?

One possible reason immediately comes to mind. As I write this, I reflect upon the tragedies of September 11, 2001, the anniversary of which falls during this time of year. For me, this event was a day of grief and mourning for all the victims and their families, but especially for those several victims whom I knew personally. One of them, Abe Zelmanowitz, will be remembered by the world for his heroic attempts to rescue handicapped coworkers. Another, Nancy Morgenstern, was one of the most creative and vivacious women I ever knew. A third, Shimmy Biegeleisen, grew up just a few houses away from my childhood home.

But beyond the grief and the mourning is the recognition that this tragedy affected all kinds of people: old and young, great and not so great, Jew and non-Jew. It is almost as if our enemies knew that if they were to strike at the heart of our great democracy, they would have to aim at a target that would symbolize democracy because of the diversity and ultimate equality of the victims.

It was only natural that as an immediate aftereffect of the events of that horrific day, so many of us came to a new appreciation of the great gifts of democracy in general, and of the privilege to live in these United States in particular. It is also to be expected that when we commemorate any anniversary of that catastrophe, which we will do as long as America stands, our appreciation for our country and for its democratic way of life will be renewed and reinforced.

Thus, it was certainly unavoidable that thoughts about democracy would fill my mind at this particular time of year. But as I introspected further, I realized that there is more going on around me during this particular time which stimulates these thoughts.

For one thing, there is this week's Torah portion, Nitzavim. If there is one parsha in the Torah which conveys the principles of

democracy most eloquently, it is this parsha. "You stand today, all of you, before the Lord your God; the chieftains of your tribes, your elders, your leaders—every person in Israel. Your little children, your women, and the stranger who is within your camp; from your wood choppers to your water fetchers." (Deuteronomy 29:9-10) I first became aware of the fundamental principles of democracy long, long ago, when I first learned these words in the early grades of the Jewish school I attended.

There is another factor that evokes in my mind the fundamental values of democracy at this time of year. As we approach the end of the Jewish year, it is natural that our memories reflect upon its beginning, indeed upon all beginnings. For me, and I'm sure that this is true for most of you, thinking about beginnings means thinking about the lessons that my parents, may they rest in peace, taught me.

My parents, one born in America, and one an immigrant from Poland, were both proud Americans and proud Jews. And they both inculcated in me and my sisters a profound appreciation for the values that our country and our religion had in common. They taught by example that we were not to discriminate between the extremely powerful and the lowly, between the rich and the poor, between the Jew and the stranger, between the doctor or lawyer and the wood chopper and water fetcher.

My father in particular, would explicitly teach me these lessons at this time of year. "The Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, are approaching," he would say. "It is time to learn what some of the melodies are these days." And he would sing them to me. "It is time to learn some of the lessons of these days." And he would teach them to me.

The lessons he taught were basically religious lessons, but in a deeper sense were also political ones. For he stressed to me, and this is obvious to anyone who but glances at the words of the liturgy of the High Holidays, that God judges all of mankind on Rosh Hashanah. He put it quite bluntly: "Rosh Hashanah may only be celebrated by Jews. But it is not only a Jewish holiday. It is the birthday of the world, and the Master of the world judges us all, with no discrimination."

These words of the prayer book, quoted below, anticipated the source works of American democracy by many centuries:

"And therefore, cast Your awe, Lord our God, upon all your handiwork, and your fear upon all whom you have created...let all creatures bow before you, and may they all together form one united group..."

Indeed, in the words of the Mishnah, which have been incorporated into the High Holiday prayer book:

"...kol ba'ei olam ya'avrun lefanecha kivnei maron..., …all the inhabitants of the world pass before you like a flock of sheep..."

Very shortly, the Lord will sit in judgment over all of us, whatever our nation, whatever our race, whatever our gender, whatever our faith.

May He judge us with mercy and compassion and guide us in His ways so that we find peace.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

No Excuse Not To "Do Teshuvah"

According to the standard order of the weekly parshios, Parshas Nitzavim is always read before Rosh HaShana. Despite the fact that our current order of reading the parshiyos is not necessarily the way that it was always practiced, there could be no more appropriate parsha to read at precisely this time of year. Nitzavim contains the following series of pesukim (verses):

"For this mitzvah that I am prescribing to you today is not too wondrous for you, it is not too distant. It is not in Heaven that you should say 'Who shall go up to Heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it? 'It is not over the sea so that you should say 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it? 'It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it." (Devarim 30:11-14)

There is a difference of opinion among the early commentators as to which mitzvah the Torah is referring. According to the Ramban (1194-1270) and others who follow his opinion, the Torah is referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah (Repentance, Return to G-d). Teshuvah is this mitzva that is "within our capacity and within our reach to fulfill."

The Sforno (1470-1550) writes as follows concerning this pasuk: "It is not too wondrous for you" – that you would require neviim (prophets). "It is not too distant" – that you would require distant wise men of the generation to explain to you that which is necessary to accomplish it, even while you are still in exile."

A person should not think, "In these times, I am incapable of doing Teshuvah. Had I lived in the times of the neviim who could have directly told me exactly what I was doing wrong – then I could have repented properly. Unfortunately, I live in a period of history when there are no neviim." To counteract such thoughts, the Torah assures us "It is not in Heaven" – implying that we do not need prophetic words from heaven to allow us to do Teshuva. This is no excuse.

Likewise, we cannot argue "If I had a real maggid mussar (expounder of homiletic lessons of chastisement) then I might be inspired to repent. If the Chofetz Chaim or the Vilna Gaon were here and would tell me to do Teshuvah, I would do it!" To counteract such thoughts, the Torah informs us "It is not across the Sea." This, too, is no excuse.

"For the matter is very near. It is within your mouth and your heart to do it." We do not need neviim or wise men. It is all up to us. This pasuk is a double-edged sword. Teshuvah is easy. It is accessible. But, on the other hand, it is completely up to us. We cannot fall back on external excuses.

Perhaps this is hinted at in the famous Gemara (Avodah Zarah 17a) regarding Eleazar ben Durdaya. When the woman of ill repute told Eleazar ben Durdaya that he would never be able to repent, he pleaded "Heaven and Earth request mercy for me." They responded that they could not help him. He invoked the aid of the stars and of the sea and was given the same answer. The Gemara says that he put his head between his knees and he expired on the spot as a result of intense remorse and repentance. What is the symbolism of placing his head between his knees? This was the ultimate acknowledgment that his repentance was dependent upon himself alone.

We cannot wait for others to do Teshuvah for us and we cannot blame others for our failure to do Teshuvah. It is not because our parents raised us poorly. It is not because our environment was bad. There are no excuses! The ability to do Teshuvah is within our own mouths and hearts.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Here's a question for you. What is not over the heavens, not over the seas but in our mouths and our hearts to do?

This is how Parshat Nitzavim describes the mitzvah of teshuvah, of penitence. It is so apt that we read this portion on the shabbat immediately preceding our new year, Rosh Hashanah.

Rav Meir Twersky asks: Why in our mouths and in our hearts? Why these particular parts of the human form? He explains as follows. There are two great barriers to teshuva.

First of all, I might say that I haven't done anything wrong; that I'm perfect and everything is fine with me. Alternatively, I

might say, yes I've done something wrong but other people are to blame so Hashem will forgive me. I'm alright because there are extenuating circumstances. Many of us explain away our errors in his fashion. So in order to correct that, 'beficha' – we have to express 'with our mouth' what we have done wrong. We need to acknowledge with vidui, with our confession, that actually there's a lot that needs repairing.

Then there is the second hurdle. Perhaps we acknowledge that we've done wrong. However, we feel that we can't correct the situation. Perhaps we're already too old, or maybe the sin is too great and we feel that God is not going to forgive us, or we've been repeating it so often, or perhaps other people aren't available in order to assist us. That's why the Torah says 'beficha uvilvavecha' – 'in our mouth and in our heart'. Within our hearts we need to have the right feeling, the right recognition of our errors in order to guarantee that we will change our ways for the better.

Just before the Torah tells us that it is with our mouths and our hearts to perform we are told 'ki karov eilecha hadavar' – 'this matter is close to you'.

It is achievable.

Let us not shirk our responsibility and let's guarantee that this year we will utilise the forthcoming High Holy Days to correct everything that is wrong and to guarantee that we will receive the full blessing of Hashem in the following year.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Those who stand with us today, and also those who do not"

Shira and Ehud Meirman

The portion of Nitzavim opens with a description of the eternal Covenant forged between the People of Israel and God. The core of the Covenant is expounded upon right at the outset of the parsha: "That He may establish thee this day unto Himself for a People, and that He may be unto thee a God" (Devarim 29, 12). In other words, the People of Israel must commit to worshipping God alone and, in turn, God will take the People under His protective wings and be unto them a God.

A covenant, or a contract – to use a more contemporary term – is a frequently used constitution. It is common knowledge that a contract binds the signatories. Hence, the following verses (ibid. 13-14) are somewhat baffling: "Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath. But with him that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day."

It follows then that the Covenant in question, in which the two parties are God and the People of Israel, did not only bind the people who were physically present when the Covenant was forged " –him that standeth here with us" – but also held accountable all those who were "not here with us this day."

What distinction is being made here? Who are those who were actually present when the People entered into Covenant with God as opposed to all those whom God is said to address ("him that standeth here")? Furthermore, who do the verses refer to when speaking of those who were not present when the Covenant came into effect ("not here with us this day") and yet are still bound by it forevermore?

Rashi and Ramban combine these two separate definitions and explain that the verses are referencing Israel's future generations. However, these two commentators do not explain the difficulty which arises from the distinction made between those who "are here with us" and all the others who are included in this address. And yet it goes without saying that the generation which was still to be born certainly did not stand with the rest of the People during that momentous undertaking.

A similar notion can be found in Midrash Tanchuma on the portion of Pekudei (3): "Rabbi Yochanan asked: Why is it written: 'Who doeth great things past finding; yea, marvelous things without number? '(Job 9:10). Take heed to the following: Every soul, from Adam to the end of days, was formed during the Six Days of Creation, and all souls were present in the Garden of Eden and at the time of the giving of the Torah, as it is said: 'With him that standeth here with us this day, and also with him that is not here with us this day ' (Devarim 29:14)."

Thus, the Midrash Tanchuma solves the difficulty of the "absent-attendees', as it were: The souls of all future generations were indeed present; however, their presence was different from that of the People of Israel who were physically present when the Covenant was entered into. If so, what reason is there for making a distinction between those who were present in body and those who were present in soul?

In the tractate of Shevuot (39:1), another explanation is given: "…This is as we have found written with regard to Moshe Rabeinu. When he administered an oath to the Jewish people in the plains of Moav so that they would accept the Torah upon themselves, he said to them: Know that it is not according to your understanding that I administer an oath to you, but according to the understanding of God and according to my understanding. As it is stated: 'Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath. But with him that standeth here with us this day etc.' [From the words] 'With him that standeth with us today ' one might infer that only those who stood at Mount Sinai were included in the Covenant. From where can it be inferred that the subsequent generations, and all future converts as well, were also included? From that which the verse says: 'Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath '(Devarim 29:14)."

It follows then that "him who "standeth with us today" is a reference to future generations. "Him that is not here with us today" refers to the converts that will join the People of Israel in future.

This means that the descendants of the People of Israel, as well as all future converts, are bound by the Covenant which was forged between God and the People of Israel at Sinai.

Before we move on, it's worth noting that the Talmud took pains to interlock the destiny of the Jewish People with that of Jewish converts. The fact that the latter were included antecedently in this long-standing and extremely significant Covenant between God and Israel serves to refute any hierarchical distinction which might exist between Jews from birth and Gerei Tzedek, true converts, since all had entered into the Covenant together at Sinai. It is especially important to remember this fact in our own times, when we are oftentimes witness to a discriminating attitude towards converts, which is completely unjustified.

After having established the identity of those "absent-attendees" at Sinai, we are still left with a baffling question: How can one be made to enter into a contract – and such a significant and comprehensive one at that – and be held accountable to it when this is hardly in keeping with the well-known halacha that says that "one cannot impose an obligation upon another in his absence" (Eiruvin 7:11)

The Malbim offers a logical explanation of his own: "It must be inferred that those who are not with us today are the descendants of those who stand here with us today and with whom the Covenant was forged; and that those who were present took [the oath] upon themselves and upon their children after them and upon all those that should join them, as is written in the Book of Esther (9:27): 'The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them.'"

This means to say that in every person lies the seed of his offspring, such that all those

entering into Covenant undertook the obligations for all future progeny as well.

Another interesting commentary is offered by the Ohr HaChaim: "Why did Moshe have to spell out 'and not with you alone? 'Would it not have sufficed to write 'the ones who are here today, as well as the ones who are not, etc.? 'This would have made it clear that the Covenant was not made exclusively with the people present at that time. However, the whole intention of these verses is to obligate the people present at this time to commit their offspring to observing the Torah, forever."

What this is telling us is that God not only compels the People of Israel to adhere to the Covenant entered into with Himself, but also holds them accountable for making sure their offspring will do the same. In other words, the fact that all future generations were included in the Covenant means that parents have to assume the responsibility to educate their children and guide them on how to fulfill the Covenant with God. In this way, the bond between God and Israel is perpetuated from one generation to the next.

This notion is nothing short of fascinating, especially when observed through a modern prism. In fact, the Ohr HaChaim talks about an intergenerational link and describes the commitment to the Covenant by using concepts like education, mutual responsibility and peoplehood. This lies counter to today's educational approach, whereby nobody is committed to anything, and one can choose to be whatever one pleases; free oneself of any identity; disconnect oneself from the community and even liberate oneself from the constraints of gender, or anything else which might confine one in any way. In fact, today one can reinvent oneself void of the ties, the bonds and the setting into which one was born.

As advantageous as this approach may seem (and there is much to be said for the right to self-determination), it still comes at a terrible price: the erasure of the identity with which we were born and the responsibility to the community and to the family that come with it.

Hence, the lesson taught us in the portion of Nitzavim, whereby the Covenant between God and the People of Israel is an eternal one and is binding for all Jews – those yet to be born and all future converts as well – is a lesson that transcends time and enables us to preserve our uniqueness as a nation even in contemporary times when new and strange winds are blowing. It is incumbent upon us to understand that we have an identity with which we were born and that will remain with our children even after we are gone. It is our duty to understand that we are not alone in this world and that we operate within a community and a religious context which give our lives meaning and value. We must never forget that the connection between ourselves and God is eternal and that it is our obligation to nurture this bond and pass it on to future generations. In light of all of the above, and in our capacity as shlichim, we believe that engaging in shlichut throughout the Jewish Diaspora is paramount. It is no secret that world Jewry is currently facing the great danger posed by assimilation and, consequently, the Covenant that was forged between God and our People compels us to take action in order to strengthen the ties between Diaspora and Israeli Jews, and to reinforce the connection that exists between world Jewry, Torah and the Land of Israel.

Let us conclude by quoting from the Mishna (Avot 2, 16): "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." Each and every one of us must take an active part in putting the Covenant into effect, i.e., fulfilling it, preserving it and passing it on to our children after us, both in the Land of Israel and outside it.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

Saying A Lot

It's definitely not too soon to be thinking about Rosh HaShana. The Sound of the Shofar is in the air. Here we are again, Boruch HASHEM and the question persists in its asking? What is the Shofar trying to say, without words?

The Torah has plenty of words and HASHEM has words too. With words HASHEM created the universe. So why now are suddenly, not quite stricken silent, but speechless?!

I heard from one of my Rebbeim many years ago that there are two types of silence. One is a silence that is below words. There is another silence that is beyond words. This world is so busy with words and it is crowded with conversation. It's often hard to know how to respond. We find ourselves stricken silent, a silence below words. When Shabbos arrives with the help of a Niggun, a song from the heart we are suddenly vaulted to a silence above words. We know what that feels like.

Somebody turned my world inside out many years ago, on my first Shabbos encounter, by simply stating, "You, western intellects, you thinkers, you think G-d is in your little world?! You are in G-d's world!" Suddenly, I realized, contrary to the words of song, time is NOT on my side, and I better prove to G-d that I exist, and that my life has significance.

One of the names that we have for HASHEM is MAKOM – literally PLACE, because HASHEM is the place of the world. HASHEM may be in our minds but we are really in HASHEM's mind. We are a thought of HASHEM and that's a good place to be because HASHEM's thoughts are real. When we find ourselves thinking about HASHEM then our thoughts are real. As Shlomo HaMelech wrote in Shir HaShirim, "Ani L'Dodi v'Dodi Li" – "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me".

Now what is it that the Shofar is trying to say, without words. The Shofar itself comes from a ram's horn that sits on top of its head like a crown. Now even though everything that comes into this world flows through the process of MACHSHAVA – DIBUR – MAASEH – THOUGHT and SPEECH and ACTION, prior to the first thought is an overwhelming desire to create, and to bring into being. The Shofar is emanating from and expressing that higher desire.

That may help understand and breathe some meaning into the sound of the Shofar that comes from HASHEM, but the Shofar is like a choral reading. It's not delineated who is communicating with whom. Like the Kol Chosson and Kol Kallah there is a back and forth as they each search for the other.

Although it's often covered and even smothered, to the point where it's barely audible, that "Kol Demama Daka", the small thin voice, still, the greatest desire within a human being is to come close to HASHEM, as Dovid HaMelech said, "Kirvas Elochim Li Tov" – "For me, good is being close to HASHEM!" The greatest pleasure a person can have in this universe is to be connected, to be attached to HASHEM. Therefore, the greatest pain that's possible is to be separate from HASHEM, and the Shofar is an amplification of that voice and it expresses a desire to break through all the barriers and make it all the way back.

So, the Shofar is an expression of ultimate desire, HASHEM's desire for a world and a people and our desire to be that people and complete His world. The Shofar is a Holy signal that we are thinking of HASHEM and HASHEM is thinking of each and every one of us at the very same time. That makes HASHEM real to us and us real to HASHEM. The Shofar may not employ any words but it sure is saying a lot.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's
Derashot Ledorot

American Jewry Stands Before the Jury of History: A Tercentenary Sermon (*1954*)

This year Jews through the length and breadth of America will celebrate the 300th anniversary of the landing of the first Jews on American soil. And this Saturday we of Kodimoh, as all Jews of Forest Park, devote to that theme - the Tercentenary. It is an occasion for happiness, pride and rejoicing.

But aside from the sense of celebration, we American Jews must and will indulge in the ancient Jewish sport of self-analysis and self-criticism. The eight-month period is not going to be, nor should it be allowed to become, a birthday party with a lot of singing, guest speaker, a cake with candles and a rousing "Happy Birthday". The occasion is too solemn for that. For we must now undergo a collective CHESHBON HA'NEFESH. And perhaps, upon reflection, we will find that there is much to be desired, and that we must revise our thinking about American Jewry. In the words of contemporary American diplomacy, we may have to experience an "agonizing reappraisal".

When, as we read in this morning's portion, Israel was about ready to enter its promised land, when it had completed its monumental sojourn in the desert and was prepared to reaffirm its covenant with G-d, G-d made sure to make them aware of the fact that they were now in the historical spotlight. ATEM NITZAVIM HA'YOM, you are now standing this day, each and every one of you, before the appraising eyes of G-d and before the jury of history. And one might say that the same command is applicable to American Jewry today: you stand before the jury of generations, on this day you are to be judged and evaluated - be ready for the task, nay, for the ordeal.

And who are we to judge our people-whether then or now? The MASSORAH, Tradition, plays upon the word ATEM - "you"- sensing that in this word G-d orders a self-appraisal to His people. And the MASSORAH connects it with three other verses which begin with that provocative, almost accusative, ATEM. Tradition tells us, as it were, that when ATEM NITZAVIM, when a people stands before the bar of History, it should be judged by the three standards which G-d Almighty prefaces with ATEM.
The first of these verses is the one in which Pharaoh orders his Israelite slaves to provide straw for the bricks and mortar. ATEM K'CHU LACHEM TEVEN, you Jews, take for yourself straw. Show what you can accomplish in the realm of material welfare and economy. Well, what has American Jewry done in laying the foundations of American economy, physical security and health? Our record here is admirable. Historians are first now beginning to appreciate the role played by the early Jewish peddlers in expanding and establishing the American economy at the turn of the century and even earlier. One need but mention such names as Baruch and Morgenthau, or Gompers and Hillman, to realize that American Jewry has contributed heavily to the philosophy and practice of American economics.

Not only in economics, but also in providing for health and in scientific advancement, have Jews contributed to the greatness of our country. In biology and medicine we have the Waksmans; in physics, the Einsteins, Oppenheimers and Tellers. American Jews have benefited heavily from this great country, along with all its other citizens. But we have contributed as heavily to its financial, physical and scientific progress. ATEM KECHU LACHEM TEVEN. We have been bricklayers for the material well-being of our country. Judged by this standard, American Jewry can rightly be proud of itself.

The second criterion is indicated by the verse in which G-d reminds Israel of what He did to Egypt, of the entire cosmic-historical drama of which they were the protagonists. ATEM RE'ISSEM ASHER ASSISI LE'MITSRAYIM, you, Israel, you above all others, you know the full import of the Exodus. You know the bitterness of persecution, the debasement of slavery and the curse of exile from your very own experience. As a Jew, therefore, your duty will be a political one too. Knowing exile, it will be your task to provide a home for your homeless brothers. And knowing what I did to Egypt, you must be a perpetual defender of the civil rights of all people. Zionism, liberty and resistance to tyranny, is part of the heritage of the Jew. And before the jury of History can pass the verdict, it must know of Jewry's achievements along these lines.

Here too American Jewry has conducted itself extremely well. America has not been deficient in providing Zionist leadership. Brandeis, Wise, Silver, Mrs. Bessie Gottesfeld and countless others have given direction and inspiration to the greatest Jewish political achievement in twenty centuries. Israel might never have been if not for the concerted political pressure of millions of American Zionists. Israel, once created, might never survive if not for the financial contribution and economic know-how contributed by American Jews. Jewish charity has always been famous, but it has never reached quite such heights as it did in the U.J.A.

And Jews have contributed mightily not to the battles for civil rights for all minorities in America. Negros have found not a few champions from Jewish ranks. One of the most active groups campaigning for mutual understanding with and tolerance for the New Puerto Rican immigrants, is a Rabbinic body. The ideals of democracy and liberty are close to the Jewish heart - for ATEM RE'ISSEM ASHER ASSISI LE'MITSRAYIM, you Jews have yourself seen the end of Egypt, and hence the consequences of any kind of tyranny.

On the first two counts, therefore, the material and political, American Jewry will be given a clean bill. It is the third which must arrest our attention. It is the third which, according to the opinion of this Rabbi, must perhaps give birth to a Jewish "agonizing reappraisal".

And the third criterion is epitomized in Isaiah's words, ATEM EIDAY, you children of Israel, are My witness. A Jew must always conduct himself in such a manner as to bear witness to the Oneness of G-d and the Divinity revealed in Torah. He must be a living testimony of G-dliness. In other words, the third test is the religious one.

Let me begin by taking exception to statements some of my colleagues have been making. They have been complaining bitterly that in summarizing the achievements of the last 300 years in America, somehow the religious angle is lost. We talk of peddlers, capitalists, labor leaders, scientists, authors, farmers, anti-semites and philanthropy, but rarely any talk about the progress of Judaism as such on these shores. Why not dramatize the contributions of religious leaders to America and American Jewry.?
In principle, I would be the first one to agree. Certainly, show the religious contribution. There is only one trouble with that. And that is, if we are to be perfectly frank and honest with ourselves, that we have little to show. As witnesses to G-d's Torah, we have not succeeded. It is perhaps a terrible thing to say, but it is true.

Take for comparison's sake, the Jewries of Spain, France & Germany, Palestine and Poland, each in its time of ascendancy and most productive era. We Americans have produced more physicians, economists, labor leaders, liberal lawyers and farmers than all together. But Spain, from Maimonides down to its most obscure religious poet, towers way above us in its array of cultural giants and religious saints. France-Germany from Rashi to the last Tosafists, is simply not something with which to compare America. Palestine and Poland-the same can only be said of them. We have not produced one Vilno Gaon, not one Baal Shem Tov, not one Joseph Caro. Religiously, and even generally in Jewish "culture", we are an impoverished people.

That is not to say that the picture is entirely bleak. There is some accomplishment, which holds promise for the future. As Ludwig Lewisohn points out in a recent article, the growth of Jewish education has been truly authentic and heroic. From 1935 to 1953, Torah Umessorah has increased the number of Day Schools from 17 to 156. The total number of Orthodox congregations is now well over 3,000 and the combined total of the other kinds of congregations is just over 900. The Young Israel movement has grown considerably. These are factors to be considered.

But they are meager accomplishments when compared with what American Jews have accomplished in other fields, or with what other Jews have achieved in their religious cultural life. No great religious personalities have been forthcoming from us. Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise will not be remembered as Reform Rabbis. The first will be recalled as a Zionist, and the second as Zionist and social reformer. The great number of Talmudic scholars, while they count some American-born among them, are primarily European.

How about our contribution to Judaism?-not in the nature of personalities, but in the nature of ideas. This does not mean, of course, that the situation is desperate. Quite the contrary, it is promising - for the future. The past has shown us to be weak. The future holds the possibility of strength. The positive religious accomplishments of which we just spoke - Day Schools, "synthesis", dignified Orthodox synagogues - these are comparatively new on the American scene. It is possible that they will be able to achieve in the next 50 years what we have not had here in the last 300. But a task of this sort requires a whole lot of dedication and hard work. It requires honesty of mind, stoutness of heart and, yes, sweat of the brow, to be able to respond to the challenge of ATEM EIDAY, to be the witnesses for G-d.

Certainly, all three standards we have mentioned this morning are important-the material, the political and the religious. But it is upon the religious that we stand or fall as a collectivity. The jury of history will consider all three counts. But its ultimate verdict will be based upon the evaluation of the Jewishness of American Jews. ATEM NITSAVIM HAYOM, American Jewry stands in judgement this year, KULCHEM LIFNEI HA'SHEM ELOKEICHEM, all of us must answer to the Divine Judge and the Jury of Coming Generations. RASHEICHEM, SHIVTEICHEM VE'SHOTREICHEM, KOL ISH YISRAEL, our leaders and communal workers and our ordinary members of the community; TAPCHEM UNESHEICHEM, our womenfolk and especially our children and, what we do with them, all of us stand ready to be judged upon all our actions, MEI'CHOTEV EITZECHA, KOL ISH YISRAEL, from wood-choppers to water-carriers, from scientists to farmers, we will be judged for all our accomplishments and all our failures. But the main issue, which all else is subservient, and for which we primarily ATEM NITSAVIM, stand in judgement, is: L'OVRECHA BI'VRIS HA'SHEM ELOKECHA, the acceptance of God's covenant.

If we succeed in living up to the terms of the covenant, even the wood-choppers and water-carriers will be blessed. If we fail, the most ingenious high-powered buzz saw, invented by a Jew, or the richest Jewish oil-well, will not save us. May G-d grant that the future be even brighter, and that we rise to our great destiny as G-d's witnesses.

BS"D

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>
date: Sep 26, 2024, 9:38 PM
subject: Rabbi Benjamin Yudin - Powerful Partnerships

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin
Powerful Partnerships

"For this commandment that I command you today - it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, for you to say, 'Who can ascend to heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, for you to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather, the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart - to perform it." (Devarim 30:11-14)

To what mitzvah are the above verses referring? Rashi believes these verses refer to the mitzvah of talmud Torah, and cites the Gemara (Eruvin 55a), stating that were the Torah in heaven, we would be obligated to ascend to heaven in order to study it. The Ramban (v. 11) understands the verses to refer to the mitzvah of teshuva, which the above paragraph clearly addresses. I'd like to suggest that, in reality, there is no major disagreement between these great commentaries; rather, their comments merge into a common objective: that the study of Torah leads one to teshuva. These two independent mitzvot combine to produce one transformative and uplifting result.

The Zohar (Terumah 161) teaches, "Histakel b'Oraissa u'barah almah," meaning that Hashem looked into the Torah, which served as the blueprint, and subsequently created the world; the Torah was the vehicle for creativity. We are taught, "v'halachta bedrachov" (Devarim 28:9), that we are to emulate His ways. This is understood by our Rabbis (Sotah (14a), to require that we emulate His attributes - just as He is compassionate, gracious, and righteous, so too are we to be. I would like to suggest that just as He studied the Torah and used its energy to create a world, so too is the Jew to study Torah, become energized from it, and create himself. As Hashem created a world, man, who is referred to as a world unto himself (Mishna, Sanhedrin 4:5), is to utilize the same blueprint, namely the Torah, to constantly create and recreate himself.

It is interesting to note that the verse in the opening paragraph of creation (1:5), "And there was evening and there was morning", teaches that this world that Hashem created was not His first creation. Rather, He created prior worlds and destroyed them, and then proceeded to create additional worlds. Rabbi Soloveitchik zt"l understood this to mean not that Hashem was attempting to get it right and needed several tries, but rather to teach us the very important idea that man, too, has the ability to not only create but to recreate. Whether it is due to a significant personal loss or a financial loss, man can pick up the pieces and recreate his environment. Similarly, the mitzvah of teshuva is based on the principle that man can recreate himself. As Hashem utilized the Torah to energize the world, similarly, the study of Torah provides man with the energy and ability to recreate himself.

The idea that Torah is referred to as energy may be seen from an interesting Gemara (Zevachim 16a), which relates that at the time of the giving of the Torah, the entire world understood that an earthshaking event was occurring. They ran to their prophet, Bilam, and inquired about the nature of the event. Our Rabbis understand this to be the meaning of Psalms (29:10-11), where they inquired if Hashem was bringing another flood to the world, to which Bilam answered that "Hashem oz l'amo yitan," meaning Hashem is giving strength to His people; Hashem is giving the Jewish nation the Torah. The psalmist refers to Torah as strength. It is this strength that enables the Jew to constantly strengthen his faith and character.

We are taught (Avos 3:7) that not only when a group engages in Torah study together are they joined by the Shechinah, but even an individual by himself/herself is privileged to have Hashem at his side. The very presence of the Divine that accompanies the study of Torah enables the individual to imbibe holiness, which has a transformative effect upon him, motivating him toward greater personal holiness and teshuva.

The study of Torah not only educates and provides the actual blueprint for our daily living, but is also transformative. We see this from Eicha Rabba (Pesikta 2), where Rav Huna and Rav Yirmiyah teach the meaning of the verse (Yirmiyahu 16:11), wherein Hashem explains the forthcoming destruction of His Temple to be because "Me they forsook, and My Torah they did not observe." The Rabbis understood this verse to mean that Hashem was proclaiming, "Halivei! Were it only that My people forsook Me but studied My Torah! For had they studied My Torah, the ma'or sh'eba - the illumination contained within the Torah - would have returned them to righteous character and the return to teshuva." Rav Huna continues in this passage and teaches the famous dictum that one is to study Torah shelo lishma, even without the proper motivation; the exalted subject matter itself will have the proper transformative effect on one's character and eventually one's studying and indulgence in Torah will lead to proper motivation, bringing the individual closer to G-d.

It is understandable that doing teshuva and changing one's behavior is most difficult. It is attributed to Rav Yisrael Salanter that it is easier to study the entire Talmud than to change one's character. It is, therefore, understandable that in our section of requests in the Amida the first request is to ask Hashem for wisdom and intelligence, and secondly, to assist us in the process of repentance. Note, however, that the blessing begins with the words "Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah," again indicating that the study of Torah is a powerful means toward repentance.

The Midrash Tehilim understands the verse (Tehillim 102:19) "So that the newborn people will praise Hashem," to refer to the forthcoming yom tov of Rosh Hashanah, when the Jewish people are reborn not only by virtue of Hashem judging them favorably for the forthcoming year, but also by virtue of the people using their lofty capacity to recreate themselves on Rosh Hashanah.

I pray that the strong, powerful partnership between Torah study and repentance adds an additional level of excitement and enthusiasm for our renewed commitment to the study of Torah in this forthcoming year, and may our personal resolve add strength to our soldiers on the front lines in Eretz Yisrael. Given the unity and responsibility of one Jew for another, our personal commitment to Torah and subsequently to teshuva will not only enrich our lives but, please G-d, theirs as well.

More divrei Torah and shiurim from Rabbi Yudin
More divrei Torah on Parshas Netzavim

Our mailing address is: TorahWeb.org 94 Baker Ave Bergenfield, NJ 07621

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WALKING THE LINE WITH RABBI JACHTER
Earlier Generations Obligating Later Generations
By Rabbi Haim Jachter
The Sages of Aragon s Question
Later generations obligate earlier ones. How can that be? Nonetheless, Devarim 29:14 records Moshe Rabbeinu, including those present and those not present in the brit he renewed between Hashem and Bnei Yisra- el near the end of his life. Rashi—citing the Midrash Tanchuma—explains that "those not present" refers to future generations. Abarbanel cites the Chachamim of Aragon (a region in Spain), who questioned why earlier generations generate an obligation for future generations. We begin by noting three classic solutions to this fundamental question.
Abarbanel's Answer
Abarbanel responds that just as one passes his assets to his inheritors, so does he transmit his obligations to the next generation. In addition, as Eretz Yisrael is a collective "possession" of Am Yisrael, so is Torah and our brit with Hashem. It is jointly "owned" by all Jews past, present and future. Thus, the brit is entered equally between earlier and later generations.
Rabbeinu Bachayei's Answer
Rabbeinu Bachayei compares earlier generations to the seeds of a tree and subsequent ones to the tree's branches. The roots and the branches are the same. Therefore, the earlier and later generations are identical; thus, the former entering the brit obligates the latter.
Malbim
Malbim invokes the Talmudic principle of "Zachin l'adam shelo befanav." While one cannot confer a chov (obligation) to others without their consent, we can grant someone a zechut, a benefit, without the latter's agreement. The Torah is the best possible lifestyle for every human being. The Torah is the Creator of the universe's guide to the best possible way to live. Earlier generations accepting the brit confers the greatest gift in the universe—a magnificent lifestyle leading to an eternal special relationship with the world's Creator.
A New Answer Based on Shemot 20:2: Our Enhanced Relationship With Hashem
We offer a new answer based on Rashi's approach to Shemot 20:2. Rabbi Yehuda Ha- Levi (in his Sefer Kuzari and see Ibn Ezra to this pasuk) famously asks why Hashem introduces Himself at Sinai as the One who took us from Mitzrayim, instead of the One Who created the world. Rashi resolves the issue by saying that Hashem releasing us from Mitzrayim is sufficient to obligate us in mitzvot. Rashi explains why Jews are obligated to more mitzvot than others. Hashem has invested more in us; therefore, we must reciprocate and invest more in Him. Creation alone is an insufficient reason to obligate us in 613 mitzvot. Creation generates the universal obligation to obey the seven Noachide mitzvot. Moreover, our pre-Sinai consent to follow the Torah is not the primary reason to observe the Torah. Rather, Hashem's enhanced investment in us at Yetziat Mitzrayim and His ongoing enhanced relationship with us drive our lasting relationship with Him. "Ani I'do- di v'dodi li—I am for my Beloved, and my Beloved is for me," (Shir HaShirim 6:3). We match His investment in us with our investment in Him. In this manner, Rashi resolves why succeeding generations are obligated to mitzvot because our ancestors accepted the yoke of mitzvot. Based on Rashi, we answer that our ancestors' agreement is not the driving force behind our obligations. Rather, it is the ongoing intense relationship between Hashem and Am Yisrael. For example, the miraculous survival and thriving of Medinat Yisrael and the Torah world's reconstitution (after near extinction in the post-World War II period) are but two manifestations of our eternal and special connection that generates our eternal and unending obligation in mitzvot. No wonder why immediately before we accept the yoke of mitzvot in Kriat Shema, we mention the ahavat olam—Hashem's never- ending love for us.
Conclusion: Our Repeated Daily Acceptance of the Brit The answers to the Chachmei Aragon's question are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, each contributes power that drives our eternal covenant with the Master of the Universe. One final thought, each generation accepts the Torah—not only on Shavuot when we reenact Matan Torah—but every day during tefillah. At the end of each tefil- lah, we recite Aleinu—where we express our gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of being Jewish. Each morning, early in Shacharit, we say, "ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu—how fortunate we are to accept Malchut Shamayim," in Kriat Shema, each morning and evening. After Kriat Shema, we describe the Torah daily as nechmad venaim, beautiful and pleasant. Besides reinforcing this central message in tefillah, we must quietly reflect on how fortunate we are to be among the few people in the world who enjoy a special relationship with Hashem and live a life permeated with meaning, respect and love. Therefore, may we all embrace and successfully convey this message to succeeding generations.
Rabbi Jachter serves as the rav of Congregation Shaarei Orah, rebbe at Torah Academy of Bergen County and a get administrator with the Beth Din of Elizabeth. Rabbi Jachter's 18 books may be pur- chased at Amazon and Judaica House

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from: **Alan Fisher** <afisherads@yahoo.com> date: Sep 26, 2024, 5:39 PM
Potomac Torah Study Center
Vol. 11 #51, September 27-28, 2024; 24-25 Elul 5784; Nitzavim-Vayeilech; Rosh Hashanah
Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.
As Israel's primary focus turns from Hamas to the evils of Iran, Gaza, Hezbollah, and their allies, we pray that Hashem will protect us during the coming year of 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world.
As I write, Rosh Hashanah is less than a week away.* How has the year gone by so quickly? Rabbi David Fohrman, as usual, provides a key insight to Moshe's message to B'Nai Yisrael on the final day of his life. Moshe has just concluded his long description of the blessings of following the mitzvot - Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah, Raizel bat Rut; Chai Frumel bat Leah, Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.
Shabbat Shalom
Hannah & Alan

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech: "Not in the Heavens"
By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone
Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.
From ancient times to today, Jewish tradition has emphasized the importance of human engagement with the divine words of Torah and its continuity. This concept is rooted in this week's parsha, which reminds us that Torah is not "up in the heavens" or "across the ocean," but is in fact, "very close to us, wherever we may find ourselves" (Devarim 30:11-14).

This approach is demonstrated exceptionally well in the teachings and life of the Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of all time. His student, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, recounts how the Vilna Gaon would refuse divine assistance from maggidim (celestial beings) in his own Torah studies, stating:

I do not want that my knowledge of God's Torah be communicated by any type of medium. Only what my eyes should be able to perceive [the wisdom of Torah] according to what God wishes to reveal to me [through my studies]. God should give me a portion in His Torah through my toils, struggles which I pursue with all my strength. (Introduction to Sifra di-Ẓeni'uta from Rav Chaim of Volozhin)

For the Vilna Gaon, the essence of Torah is now in the hands of mankind, with God's wisdom and words sanctified through our own discovery.

The Talmud further reinforces this notion of human authority, albeit within established protocols of our tradition. In the famed story of 'the oven of Achnai,' (Bava Metzia 59b) the sages push the bounds of these verses even further, insisting that these verses are not merely about accessibility to Torah, but about who has authority over Torah. When R' Eliezer enlists the help not only of miracles and wonders, but even of a Bat Kol, a heavenly voice, to demonstrate that his interpretation of the Halakha is correct, his interlocutor R' Yehoshua declares "it is not in the heavens!" This bold statement asserts that the authority to interpret and apply Torah has been entrusted to humans.

This trust and authority to interpret and reapply Torah goes beyond just studying and observing Jewish laws. When we have knowledge of the halakhic theorems which Jewish ideals and law are predicated upon, God entrusts us to take part in crafting the Torah to engage in every generation, demonstrating God's desire for partnership with us in building up new levels of Torah, guaranteeing the immortality of our covenantal relationship. Particularly in the face of new and emerging challenges that arise over the course of human and Jewish history, God seeks out our active participation in the development of the Torah.

In fact it is in the face of new challenges that this responsibility becomes especially crucial. This past year, we have witnessed and experienced unprecedented circumstances that have required innovative halakhic thinking as poskim and as a people. How should Shabbat observance be managed, with soldiers, doctors, social workers, and so many others required to move from one place to another, in what is now the second longest war in the country's history? Am I allowed to travel back home from telling a family that their soldier son was killed in battle, if Shabbat has already begun? Can I eat kosher food that was brought to the base by a family that traveled on Shabbat? How do I search for chametz before Pesach if there are soldiers who keep such foods with them in our barracks? What are our obligations and prioritizations towards charitable giving, with thousands of Israelis still wounded, displaced, emotionally scarred, laid off, and grieving?

These and so many more questions I have heard over the last year aren't directly addressed in the canon we've inherited, leaving it to us, with God's permission and help found in the rabbinic literature, to forge new pathways in Torah as we face realities that are directly related to the messianic age. We continue this work daily. While this opportunity arises from tragedy, it simultaneously demonstrates the beauty of the enduring relevance and eternality of our Torah traditions, and how they hold a message for every generation.

The final words in Talmud regarding the oven of Achnai incident are as follows:

Years after, Rabbi Natan encountered Elijah the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time, when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration [that we don't follow the word of God in heaven]? Elijah said to him: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: Nitzchuni banai Nitzchuni banai."

These final words can be translated in one of two ways. The first is that "My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me." Indeed our parsha reminds us that the axiom of rabbinic protocols takes precedence over divine pronouncements. Or that final comment can be translated "My children have immortalized Me; My children have immortalized Me." Reading it this way, we see how by taking responsibility for the development of the Torah we help guarantee its immortality and the future of our covenant with the Divine.

As we approach a new cycle of Torah reading after the holidays this year, we hope for resolution to the many halakhic dilemmas, the return of our hostages, calming of tensions, and healing for our people. Through our continued engagement with Torah, may we fulfill our role as partners with God in bringing more light into our world.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org>
date: Sep 26, 2024, 8:24 PM
subject: Families of Hostages Share Urgent Message at OU HQ; Commemorating the Anniversary of Oct. 7; Understanding the Jewish Vote

PARSHAT NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH
September 27-28, 2024 / 25 Elul 5784
SPECIAL DAYS
Ashkenazim begin Selichot motzaei Shabbat, September 28.
Rosh Hashana begins Wednesday night, October 2, and is celebrated through Friday, October 4.

L'ma'an Achai v'Reiai: Hareini Mekabeil Alai – I Accept Upon Myself – Elul 5784

By Rabbi Moshe Hauer

26 Sep 2024

Within the OU and its departments, we are focusing meaningful effort on considering and addressing the issue of sinat chinam, providing both food for thought and practical action points that can help us begin to demonstrate care for each other and ameliorate our nation's divisions by adjusting both our thinking and actions. We invite you into this process in the hope that you may find it meaningful and helpful, add your own energies to this effort, and be in touch to contribute your own thoughts and ideas. Thank you to all who have already shared their thoughts and ideas.

We began by pulling out our ear pods to try to notice those around us a bit more, went further to provide someone with a sense of "imach" by taking a bit of time to check in, and then moved towards building mutually appreciated relationship with others who may not have it elsewhere, inviting them into our homes or reaching out into theirs.

How should a Jew prepare for Rosh Hashana and the Yamim Noraim? The Alter of Kelm, one of the great Mussar masters, had a simple and surprising approach: focus on v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha, work on loving others more. He returned to this theme year after year, undertaking personally and along with his students to recall at every time of prayer the mitzvah to love others. In this, he was faithful to the custom instituted by the great Kabbalist, Rav Yitzchak Luria, and followed by many hasidim and others, to declare before every prayer: "Hareini m'kabeil alai mitzvat as'eh shel v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha. I accept upon myself the mitzvah to love my fellow man as myself." The Sefardic version of this declaration is even more exquisite, adding a declaration of actual love for every Jew k'nafshi u'me'odi.

The idea is both beautiful and puzzling. How does expressing our commitment to other people – bein adam la'chaveiro – fit the intense religious moment of prayer bein adam la'Makom?

Notice however that the original Jewish prayer recorded in the Torah was offered by Avraham on behalf of the people of Sodom. Avraham did not resort to prayer in search of mystical or spiritual communion. He approached God out of a deep concern for his fellow man. Sodom was in trouble, its future was threatened, and Avraham stepped forward to plead with God on

their behalf. That is evidently what prayer is supposed to look like. We approach God with others in mind. And, as the Alter of Kelm himself explained, when we approach God with Klal Yisrael in mind, we stand before Him empowered by the history and the destiny of our nation.
This practice of beginning davening with that commitment to our fellow Jews has not previously been part of my routine, but I intend to do it now as the next step on working on sinat chinam. Davening can easily be an experience of turning inward or looking upward while focusing on our own needs, but when we bring the Klal into those prayers it makes us bigger. When making that commitment to love my fellow Jews, I will try to think of a specific part of my community or of the Jewish people that I do not strongly identify with for ideological, religious, cultural, or any other reasons. I hope in that way to stand before Hashem not as an individual but as part of the unbreakable and ultimately indivisible Jewish people.
Every day of the year, most of our prayers focus on the overwhelming need for a better world. Particularly on Rosh Hashana, the Alter of Kelm would remind his students via a note he would hang on the door of the beis hamedrash that our main request of God is that He build His kingdom and bring us all together in His service. We can only sincerely make that request when we ourselves come together, when we stand with our fellow Jews in love and commitment, prioritizing the unity of our people and of the kingdom of God for which we pray.
Hareini m'kabeil alai mitzvat as'eh shel v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha
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from: YUTorah <yutorah@comms.yu.edu>
date: Sep 26, 2024, 6:54 PM
subject: The Final Parsha of the Year!
Rav Soloveitchik on Vayelech: Everyone is Welcome
Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters (Ktav, 2023)
Parashat Vayelech introduces the mitzvah of hakhel,
the special gathering of the entire Jewish people
every seven years. This is supposed to take place on Sukkot, "When all Israel comes to appear before the
Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 31:11). Hakhel is about the nation coming together as a whole—men, women, and children—to hear and rededicate themselves to
God's word. It is fitting that it should be observed during Sukkot, a holiday with motifs of inclusiveness and unity, as demonstrated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.
To bring this into sharp relief, let us begin by examining Yom Kippur, which occurs only a few days before Sukkot. When the Temple stood, it was the avodah (Temple service) of the day that brought atonement for all, but only the kohanim, a group with a genetic barrier to entry, were
able to perform it. A select few of Yerushalayim's nobles also helped with the rituals of the day and were privy to hear the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.
By contrast, on Sukkot we take the four species. The Sages explain that they symbolize four levels ofJewish observance and spiritual accomplishment. The fragrant and tasty etrog is the Jew who learns Torah and does mitzvot; the succulent palm is someone who performs the mitzvot even if deficient in Torah; the aromatic hadas (myrtle) represents the Jew who learns Torah but does not carry out mitzvot sufficiently; and the aravah (willow) symbolizes the Jew deficient in both Torah study and mitzvah performance.1 The mitzvah is to bind three species together and to hold all four as one. We are a single people and should visualize ourselves as such.
The kohanim play a key role in Judaism, particularly when the mishkan (Tabernacle) and Temples stood, but the Torah has never been considered the inheritance of any elite. "Every Jew has a portion in the Torah; all stood at Mount Sinai/' said the Rav. "Keneset Yisrael can only be built and survive with the participation of all Jews."2 While Pesach is also all-inclusive, given that all four children, even the wicked, are invited to reexperience the Exodus
as a family,3 it does not have an entire day devoted to this theme like Sukkot does—Hoshana Rabbah.
On Hoshana Rabbah, we select the aravah to be used in a second mitzvah. Although seemingly the least obvious choice in the rabbinic scheme of representation, it is precisely the unpalatable and nonaromatic aravah that we used to take for the aravah ceremony in the Temple (and still do today at the end of the prayer service). In the Rav s words:
Those who are represented by the aravah cannot manifest themselves in the same way that the other three species can. But beyond the surface, deep in the soul, the aravah has the same potential as the other species. The difference is that the other species have had the opportunity to develop, to actualize themselves, to build on their strengths, while the aravah has not.4
If Yom Kippur featured the elite, Sukkot focuses on those who might be considered, and therefore consider themselves, "the lower class." Sukkot demands that those on the periphery take center stage in the assembly of the entire people at the Temple. The aravah Jew has the same potential as the sage, if only given the opportunity.
The Talmud relates that the aravot were gathered for Temple use from a place below Yerushalayim, to which one has to descend.5 This is a beautiful image, the Rav said. The mitzvah of the aravah is fulfilled by reaching out to people who are "lower," that is, not yet proficient in Torah and
ritual observance. One goes to where they are and brings them up to the Temple. At that moment, when they are welcomed into this sacred setting, they will experience the warm embrace of their community and be inspired.6
Exploring the Rav s Insight
Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook saw in the sukkah this same motif of unity that characterizes Sukkot. The Talmud offers the imagery of a Sukkah large enough to surround the entire Jewish people. "'For seven days...
all who belong to the Jewish people will live in sukkot' (Leviticus 23:14). This teaches that it is fitting for all of Israel to sit in one sukkah."7
Obviously, no sukkah is large enough to hold millions of people, so to what does the Talmud refer?
Rav Kook explained that after the teshuvah and transformation of Yom Kippur, the nation is purified of its pettiness and can again behold the positive and the potential in one another. Harmony can now be restored, and even increased. This Talmudic dictum is therefore
a call to construct a sukkah intended to accommodate every member of the nation, a sukkah where every single individual is and feels welcome.8
Footnotes 1. Leviticus Rabbah, ch. 30. 2. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 5:249. 3. See Genack, Exalted Evening, 46. 4. Lustiger, Derashot Harav, 128. 5. Sukkah 45a. 6. Lustiger, Derashot Harav, 130-131. 7. Sukkah 27b. 8. Neriah, Moadei ha-Re'iyah, 148-149. The importance of harmonized diversity recurs throughout Rav Kook's writings. For example, about the statement "Torah scholars increase peace in the world," he said that their divergent opinions express the
fullness of truth and knowledge of God (Siddur Olat Re'iyah, 1:330-331).
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https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/1110782/Hakhel-in-Yavneh...And-Beyond
Hakhel in Yavneh...And Beyond
Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom
September 25 2024
Tidbits for Parashas Nitzvaim-Vayeilech
Inbox
From: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>
Tidbits in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZT"L
Parashas Nitzavim-Vayeilech • September 28th • 25 Elul 5784
Selichos (for Ashkenazim) begin this Motzaei Shabbos, September 28th. Selichos are generally recited each morning before davening, although some say it the night before (after chatzos, according to many). One should say Birchas Hatorah each morning prior to reciting Selichos. Selichos, and especially the Yud Gimmel Middos (Hashem, Hashem…), should be said with concentration and sincerity. It is more worthwhile to daven at one's own pace than to rush through to keep up with the minyan. However, when the congregation reaches the Yud Gimmel Middos, one should say it along with

them. When the congregation reaches Tachanun, one should say Tachanun along with the congregation and need not return to make up for what he skipped. Someone saying Selichos without a minyan omits the Yud Gimmel Middos, as well as the Aramaic passages following Tachanun (Machei Umasei etc.). There is a minhag for the Sheliach Tzibbur of Selichos to serve as the Sheliach Tzibbur for the other Tefillos that day.
There is no Shabbos Mevorchim for Chodesh Tishrei. The molad for Chodesh Tishrei is Thursday morning 3:21 AM and 13 chalakim.
Vehi Noam is omitted on Motzaei Shabbos.
As the precarious situation in Eretz Yisrael unfortunately continues, each person should increase reciting tehillim and performing other mitzvos as a zechus for the many Acheinu Beis Yisrael in travail and captivity as well as for the soldiers in battle.
Pirkei Avos: Perek 5-6
Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Bava Basra 95 • Yerushalmi: Orlah 9 • Mishnah Yomis: Bava Metzia 3:5-6 • Oraysa: Next week is Beitza 5a-7a
Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbi to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn't speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!
Rosh Hashanah begins next Wednesday evening, October 2nd.
Tzom Gedaliah is on Sunday, October 6th (nidcheh).
Yom Kippur begins on Friday evening, October 11th.
Succos begins Wednesday evening, October 16th.
Parsha in a Paragraph
NITZAVIM: On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers the people to enter them into an eternal covenant • If one goes astray and serves other gods thinking he will be spared, the curses stated in the Torah will be visited upon him • Hashem will not punish for hidden sins of another, rather only for not uprooting known misdeeds • When you witness the fulfillment of the berachos and kelalos you will be inspired to repent • The mitzvah of Teshuvah (alternatively, learning Torah) is not difficult; it is well within reach • Hashem lets you choose between life and death; choose life!
VAYEILECH: Moshe takes leave of Klal Yisrael • Moshe encourages Yehoshua in front of all of Klal Yisrael • Moshe writes a Sefer Torah • Moshe teaches the mitzvah of Hakhel • Moshe and Yehoshua enter the Mishkan together and receive prophecy • The mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah • Moshe's Sefer Torah is placed alongside the Aron as a testimony
Haftarah: The haftarah of Nitzavim is leined. The haftarah of "Sos Asis" (Yeshaya 61:10-63:9) is the final haftarah of the Shiva D'nechemta. Yeshaya Hanavi proclaims that we will rejoice in Hashem with the final redemption when we emerge triumphant from exile, enveloped in glory and royalty, similar to a chassan and kallah.
Taryag Weekly
Parashas Nitzavim: 40 Pesukim • No Mitzvos listed
Parashas Vayeilech: 30 Pesukim • 2 Obligations
1) Hakhel: In the year after shemittah, on the second day of Succos, all of Klal Yisrael gathers to hear the king read portions of Mishneh Torah (Sefer Devarim). 2) Write a Sefer Torah or, alternatively, commission one to be written.
Mitzvah Highlight: The mitzvah to write a new Sefer Torah is for the purpose of making Torah accessible. Even if one inherited a Sefer Torah, the mitzvah still applies, as writing another sefer will allow others to benefit from it. A newer sefer is also more appealing to the reader. For these reasons it is important to publish new sefarim and publications on Torah topics (Sefer HaChinuch).
For the Shabbos Table
כְּדַלִּים וּכְרָשִׁים דָּפַקְנוּ דְּלָתֶיךָ
(Selichos)
We begin Selichos with the words, כְּדַלִּים וּכְרָשִׁים דָּפַקְנוּ דְּלָתֶיךָ - Like poor and destitute people we knock on your door.
A person who falls on hard times financially and finds himself in need of assistance is still very hesitant to approach others for help. At first, he'll perhaps try to drop a hint to people close to him that things aren't going well. Then perhaps he will try some other subtle attempt. However, once a poor man reaches 'rock-bottom', he'll just walk up to the nearest rich man's door and bang in desperation.
The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16b) says kol shana sherasha b'tchilasa misasheres b'sofa. Any year which begins in poverty, with weak financial markets, will ultimately be a prosperous year. In reality this doesn't seem to always be the case. How can we understand this gemara?
Rav Shlomo Heiman zt"l quotes Rav Naftali Trup zt"l: We often find that those with immediate needs, such as those facing a health crisis or who are in need of a shidduch, daven most intently on Rosh Hashanah. The person who just lost his job is concentrating much harder than the fellow next to him who is in a secure senior position at his firm. But this is not reflective of reality. The reality is that on Rosh Hashana we are all between years and thus we are all "between jobs". Although we often get to keep our positions, we are not guaranteed anything. K'dalim uch'rashim dafaknu delasecha, we come into selichos asking, begging, like one who knows that all their possessions are only due to Hashem's graciousness and mercy.

Klal Govoah 481 Oak Glen Road Howell, NJ 07731
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From: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand**
Parshas Netzavim
An Enigmatic Medrash Explained
This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1393 – The Baal Tokeah Who Could Only Blow From His Left Side and Other Shofar Issues. Good Shabbos.
The pesukim in Parshas Nitzavim say, "For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, for you to say, 'Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, for you to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take if for us so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it." (Devorim 30:11-14).
There is a dispute among the early commentaries regarding what the expression "hamitzvah hazos" (this commandment) refers to. We will focus on the view of Rashi (and others as well), who say that the expression refers to Torah. According to this approach, the pesukim are saying that Torah is accessible to every Jew. They need not go up to Heaven to access it.
There is an enigmatic Medrash Rabbah here (Nitzavim 8) which states: "Lest you think that it was to your detriment that I gave you the Torah, that is not the case – I gave it only for your benefit! The proof is that the malachay hashares (ministering angels) also wanted it, but it was hidden from them. The Torah is beyond the malachay hashares, but for you, my sons, this is for you, as it is written 'Lo niflais hi mimcha.'"
The difficulty with this Medrash is two-fold. First of all, what on earth does it mean "You might think that it was to your detriment that I gave you the Torah"? The Torah is called a "lekach tov" (Mishlei 4:2). Who would have ever thought that it was given to our detriment!? Second of all, what kind of proof is it that it was not to our detriment because the malachay hashares wanted it as well?
I would like to share an interpretation from Rav Elya Baruch Finkel, but I want to introduce that thought with an idea I found in the Daas Zekeinim M'Baalei Hatosfos. On the pasuk, "Mi Ya'aleh Lanu Hashamayma" (Who will go up for us to Heaven), the Daas Zekeinim write that the first letters of those four words (Mem, Yud, Lamed, Hay) spell out the word milah (circumcision). What allusion is the Daas Zekeinim pointing out to us with this comment?
Perhaps we might relate this comment to something the Sefer Hachinuch famously writes. The Sefer Hachinuch asks why the Torah gave us a mitzvah of milah. After all, if the Almighty did not want us to have a foreskin, we could have been born without one and there would have been no need for the mitzvah of milah. Yet, He gave us a foreskin and commanded us to remove it. Why is that?

The Sefer Hachinuch writes that the Ribono shel Olam wanted us to become more perfect human beings. He wanted us to make the effort to improve ourselves. Therefore, He did not create us from the womb as perfect human beings – the proof being that we have a foreskin, which needs to be removed. This symbolizes the following: Just like man is able to improve his physical body, so too he is able to improve his spiritual essence. Mitzvas milah sets the tone for a person's life. Man is born imperfect specifically to impress upon him the message that human beings are far from perfect and man is charged throughout his life to try to become a more perfect human being. This is all alluded to in the pasuk "Mi Ya'aleh Lanu Hashamayma" because milah is really an indication of what Torah is all about. Torah, too, was given to us as a way for us to become closer to the Ribono shel Olam and to become holier people.

With this introduction, we return to Rav Elya Baruch Finkel's interpretation of the above-cited Medrash: There are two reasons why the Ribono shel Olam gave us the Torah. Number one is as an antidote to all the bad things about human beings. "I have created the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination); and I have created Torah as its antidote." (Yalkut Shimoni Parshas Ekev) We come into this world as very physical and materialistic people. We have all sorts of lusts and all sorts of personality faults – anger, haughtiness, etc., etc. Part of the reason for mitzvos is "for your detriment" (l'ra'aschem) – to go ahead and take away the negativity that exists within you, to purify yourselves from the dross that encompasses every human being.

You may think, says the Medrash, that the whole purpose of Torah is just to take away the bad. However, that is not the case. "It is for your benefit" – meaning, that not only is there a "sur me'rah" (depart from evil) aspect to Torah but there is also a major "aseh tov" component in it as well. The "aseh tov" component is that you become better people by virtue of the Torah. You become better baalei midos; you become greater baalei chessed; you become better people – l'tovaschem (for your benefit).

By learning the Torah and keeping the Torah, you become G-d-like and you elevate yourselves. This is a far cry from merely taking away the bad. This is the proof from the malachay hashares. The malachim clearly don't need a Torah to take away the bad. They have no Yetzer Hara. They are not physical. They are totally spiritual. They have no anger or jealousy. Then why did THEY want the Torah if they had no "bad" to be taken away? The answer is that they wanted it because they themselves realized that the way to come closer to the Ribono shel Olam is through Torah.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Nitzavim/Vayeilech is provided below: ... A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit http://www.yadyechiel.org/ for further information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 http://www.torah.org/ learn@torah.org (410) 602-1350

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subject: Who Knows Thirteen?

Who Knows Thirteen?
By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Sneak Preview

My grandmother told me how she remembers that the first night of selichos people used to go from shul to shul sampling the davening of each of the chazzanim, and deciding which shul they would attend for Rosh Hashanah. Is there any halachic basis in having the chazzan also daven the first night of selichos?

Question #2: Bemotza'ei Menucha – At the end of Shabbos

Why do Ashkenazim begin reciting Selichos on Motza'ei Shabbos or Sunday morning?

Question #3: More or Less?

Levi asks me: "Because of my work schedule, on most days I do not have a lot of time to recite selichos. Is it better to recite just a small amount of the selichos in the time that I have, or to race through as much as I can say?"

Answer:

In this article, we will address these basic questions: What is the source for the practice of reciting selichos? Does it have the halachic status of a custom or is it something that Chazal instituted?

To begin, let us note that our structured prayers can be classified into three categories:

I. Daily Davening

Our daily tefillos. Through these we fulfill our mitzvah to serve Hashem every day, as the Rambam says, IOt is a positive mitzvah to pray every day, which fulfills what the Torah states "and you shall serve Hashem your G-d." The oral mesorah teaches that the service
referred to here means prayer (Hilchos Tefillah 1:1).

II. Fasts and Emergencies

Tefillos that we say on fast days and other times of difficulty. These fulfill a different Torah mitzvah, and again I quote the Rambam: There is a positive mitzvah of the Torah to cry out and blow trumpets on every travail that befalls the community (Hilchos Taanis 1:1). One day, I hope to write an article on the topic of trumpets and why we do not blow them today. The selichos we recite following the repetition of shemoneh esrei (or according to some old minhagim, during the repetition of shemoneh esrei) on most of our fast days, including the Tenth ofTeves, Taanis Esther, the Seventeenth of Tamuz, and Behab after Sukkos and Pesach, are all reflective of this mitzvah.

III. Selichos

Even though teshuvah and prayer are always good, during the ten days that are from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur they are exceptionally good and they are immediately accepted (Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:6). The selichos that I am discussing in this article are the special prayers for teshuvah and forgiveness with which we supplicate during Elul and the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah.

Structure of Selichos

Although there are numerous variant customs, most of Klal Yisrael structures selichos in the following way: We begin with ashrei, followed by a half-kaddish, then recite many introductory verses of Tanach, which in turn lead into some small prayers that culminate with a paragraph that begins with the words Keil Erech Apayim. Keil Erech Apayim directly introduces the focal point of the selichos – the recitation of the thirteen attributes of Hashem's kindness. After the Jewish people sinned when we worshipped the Eigel Hazahav, the Golden Calf, Hashem taught Moshe to use these thirteen attributes of His kindness to achieve absolution for the Jewish people.

The recitation of the thirteen attributes is followed by a few verses that refer to Hashem pardoning our iniquities. We then recite several poetic supplications, each of which leads into another recital of the thirteen attributes. This is followed by some closing prayers which include the viduy (confession) and tachanun (a prayer customarily said while sitting in a bowed position). Selichos concludes with the chazzan reciting full kaddish. In all Ashkenazic customs with which I am familiar, there are numerous different poetic supplications, variously called selichos, akeidos, pizmonim, etc., and each day we recite a different series of these prayers. The purpose of these prayers is to introduce and set the mood for the recital of the thirteen attributes.

If we stop to realize, we will notice that our selichos prayer is structurally similar to our daily mincha prayer (without the aleinu and mourner's kaddish at mincha's end). However, the most noticeable difference between mincha and selichos is that the shemoneh esrei recited as the primary part of mincha is replaced in selichos by the repeated recital of the thirteen attributes of Hashem's mercy and the numerous prayers that introduce those recitals.

The Thirteen Midos

Why is the recital of the thirteen midos of Hashem's mercy so important? Let me quote the Talmudic passage that is the basis for our recital of selichos.

Rabbi Yochanan said: 'Were it not for the fact that the Torah itself wrote this, it would be impossible to say this. The Torah teaches that Hashem wrapped Himself in a talis like a chazzan and demonstrated to Moshe the order of prayer. Hashem told Moshe: "Whenever the Jews sin, they should perform this order [i.e., the thirteen middos] and I will forgive them"' (Rosh Hashanah 17b).

Rabbi Yochanan noted that the anthropomorphism of his own statement is rather shocking, and without scriptural proof we would refrain from saying it. Nevertheless, the Torah compelled us to say that Hashem revealed to Moshe a means whereby we can be pardoned for our iniquities. According to the Maharal, Moshe asked Hashem to elucidate, to the extent that a human can comprehend, how Hashem deals with the world in mercy. Hashem did indeed enlighten Moshe, and this enabled him to implore that the Jewish people be forgiven, and taught him how to lead the Jews in their prayers (Chiddushei Agados, Rosh Hashanah 17b s.v. Melameid).

Source for Selichos

This, then, is the basis for selichos. Indeed, it is not a takanah, but a custom; yet who would not avail himself of the opportunity to prepare early for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur! To quote the Leket Yosher: Someone who goes to daven on the High Holidays and did not say selichos in preparation can be compared to an individual who desires to approach the king with an urgent request, and manages to acquire the key to the king's inner sanctum, but fails to arrange how he will enter the outer office. All his efforts are therefore completely in vain, because he failed to prepare himself adequately. This can be compared to someone moving to an unsettled area who installs a modern kitchen, expecting to be able to turn on the tap and produce water, but there are no connecting water pipes!

More or Less

Since we understand how important it is to say selichos with feeling, it is obvious that one with limited time to recite selichos, should say a smaller amount and understand what he is saying, rather than rush through what he says (see Tur Orach Chayim Chapter 1).

Praying Truthfully

We should bear in mind that many of the selichos state that we are arising while it is still dark and similar expressions, all of which reflects the custom of earlier generations of reciting selichos either at halachic midnight (chatzos) or very early in the morning well before sunrise. Someone reciting selichos anytime after sunrise should be careful to modify these passages so that he is not lying while he pleads to Hashem (Aruch Hashulchan).

Who Should Be the Chazzan?

The above-quoted Leket Yosher concludes: It is therefore logical that the individual leading the selichos should be someone who will lead the services on Yomim Nora'im. In other words, since selichos are the introduction to our Yomim Nora'im supplications, the same chazzan that the community desires to plead on its behalf on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur should be called upon to lead their selichos entreaties.

By the way, other authorities mention another reason why the chazzan who will be leading services on Yomim Nora'im should also be chazzan for selichos, particularly if the chazzan is paid for his services. The halacha forbids paying someone for performing work on Shabbos or Yom Tov, even if it is work that is otherwise permitted, such as babysitting, being a kashrus mashgiach or a chazzan. This forbidden payment for Shabbos work is called sechar Shabbos, literally, Shabbos wages. So how does one find a babysitter for Shabbos when one needs to attend a simcha, if I cannot pay him or her?

The way to avoid the prohibition of sechar Shabbos is to hire someone for an entire job that also includes weekday work, without calculating how much is being paid for Shabbos or Yom Tov. Making the payment into one big package is called havlaah (literally, "absorbed") and is permitted, provided no computation is made for specific Shabbos or Yom Tov work and the wages are not paid on a calculated hourly basis (since this also means that one is paying for the hours worked on Shabbos or Yom Tov).

Now we have a curious problem. It is a practice of at least a thousand years to hire chazzanim. How does one pay a chazzan to perform his job on Shabbos and Yom Tov, when there is a prohibition of sechar Shabbos to pay for Shabbos work? The answer is that one also hires the chazzan to perform some weekday activity, such as giving bar mitzvah lessons, teaching in the congregation Hebrew school, or running the shul's youth activities.

None of these solutions resolve the sechar Shabbos concern regarding a chazzan who is hired to daven only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. To avoid the sechar Shabbos problem, the custom developed for the chazzan to lead one of the selichos, and thereby he is paid a "package deal" renumeration that includes some weekday work (Elef HaMagein
585:24; Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah Chapter 28 note 145).

What if the chazzan is traveling from a distance for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and it is not worthwhile to pay his transportation for a third trip to daven selichos? In this instance, there is a simple solution to the sechar Shabbos predicament, since the chazzan is also being paid for his travel time, and this itself becomes the havlaah.

Note that a halachic difference results between the two approaches I have presented why the chazzan also leads selichos. According to the Leket Yosher's approach, the chazzan should preferably daven every one of the selichos days, whereas according to the sechar Shabbos reason, it is adequate if he davens any one of the selichos days. According to both approaches I have mentioned, there is no particular reason why a chazzan should daven specifically the first night of selichos.

Why Begin Motza'ei Shabbos?

Indeed, why do Ashkenazim begin selichos on Motza'ei Shabbos?

"We always begin reciting selichos on Sunday because it is close to Shabbos, and everyone learns Torah on Shabbos since he does not deal with his financial matters and therefore has time to learn Torah… and since people are happy and joyous because of the mitzvah of learning Torah that they were able to do on Shabbos, and also because of the Shabbos pleasures that they celebrated, and we say that the shechinah rests when one is happy because of performing a mitzvah, therefore it is good to pray then (Leket Yosher).

Others explain the reason we begin selichos on Motza'ei Shabbos is because the beginning of the week represents the beginning of creation, and we are performing teshuvah for man who is the goal of all creation (Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim 581:3).

At Least Four

Ashkenazic custom is that, when Rosh Hashanah begins on Monday or Tuesday, we begin selichos the week before, to make sure that we recite selichos for at least four days before Rosh Hashanah. One reason mentioned for this practice is because originally people fasted on the days of selichos, and they wanted to fast a total of ten days. Since there are four days during the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah that one may not fast – Shabbos, the two days of Rosh Hashanah and Erev Yom Kippur – we recite selichos for at least four days before Rosh Hashanah (Tur, Levush, Taz, Magen Avraham Orach Chayim 581).

A Word about Attributes

We mentioned above that the main "prayer" of the selichos is mentioning the thirteen merciful attributes of Hashem. What exactly are the thirteen attributes? For that matter, can we attribute personality characteristics to Hashem?

Humans are not capable of understanding who Hashem is. The Torah requires that we understand that Hashem does not have moods (Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:11). When we describe Hashem's different attributes, we are explaining Hashem in a way that we as human beings will be able to comprehend Him, since we cannot comprehend Him in any other way (Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:9). Thus, providing thirteen different attributes of Hashem's mercy is simply a human way for us to appreciate more specifically and in a greater way what Hashem does and has done for us, and what is our responsibility to fulfill the mitzvah of being like Hashem, which I will explain shortly.

To quote Rabbeinu Bachyei: Although we no longer know how to beseech, nor do we properly understand the power of the thirteen attributes and how they connect to Hashem's mercy, we still know that the attributes of mercy plead on our behalf, since this is what Hashem promised. Today when we are without a kohein gadol to atone for our sins and without a mizbei'ach on which to offer korbanos and no Beis Hamikdash in which to pray, we have left only our prayers and these thirteen attributes (Kad Hakemach, Kippurim 2).

Who Knows Thirteen?

To quote the Haggadah, I know thirteen! Thirteen are the attributes.

What are the thirteen midos?

The Torah says: Hashem, Hashem, who is a merciful and gracious G-d, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth. He preserves kindness for thousands of generations by forgiving sins whether they are intentional, rebellious or negligent; and He exonerates (Shemos 34:6-7).

There are many opinions among the halachic authorities exactly how to calculate the thirteen merciful attributes of Hashem. The most commonly quoted approach is that of Rabbeinu Tam, who includes each of the names of Hashem at the beginning as a separate attribute.

What Do I Do?

At this point, I want to return to the above-quoted Talmudic source of the selichos, and note a curious and very important point.

Hashem told Moshe: "Whenever the Jews sin, they should perform this order and I will forgive them." The Hebrew word that I have translated as should perform this order is yaasu, which means that the Jews must do something, definitely more than just reading the words. If all that is required is to read these words, the Gemara should have said simply: They should read these words. Obviously, action, which always speaks louder than words, is required to fulfill these instructions and accomplish atonement.

What did the Gemara mean?

Emulate Hashem

To answer this question, we need to realize that the most important of the 613 mitzvos is the commandment to emulate Hashem. To quote the Gemara: Just as Hashem is gracious and merciful, so you should become gracious and merciful (Shabbos 133b). When Hashem told Moshe: Whenever the Jews perform this order I will forgive them, He meant that when we act towards one another with the same qualities of rachamim that Hashem does, He forgives us. Reciting the thirteen attributes of Hashem's mercy is the first step towards making ourselves merciful people who emulate Hashem's ways. Yaasu means learning to internalize these attributes by doing them, and thereby making ourselves godly people. "Doing" the thirteen attributes means not only understanding the absolutely
incredible amount of tolerance that Hashem manifests, but also includes realizing how accepting we must be of people who annoy and harm us!

This sounds great in theory. What does it mean in practice?

Here are several examples, all taken from the sefer Tomer Devorah, to help us comprehend what our job is:

1. Whenever someone does something wrong, Hashem is always at that very moment providing all the needs of the offender. This is a tremendous amount of forbearance that Hashem demonstrates. Our mitzvah is to train ourselves to be this accepting of those who annoy and wrong us.

2. We should appreciate the extent to which Hashem considers the Jews to be His people, and identify with the needs of each Jew on a corresponding level.

3. Hashem waits with infinite patience for the sinner to do teshuvah, always being confident in this person's ability to repent and change, and continues to provide the sinner with all his needs. Similarly, we should not stand on ceremony to wait for someone who wronged us to apologize.

4. Hashem emphasizes the kindnesses that a person does, and continues to shower the person with good, while in the interim overlooking the sins a person has committed. Similarly, when I know that someone wronged me, but at the same time I have received chesed from him or her, I should ignore that they wronged me – after all they also have helped me. The Tomer Devorah emphasizes specifically the chesed that one receives from one's spouse, which should, without question, supplant any criticisms one has of him or her.

5. When a person does teshuva after sinning, Hashem loves him more than He loved him before he sinned. As the Gemara states: In a place where baalei teshuvah stand, full tzadikim are unable to stand. The parallel responsibility incumbent on a person to someone who wronged him is that when he sees that the person wants to makes amends, he should befriend and accept him at a greater level than he had previously.

Conclusion:

We see that the recital of the thirteen attributes serves not only that we should appreciate all that Hashem does for us but also as a training ground to teach how we should constantly treat our fellowman.

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date: Sep 26, 2024, 3:21 PM
subject: The High Holidays as the Language of Love - Essay by Rabbi YY

The High Holidays as the Language of Love

The 5-Step Program of Spiritual Courtship, Engagement, Marriage, Honeymoon, and Real Life

To Be In Bliss

If G-d is "perfect", as Judaism teaches, what prompted Him to create us? What void was He seeking to fill?

One answer provided in Kabbalah and Chassidus, based on many a verse in Tanach and in Talmud, is that G-d desired marriage. The most accomplished and self-sufficient bachelor—and G-d is the "perfect single," lacking nothing—can not marry himself. Marriage necessitates the existence of someone distinct from yourself with whom to share your life, a union of husband and wife. G-d chose the Jewish people as His bride.[1] In this relationship, the bride would experience bliss with the loving core of all consciousness, and reveal the Divine oneness pervading the entire cosmos.
What a marriage this has been—a roller coaster of romance, affection, but also deep pain, quarrel, and estrangement. In every generation, many counselors advocated a divorce, while others proclaimed the Groom dead. Yet, the relationship has endured, because both the soul is real and G-d is real. When all layers are removed, the human person yearns for meaning, for union with G-d, and G-d craves a relationship with us.
The high-holiday season is the annual re-experience of the marriage between G-d and His people.[2] The five primary milestones of this season parallel the five phases of a conventional courtship and union.[3] The holidays invite us to journey through this process again to rejuvenate the relationship.
The Courtship
The Hebrew month of Elul precedes the high holidays. This month is described in Chassidic teachings as a time when "The King goes out to the field to meet with His people, greeting them with kindness and tenderness, displaying a joyous face to all."[4]
In our present-day slang, we would call this a date.
Just as the conventional dating process allows the two people involved to become acquainted with each other, with joy and serenity, so too the month of Elul provides us with an opportunity to get to know G-d genuinely and profoundly. G-d comes out to the field, as it were, longing to meet you where you are, to connect with you in your natural and authentic state.
The Groom Proposes
G-d, apparently, is not a fan of drawn-out dating, neither is He fearful of commitment. Four weeks later, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, He makes His proposal. "I'm crazy over you. Will you marry me?" is the question communicated to the heart of each of us as the sun sets over the horizon of the year gone by.
This is not an easy decision to make. To be married to G-d is a formidable task. It means to live with transcendence, discipline, and endless mystery. It means to challenge myself daily to go beyond my ego and insecurities and align my posture with Divine infinity. It is the constant readiness to challenge my moral failures and to stand by the highest levels of integrity and truth. And yet, a whispering voice within persists that if we will avoid this relationship we will deny ourselves the fulfillment and happiness we are capable of achieving in our lives. We were designed to be G-dly human beings, conduits for the cosmic heart.
"Let me sleep on it," we tell G-d.
What a night this is! The world goes haywire, says Master Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luriah.[5] "During the night of Rosh Hashanah," he writes, "the consciousness animating the universe becomes weak."[6] The great Jewish mystics would feel physically weak during the night of Rosh Hashanah.[7]
All of existence was brought into being for the sake of this marriage. If we refuse Him, the entire creation is in vain. The entire cosmos—every galaxy, every blade of grass, every grazing animal, every electron, genome, plant, and speck of dust—awaits our decision with trepidation.
The Bride Commits
On the morning of Rosh Hashanah, a piercing sound rises from the earth: The cry of the Shofar. It is a simple, unsophisticated cry, expressing a person's quintessential yearning to touch heaven.
We have decided. Our answer is, yes.[8]
The Wedding
The wedding day arrives. Yom Kippur is a day described as "the time of oneness"[9] in which the cosmic bride and groom forge a bond for eternity.[10]
In the Jewish tradition, the bride and groom fast on their wedding day.[11] On the day we unite with G-d, we abstain from food or drink as well.[12]
The Talmud[13] teaches that upon marriage, all the sins of the groom and bride are forgiven.[14] That's why this day is called Yom Kippur, "the day of atonement (12)."
The marriage ceremony begins with the stirring melody of "Kol Nidrei," in which we annul our vows for the coming year. What is this all about? It is the courage we cultivate to remove the power from all those promises, vows, and addictions that tie us down, opening our neural pathways to new possibilities. During these profound moments, we attempt to free ourselves from compulsive behavior and toxic habits and let go of the traumas, pains, resentments, animosity, anger, fear, and envy, that hold us hostage to dysfunction.[15]
The traditional Jewish marriage ceremony culminates with the bride and groom entering a secluded room ("cheder yichud" in Hebrew) to spend time alone with each other. Yom Kippur as well culminates with the Neilah, or closure prayer. As the sun of Yom Kippur sets, the gates of heaven close—with you inside.
During Neilah, every soul is alone with G-d.[16]
The Celebration
When the bride and groom exit their private room, the party begins. From Yom Kippur, we leap into the seven-day festival of Sukkot, described in the Torah[17] as "the time of our Joy."
These days are filled with feasting and ecstatic happiness. Every Jewish family builds a hut, a Sukkah, outdoors, where they celebrate for seven days the marriage between G-d and His people.[18]
We eat, drink, sing, dance, and just enjoy being one with Oneness.
Intimacy
The wedding feast is over. The guests and relatives have returned home. In the consummation of the relationship, bride and groom experience intimacy, their lives melded together as husband and wife.
So too, following the seven days of Sukkot, we reach the zenith of the High Holiday season: Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, described in the writings of the Arizal, the Tanya, and the Vilna Gaon[19] as the "time of intimacy with the Divine." During these two charged days the joy reaches its peak, as G-d and His people merge into a seamless whole. A Divine seed is planted in each of our hearts.
That's why we recite special prayers for rain on the festival of Shmini Atzeret. What is rain? In the midst of intimacy between heaven and earth, procreative drops from heaven are absorbed, fertilized, and nurtured by mother-earth, which in time will give birth to its botanical children.[20] Shmini Atzeres is the day of intimacy when all new souls to be born that year are spiritually conceived.
The Ordinary Month
The honeymoon comes to an end and the excitement begins to fade. Now the marriage becomes about caring for each other and demonstrating trust and loyalty, as husband and wife work through the daily grind of life.
Out of the twelve months in the Jewish calendar, the only one lacking a single festive day is the one that immediately follows the High Holiday season, the month of Cheshvan. Why? Because this is the time to build a genuine relationship with our marriage Partner in our everyday lives. No fanfare or drama, just learning to find meaning and love in the daily chores of life.[21]
This is the time to discover the joy born out of a continuous relationship with G-d, during the mundane days and nights that define the bulk of our life on planet earth. It is time to discover how ordinary moments and experiences can be extraordinary -- as long as the love is flowing in your veins.

[1] See King Solomon's Song of Songs. Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 10. Tanya Shaar Hayechud V'haEmunah chapter 7. This theme pervades a large part of the Kabbalistic and Chassidic literature. In the Jewish mystical terminology, it is described as the creation being motivated by "Sefiras Hamalchus," i.e. G-d desire for a relationship with somebody outside and independent of Him (Cf. Tanya ibid; Likkutei Torah Tzav Maamar Hayam Raah and countless more discourses of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and other Chassidic Masters.) [2] See Mishnah Taanis 26b. [3] The following ideas are based on various sources in the Kabbalistic and Chassidic

literature. All of my sources are noted in the following footnotes. [4] Likkutei Torah Reah p. 32b. [5] Rabbi Isaac Luryah, the Arizal, passed away in Sefad on the 5th of Av 1572. [6] See Pre Eitz Chaim Shaar Rosh Hashnah. Cf. Sefer Hasichos 5752 Parshas Vaeira and references noted there. [7] See references in Sefer Hasichos ibid. [8] See Talmud Rosh Hashanah p. 16a and p. 34b. Cf. Pre Eitz Chaim Shaar Rosh Hashanah how the blowing of the Shofar accomplishes "Binyan Hamalchus," the dynamic relationship between man and G-d. [9] This is how the Mishnah (referenced in footnote #2) defines the day of Yom Kippur, "yom chasunaso." [10] Likkutei Torah Pinchas Maamar Kodesh Yisroel L'Hashem. Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1154. [11] Rama Even Haezer section 61., 63, 65. The first source for this custom, apparently, is Terumas Hadeshen section 109. [12] See Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27-29. Numbers 29:7. [13] Talmud Yerushalmi Bikkurim chapter 3, p. 65. [14] See Beis Shmuel to Even Haezer 61 section 109, quoting Maharam Mintz section 109, that one of the reasons for fasting on the day of the wedding is because of it being a day of atonement. [15] Likkutei Torah Matos p. 85a. [16] Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1154. [17] This is the description of the holiday in all of the Amidah services of Sukkos, based on Deuteronomy 16:13;15. [18] See Sefer Haamarim Melukat vol. 1 p. 177 and references noted there.[19] Pre Eitz Hachaim Shaar Halulav chapter 8; Mishnas Chassidim Mesechte Sukkah chapter 12 Mishnah 8. Tanya Igeres HaKodesh section 20, p. 130b. [20] Sources in the previous footnote. The spiritual birth as a result of this "intimacy" occurs, according to the above sources, on the seventh day of Pesach. This is the mystical significance behind the splitting of the sea on that day, representing the "opening" of the cosmic "mother-womb" to give birth to the souls. Cf. above sources and Likkutei Torah Tzav Maamar Hayam Raah. [21] Sefer Hasichos 5749 pp. 38-47.

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from: Torah Musings <newsletter@torahmusings.com>
reply-to: Torah Musings <torahmusings@gmail.com>
date: Sep 26, 2024, 11:01 AM
subject: Torah Musings Daily Digest for 09/26/2024

Let's Be Zionists!

by R. Gidon Rothstein

Parshat Nitzavim

Lest I forget, this is the last Torah reading before Rosh HaShanah, so let me with you a ketivah ve-hatimah tovah.

It's a double parsha, so instead of a concluding paragraph bringing together the ideas in this essay, I'll challenge you up front—what in the four comments I chose for Nitzavim justifies my title? Answers welcome to my email address, my first initial, first six letters of my last name (rothst) and it's a gmail address. Prize is satisfaction.

You Can Figure It Out

Among Moshe Rabbenu's encouragements, 30;11, he says the Torah is lo nifleit (in translations on Sefaria, not too baffling, abstruse, extraordinary, or hidden; the multiple readings are somewhat ironic in light of R. Mecklenburg's comment). HaKetav VeHaKabbalah thinks the verse comes to reassure us, despite difficulty we may face in understanding all the Torah's meanings.

Torah' s depth of expression challenges us to find the full connotations of each word, particularly synonyms, or where the Torah uses two different words to the same effect. He chooses famous examples from the Aseret Ha-Dibberot, the Torah says zachor and shamor regarding Shabbat, lo tachmod and lo tit'aveh for the prohibition against coveting another's possessions. Indubitably, he says, the words vary in meaning, intend different ideas. Unless we understand all their imports, we will not have plumbed the text's message.

It's hard work, R. Mecklenburg concedes, so Moshe wanted us to know it was doable, not beyond our capabilities.

Fighting One Battle, Misreading the Other

Three verses earlier, 30;8, the Torah promised the Jews would return to God and perform all the mitzvot. R. Hirsch points out verse two had already said much the same. He resolves the redundancy by assigning the earlier verse to exile, it speaks of Jews' return to full observance of what's doable outside Israel.

This later verse speaks of repentance in the Land, once Hashem has restored us there. There is only one possible way to read the blessing in this section of the Torah, he says, three times, there will be an ingathering of exiles, brought to the promised Land. The prerequisite is Jews' return to full observance, after which their scatterings will be ended. Adherence to the Torah in Israel will fulfill the purpose of their being brought there.

Thank God, it seems God has granted us more of an ingathering, despite our many failings of observance, than R. Hirsch thought possible.

I think he was also more focused on the end of his comment, where he dismissed claims the Torah was outdated. In his time, mid- to late 1800s in Germany, many Jews (especially Reform) denied any continuing role for Israel in Jewish life, and R. Hirsch, staunch defender of the faith, was telling them how wrong they were.

No Matter How Far We Are Flung

Malbim picks apart the choice of adjective in 30;4, if nidachacha, your outcasts (or exiled ones), be at the end of the heavens. Lehadiach someone, says Malbim, is harsher than throwing away, means the object has been cast as far as possible, until there is nowhere else to cast him/them/it. There will be some Jews who are nidachim, who are as far away as possible (before World War I, I think the Jews of America were thought of as exactly that). Now the verse switches roots, promises Hashem will be mekabetz those Jews, gather them in. (Malbim very much adopts the Vilna Gaon's concern with the connotations of synonyms. Here, the people will be nidachim, thrown away as far as could be, yet will be mekubatzim, regathered.) Kibbutz is not the reverse of hadachah, casting out; to Malbim, the word indicates Hashem will take us each individually (as Yeshayahu 27;22 says). Indeed, in another outcome I'd have thought hardly imaginable in Malbim's time, so many of us have personal Aliyah stories, how Hashem worked it out for us to get here.

Can We See It?

R. David Tzvi Hoffmann was dissatisfied with the many readings he knew of the first verse chapter thirty (I'll leave out that discussion). Instead, he thinks it is telling us what will lead to the repentance promised in the rest of the chapter. When we experience God's blessings and punishments, and pay attention to the link, to how our lives go well when we fulfill the Torah, how we have hard times when we abandon it, we will see the underlying course of history.

In his view, the verse speaks of "among all the nations" to tell us we will arrive at this conclusion even there, since Hashem will have given us no peace or rest. In his view—accurate for some Jews in the past century, sadly not yet of others—the course of Jewish history will certify God's "Hand" in that history, will make clear to us the link between how we do in our relationship with God and how we progress in this world.

May it become ever clearer for those who do not yet see it!

Parshat VaYelech: Guideposts to Goodness

History Should Be Transparent

HaKetav VeHaKabbalah read Moshe's prediction of the people's sinfulness after he passes away, 29;29, similarly to what R. Hoffmann wrote for the beginning of chapter thirty . The upcoming song, Ha'azinu, will predict their troubles when they go wrong, to forestall their treating it like happenstance . Moshe is saying it now, to stop Jews from saying it was unpredictable. It was in fact predicted, along with the reaction we are supposed to give it.

Contending with God

I once saw an idea of Elie Wiesel's, the angel gives Ya'akov the name Yisrael ki sarita im Elokim, for you have struggled with God. Jews struggle with God, Wiesel said. R. Hirsch infers something similar from the way Moshe phrases his description of the Jews' rebelliousness, 31;27. Rather than saying they were mamrim bo, rebelled against Him, or oto, at Him, as it were, Moshe says they were mamrim im, rebelled with.

Throughout Jewish history, starting already in the desert, Jews were never fully faithful, but also never fully sundered their ties to God. Always somewhat mamrim, and somewhat im, somewhat in rebellion, somewhat still with.

It is, says R. Hirsch a bit poetically, the root of all our troubles and the source of all our comfort.

The Experience of Hakhel

The middle of chapter thirty-one sets up a ceremony to occur once every seven years, during the Sukkot of the shemittah year, Hakhel. Jews are to

gather in all their masses, to hear the Torah read, to be reminded of the importance of adhering to the Torah and its dictates.
Malbim to verses ten and eleven articulates ways the event was calculated to maximize its impact on attendees. First, seven years is rare enough for people to take note (it doesn't become common or rote, like saying Tehillim after every service). Second, people had more free time than usual during a shemittah year (the farmers, anyway), would have spent that time studying Torah, so this ceremony would build on what they had already done, would cap their year.
Third, when coming to Jerusalem, in some sense "more" in the Presence of God, people would focus on their spirituality, knowing God can see inside of them. This would be helped by the place itself, where God's Presence was palpable (as Ya'akov Avinu had already said, adds Malbim). Fifth, the king would read the Torah, and people always pay attention to what a king does. The words of the Torah themselves, being direct from God, would do their part, as would the size of the gathering, big crowds always making an impression.
A ceremony structured to be remembered.
Bible Critics Don't Know Better Than Chazal
The last comment we will see of R. David Tzvi Hoffmann's—he didn't write about Ha'azinu or VeZot HaBerachah that I could find—dismisses translations of 31;7 that led Biblical critics to amend the text. Back in 3;21, Moshe had told Yehoshu'a he would enter the Land with the elders of the Jewish people, ata tavo, where our verse has Moshe adjuring Yehoshu'a to bring the people to Israel, tavi.
Some translations—the Peshitta, Vulgate, and Samaritan—mitigated tavi, treated it as a hif'il, cause them to enter. Sensing the problem, others called to amend the text, have it read tavo, to fit the earlier verse.
R. Hoffmann first cites the Septuagint, which coheres withSanhedrin8a, where R. Yochanan puts the two together. Yehoshu'a is generally to lead the people with the elders at his side, but is also to remember, a la Harry Truman, where the buck stops, to remember he is the leader, will sometimes need to lead forcefully (R. Hoffmann singles out military strategy as a place for this).
Jews have never found it easy to serve God, R. Hirsch told us, although Hakhel and the course of history should have made it clear, Malbim and R. Mecklenburg added, even when we have had proper leadership, such as Yehoshu'a, who balanced sometimes working with the elders, sometimes being the one leader of the generation.

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from: **Rav Immanuel Bernstein** <ravbernstein@journeysintorah.com>
date: Sep 26, 2024, 7:14 AM
subject: Meshech Chochmah on Nitzavim
MESHECH CHOCHMAH
Parshas Nitzavim
Close at Heart
כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ
For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it (30:14)
Natural Assets
Hashem has endowed man with numerous assets and faculties which can serve him faithfully, provided he does not impair them. For example, the five senses are there to serve man, but can become de-sensitized through excessive and unhealthy behavior. Similarly, the world's resources are available to man, yet can prove inadequate if he engages in them excessively, turning yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities. With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the Mishnah's famous statement[1] regarding why humans can sometimes find it hard to make a living: "הרעותי את מעשי וקפחתי את פרנסתי – I corrupted my deeds and (thus) frustrated my livelihood." The relationship between these two phrases is that when one "corrupts his deeds" and becomes dependent on luxury items, making a living that requires their inclusion thereby becomes a frustrated endeavor.
The same is true with regards to matters of morals. Man has been endowed with a natural moral sense, valuing good and kindness while rejecting evil and injustice. However, these senses, too, can become dulled. If a person gives in to his baser drives, he can come to dull or even corrupt his natural sense of right and wrong. These forces serve to blind the person to basic truths which were once clear to him. Indeed, the person himself can sometimes recognize this blinding effect, for once his wrongful activity is over he regrets it, with all the justifications and rationalizations that accompanied it falling away. This is the meaning of the Gemara's statement[2] that after a person passes away, "his soul testifies against him." The recognition of the immoral nature of the person's acts is something that originally existed within the soul while the person was alive, but was then robbed of it by his desires. Now, free of the skewing influences of the person's selfish drives, his soul is free to testify concerning these deeds with full clarity and conviction.
So, too, with regards to recognition that the world has Creator. The natural unfettered response to seeing a world which caters for all of man's needs is to conclude that Someone ordered it in this way. This was the way Avraham came to an awareness of Hashem. Here, too, one can choose to give in to forces which are not prepared to recognize Hashem, at which point he will be forced to come up with much more elaborate explanations as to how all these things came into being and exists in the way that they do.
All of these ideas are summed up in Shlomo Hamelech's words in Koheles:[3]
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹקִ֖ים אֶת הָאָדָם יָשָׁר וְהֵמָּה בִקְּשׁוּ חִשְׁבֹּנוֹת רַבִּים
For God made man upright, while they pursued many calculations.
Hashem created man in a state which was "upright" (yashar) where certain key truths and values were clear to him. Part of man giving into corrupting influences is that he is then forced to "pursue many calculations" in propounding ideas that fit in with the way he wishes to live his life.
"The Book of Man's Source"
The implications of the above idea is that man innately possesses the ability to make correct moral decisions, as well as the capacity to recognize Hashem based on his observation of the world. These are the two areas the basics of which comprise the seven Noachide laws. With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah offers a fascinating explanation of a statement in the Talmud Yerushalmi.[4] R' Akiva famously says that "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ – love your neighbor like yourself,"[5] is a "כלל גדול בתורה – major principle in the Torah." To this Ben Azzai responds, there is a greater principle still, contained within the verse: "זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם – This is the book of the generations of man."[6]
This response of Ben Azzai is quite difficult to understand. It is not readily apparent how that verse about the generations of man constitutes a principle at all, much less the greatest of all principles!
The Meshech Chochmah explains that Ben Azzai expounds this verse as saying that not only is man obligated by the Torah to treat his fellow fairly and correctly – man himself is a book where that command can be read! The word "תולדות" refers to how things emanate. As long as man is close to his initial uncorrupted mode of emanation ("תולדות אדם – the emanation of man"), his natural sense is in accord with moral behavior, which makes his very being the equivalent of a book or moral instruction. It is with this in mind that verse concludes by saying that man was created "בִּדְמוּת אֱלֹקִים – in the likeness of God." Hashem, the ultimate Source of moral instruction, has made Man in his likeness, endowing him with a sense of moral behavior to instruct him on Hashem's behalf.
The Jewish People and the Torah
The above holds true for humanity in general. However, the outstanding efforts and achievements on the part of the Avos in recognizing Hashem and implementing Godly living led Him to choose their descendants for a higher level of Divine knowledge and attainment. If people in general have the innate capacity to recognize Hashem as Creator and the value of moral living – the basis of the seven Noachide laws, the Jewish People were further endowed with the capacity to love Hashem and recognize His involvement in the course of world events – the basis of the Torah's mitzvos:
Mitzvos such as tzitzis, tefillin and mezuzah reflect love for Hashem by pacing a reminder of Him on the person, his clothing and his dwelling.

Similarly, the various korbanos reflect a desire to attain a greater closeness to Him.
Mitzvos such as reciting the Shema, learning Torah, remembering the Exodus and keeping Shabbos and Yom Tov, reflect the desire to spread Hashem's word and celebrate His guidance of world events.
However, in the same way that humankind in general can have its basic sense of moral living corrupted by selfish forces within them, so, too, the Jewish People can experience this corruption with regards to their natural affinity with them mitzvos of the Torah.
Hearing Hashem's Voice
It turns out that the relationship between doing teshuvah and hearing Hashem's voice is twofold:
Firstly, doing teshuvah comprises a decision to hear Hashem's voice in the sense of recommitting or strengthening one's commitment to heed His commandments as set forth in the Torah.
Additionally, doing teshuvah purifies the person's heart and rids it of corrupting and distorting influences, to the degree that he is then capable of hearing Hashem's voice emanate from within his own heart.
It is this second voice that is being referred to by R' Yehoshua ben Levi's statement in Pirkei Avos:[7] "Every day a voice emanates from Chorev (Sinai) and says 'Woe to the people over the disgrace of the Torah!'" this voice is the one that resonates and reverberates from within
With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the meaning of pasuk 10 which states:
כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו... כִּי תָשׁוּב אֶל ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשֶׁךָ
When you hear the voice of Hashem, your God, to keep His mitzvos… when you return to Hashem, your God, with all your heart and all your soul.
The ideas contained within this pasuk – doing teshuvah and heeding Hashem's voice – have already been mentioned earlier on the perek,[8] for they are the basis of teshuvah itself. What is being added by their repetition here at the end of the Torah's discussion of teshuvah? Rather, in this later pasuk, the Torah is referring to hearing Hashem's voice from within, something that is only possible once one has purified his heart through doing teshuvah "with all his heart and all his soul".
If the heart of humankind generally is a book instructing the person to live in a moral and Godly way, the hearts of the Jewish people are a sefer Torah, exhorting the person to live on accordance with all the Torah's mitzvos.
Teshuvah begins by heeding Hashem's call to return to the Torah and ends by hearing that call echo in one's own heart. It is this idea which the Torah proceeds to set forth in pesukim 11-14, where it says:
כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת... לֹא נִפְלֵאת הִוא מִמְּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִוא... כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ
For this mitzvah… is not inaccessible to you nor is it far away… for the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.
כתיבה וחתימה טובה לכל בית ישראל!
[1] Kiddushin 82b. [2] Taanis 11a. [3] 7:29. [4] Nedarim 9:4. [5] Vayikra 19:18. [6] Bereishis 5:1. [7] 6:2. [8] Pasuk 2. Journeys in Torah 2/4 Rechov Yitzhok ben Nachum Bayit Vegan 90045 Israel

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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 chofshit' (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 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 **derech 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 Seforno'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.

Parshas Netzavim Vayeilech: Dimensions of Teshuvah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. PARASHAT HAT'SHUVAH

The second half of Parashat Nitzavim (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 n longer be tempted to abandon our commitment to God or our intimate relationship with Him.

At that point, following S'forno'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 occurences 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'forno'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'forno'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 desparation 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.

Holiday Reader of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

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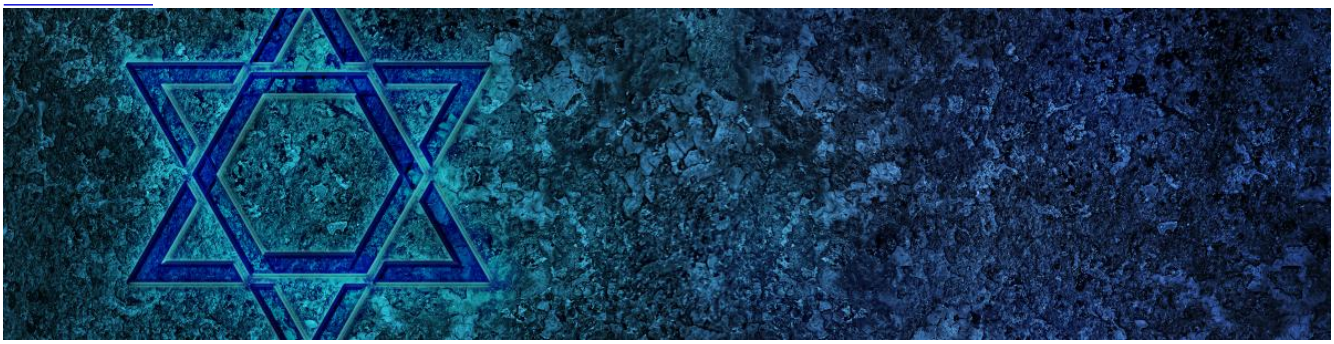

Holiday Reader

For Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Succoth

Prepared by Rabbis Marc and Hayyim Angel

For

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

Eyes Open, Eyes Shut: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Paul Gaugin, the famous 19th century French artist, commented: “When I want to see clearly, I shut my eyes.”

He was referring to two different ways of perceiving reality. With our eyes open, we see surface reality—size, shape, color etc. But with our eyes shut, we contemplate the context of things, our relationship to them, the hidden meanings.

With our eyes open, a dozen roses are 12 beautiful flowers. With our eyes shut, they may be full of memories and associations—roses given or received on our first date; roses at our wedding; roses growing in our childhood home's back yard; roses on our grandmother’s Shabbat table.

How we see fellow human beings is also very different with open or closed eyes. With our eyes open, we see their physical features. With our eyes shut, we remember shared experiences, friendships, happy and sad moments. When we want to see clearly—comprehensively—we shut our eyes.

Mircea Eliade, a specialist in world religions, has written in his book, The Sacred and The Profane, about the pagan view of New Year. For them, human life is a series of recurring cycles, always on the verge of chaos. On New Year, people descend into this primordial chaos: drunkenness, debauchery, chaotic noise.

The Jewish view is radically different. For Jews, reality isn’t a hopeless cycle of returns to chaos, but a progression, however slow, of humanity. Rosh Hashana is not a return to primeval chaos, but a return to God, a return to our basic selves. Our New Year is observed with prayer, repentance, solemnity, and a faith that we can—and the world can—be better.

The pagan New Year is an example of seeing reality with open eyes. Things really do seem to be chaotic when viewed on the surface. Humanity does not seem to improve over the generations. We always seem to be on the verge or self-destruction.

The Jewish New Year is an example of viewing reality with our eyes shut, of seeing things more deeply, more carefully. While being fully aware of the surface failings of humanity, we look for the hidden signs of progress and redemption. We attempt to maintain a grand, long-range vision. This is the key to the secret of Jewish optimism. While not denying the negatives around us, we stay faithful to a vision of a world that is not governed by chaos, but by a deeper, hidden, mysterious unity.

The problem of faith today is not how to have faith in God. We can come to terms with God if we are philosophers or mystics. The problem is how can we have faith in humanity? How can we believe in the goodness and truthfulness of human beings?

With our eyes open, we must view current events with despair and trepidation. We see leaders who are liars and hypocrites. We see wars and hatred and violence and vicious anti-Semitism. We are tempted to think that chaos reigns.

But with our eyes shut, we know that redemption will come. We know that there are good,

heroic people struggling for change. We know that just as we have overcome sorrows in the past, we will overcome oppressions and oppressors of today.

Eyes open and eyes shut not only relate to our perception of external realities, but also to our self-understanding. During the season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we focus on penitential prayers. We confess our sins and shortcomings. But as we think more deeply about our deficiencies, we also close our eyes and look for our real selves, our deeper selves, our dreams and aspirations.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, noted that the high holy day period is symbolized by the shofar. The shofar must be bent, as a reminder that we, too, must bow ourselves in contrition and humility. But shortly after Yom Kippur comes Succoth, with the lulav as a central symbol. The lulav must be straight, not bent over. The lulav teaches us to stand strong and tall, to focus on our strengths and virtues. The holiday season, then, encourages us to first experience humility and contrition; but then to move on to self-confidence and optimism. Our eyes are open to our shortcomings; but when we shut our eyes, we also can envision our strengths and potentialities.

Rosh Hashana reminds us to view our lives and our world with our eyes open—but also with our eyes shut. We are challenged to dream great dreams, to seek that which is hidden, to see beyond the moment.

Rosh Hashana is a call to each individual to move to a higher level of understanding, behavior and activism. Teshuva—repentance—means that we can improve ourselves, and that others can improve, and that the world can improve.

This is the key to Jewish optimism, the key to the Jewish revolutionary vision for humanity, the key to personal happiness.

Changing the Channel: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his short story, “The Last Channel,” Italo Calvino portrays a man who has been deemed to be insane. When this man watched television, he kept clicking his remote control button without watching any program for more than a few seconds. At some point, he started to take the remote control panel outside his house. He clicked it at buildings, stores, banks, neon signs, and at people.

But this man claimed that he was not at all deranged. In his defense, he stated that he kept clicking the remote control button because he did not like what he saw! He was looking for the “true” program, a program without drivel and artificiality and hypocrisy. He asserted: “There is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, MY story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I’m going.”

This man flashed the remote control button because he was looking for the “real” program, the “real” city, his “real” self. He wanted to turn off the chaos and senselessness around him and was certain that if he kept clicking the remote button he would at last find the “right” channel.

While the man in Calvino’s story seems to have crossed the line between sanity and insanity, his desire for self-understanding and for the perfection of the world were not insane at all. Don’t we all wish we had a remote control button that we could click and make everything right, find the “real” picture, the “real” world that makes sense to us. When we confront lies and hatred, violence and injustice, hedonism and meanness—wouldn’t it be nice to have a button to click to change the channel to a better picture?

In some ways, the shofar of Rosh Hashana serves as our remote control button! It evokes a world yet in progress, a vision rooted in antiquity, fixed in the present, and arching into the distant future. It alludes to a “real” world, a finer world.

The original shofar dates back to the story of the Akeidah, when Abraham was called upon to bind Isaac on a sacrificial altar. The story teaches that God does not want child sacrifice. We are to demonstrate our faith not by murdering our children but by strengthening them in life. At the end of the episode, Abraham noticed a ram caught in the brambles by its horns. He offered the ram as a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac. The shofar blown on Rosh Hashana evokes memories of the Akeidah.

At the conclusion of the Akeidah narrative, the Torah informs us that Abraham and his retinue “rose up and went together to Be’er Sheva.” Why is this detail provided? Why do we need to know where Abraham went after the Akeidah?

If we look at the passage just before the recounting of the Akeidah, we find that “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Be’er Sheva, and he called out there in the name of God Lord of the Universe.” The Akeidah was a setting of trauma, terror, spiritual confusion. Such a crisis could have broken anyone. But Abraham clicked his remote control button. He went back to Be’er Sheva and reconfirmed his faith in God Lord of the Universe. He found inner serenity, the power to transcend the vicissitudes and trials of life. He clicked on to a better channel! When faced with overwhelming crisis, it is right and proper to return to our starting point, to our essential selves, to our rootedness in our faith. The shofar prods us to seek a firm and grand framework for life.

Just as the shofar harks back to the Akeidah story, it also reminds us of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. That dramatic occasion was accompanied by “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud.” The voice of God was heard by the trembling assembly. But we might ask: with all the thunder and lightning and voice of God, what need was there for the sound of a shofar?

The shofar’s essential sound is a *teruah*. The Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as *Yom Teruah*. The shofar is alluding to something mysterious and profound.

A *teruah* is a sound without words, a crying plaintive sound that does not verbally articulate anything. The shofar is symbolic of human feelings and thoughts that are too deep for words. The *teruah* transcends glibness; it pushes away banalities and pretenses. In a sense, it is a remote control button that allows us to penetrate beyond surface successes and failures, prompting us to think more carefully about our lives, about the world we live in. The *teruah* is the sound of self-understanding…and the sound of protest against an imperfect world and an unjust society.

And yet another symbol: the messianic age will be introduced with the sounding of the shofar. The shofar calls to mind the utopian vision of Judaism. We do not believe humanity is condemned to live forever with injustice, corruption, hatred and war. We may look at our contemporary world and be overcome with discouragement. The shofar reminds us: click the remote control button! A better time will surely come, redemption will emerge, a messianic age beckons to humanity.

The shofar suggests a grander, truer vision of who we are and who we can become. It cries out to us to keep striving for a better society and a better world. It invites us to strengthen our faith in the Almighty…and in ourselves. One day, we will find the right channel.

Shofar So Good: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Shofar plays a central role in the Rosh Hashana liturgy and invariably is one of the highlights of the synagogue service. Its primordial sounds are meant to awaken us from spiritual slumber; and to evoke thoughts and emotions relating to the Akeida story, the Revelation at Sinai, and the Messianic Redemption.

The laws relating to the ritual propriety of a shofar can be understood to convey moral lessons. A shofar must be fashioned from one horn; a shofar that is patched together using different pieces of ram's horn is not kasher for use. The moral: we need to be "whole" human beings, true to ourselves, strong with personal integrity. If we are merely a patchwork of other people's ideas and values, we are not fulfilling our responsibility as autonomous human beings.

The shofar is not to be plated with gold in such a way as to alter its authentic sound. The moral: we are not to allow material prosperity to falsify our authentic voices. Nor are we to be impressed by wealthy individuals whose "voices" have been altered by their riches e.g. who arrogate to themselves rights and privileges simply because of their wealth. A person's human worth is not to be determined by how much or how little "gold" he/she has.

If the sound of the shofar is the result of an echo i.e. the person blew the shofar in a cave or through a microphone, then this does not satisfy the religious requirement of hearing the shofar. The moral: we need to concentrate on the real thing, not on echoes or artificial magnifications. The shofar serves its role not by how loud a noise it can make, but by how natural and authentic a sound it emits.

The shofar is supposed to be bent over into a curve. The moral: we are to be contrite when we come before the Lord, bowing in humility and with honest recognition of our weaknesses.

Thus, the shofar is imbued with important symbolic messages to help us be better human beings and more devoted Jews. May we all be sensitive to the messages of the shofar. May we all be blessed with a meaningful holiday season. May the Almighty bless us and our loved ones with a year of good health and happiness, peace for America, Israel, and the world.

Deeper Meanings: Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Eleanor Roosevelt once noted: “Do not hesitate to do what you think you cannot do. Dare to reach beyond your perceived limits. Do not let yourself be trapped within the narrow confines of narrow thinking. Do not let past defeats and failures drag you down."

Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of Jewish optimism in our ability to grow, change, and redefine ourselves. It is a day to cleanse ourselves of our past failings and sins, and to imagine ourselves beginning a new phase in our lives.

Yom Kippur aims at our spiritual selves. It calls for a transformation in the way we see things and the way we experience things. It wants us to confront reality more clearly than we have done in the past. Young or old, this is a time for renewal and re-invigoration.

There is a famous story about a shohet (ritual slaughterer) who came to a new town and wanted to be employed by the community. As was the custom, he came to the town’s rabbi and sought approval. The rabbi asked the shohet to demonstrate how he prepared the knife for the slaughter of animals. The shohet showed how he sharpened the knife; and he ran his thumb up and down the blade checking for any possible nicks. When he completed the demonstration, he looked to the rabbi for validation.

The rabbi asked: “From whom did you learn to be a shohet?”

The shohet answered: “I learned from the illustrious Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov.”

The rabbi replied: “Yes, you have performed the task of sharpening and checking the knife very well. However, you did not do so in the manner of the Baal Shem Tov. When the Baal Shem Tov checks the knife, he always has tears in his eyes.”

Yes, the shohet had learned the technical skills of his trade—but he did not plumb the depths of his work. He had not internalized the emotional, psychological and spiritual elements that were the hallmark of his teacher. He was technically proficient—but he had no tears in his eyes.

Religious life (and life in general!) can sometimes be technically correct; but at the same time it might be missing the inner spiritual content, the tears in the eyes. A synagogue service might be conducted with great accuracy, and yet fail to produce a real religious experience. A person might fast and pray all day on Yom Kippur, and yet be exactly the same person at the end of the day as he/she was at the beginning of the day.

If Yom Kippur is observed without our realizing the deeper significance of the moment, then it is just another lost opportunity.

Yom Kippur offers us purification, a fresh start, a revived spirit. It reminds us of who we are and who we can yet become. It dares us to transcend our past limits. If we experience Yom Kippur deeply and clearly, we will face the adventure of life with renewed strength and wisdom.

The MIshnah (Taanit 4:8) quotes Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that Yom Kippur was one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar (the other being the 15th day of Av). We should draw on this spirit of optimism as we observe Yom Kippur, recognizing that this day offers us a unique gift: the gift of personal renewal.

Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Although we popularly refer to the upcoming fast day as Yom Kippur, the Torah calls it Yom haKippurim—the day of atonements (in the plural). The plural form reminds us that there are many roads to atonement. Each person is different and is on a unique spiritual level; each comes with different insights, experiences, memories. The roads to atonement are plural, because no two of us have identical needs.

This season of Teshuvah and Kapparah—repentance and atonement—provides us with a special challenge and opportunity. We are granted a yearly period of time for intense evaluation of our lives. This period should serve as a springboard to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The first step in the process of spiritual renewal is to become humbly aware of our frailties. No matter how successful we think we are, we are mortal! We have limited physical capacities and a limited time of life on this earth. Aside from our physical limitations, we have moral and religious shortcomings that must be confronted. The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, suggested that a person grows only after confronting deep existential crisis. “These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.” The first goal of this season is to feel “shipwrecked.”

But when we do “come up against our own reality” we often reach a point of perplexity. How are we to make ultimate sense of our lives? How are we to understand the vagaries of human existence—disease, wars, injustice? How are we to deal with all the social and professional pressures? How can we cope with problems in our families and communities? How can we advance beyond the quagmire of fear and self-doubt?

The famous Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked: Where is God? And he answered: Where ever a human being lets Him in! If we want to feel the presence of God, we need to open ourselves to that experience. The season of Teshuvah and Yom haKippurim is a time to restore our relationship with the Almighty, to express our perplexities. This genuine experience of relationship with God gives us the inner strength to cope with our problems and perplexities.

A further step in the process of Teshuvah and Kapparah is balancing the feelings of alienation and belonging. We say to the Almighty: *ki ger anokhi imakh; toshav kekhol avotai*, I am a stranger with You, a sojourner as were all of my ancestors. What does this mean? I feel as though I am a stranger, alienated from God; there are barriers between me and You. But I want to be a sojourner, a permanent resident in Your presence, not a stranger or a passing visitor. I want to come home to the teachings and traditions of my ancestors who have maintained faith and courage for the past 3500 years.

A parable: A person tries to cut down a tree with a dull edged saw. He works very hard but makes little progress. A passerby sees this and asks: why don't you sharpen the saw? The person responds: I don't have time, I can't stop working, I need to cut down this tree. The passerby says: But if you would stop working for a few minutes to sharpen the saw, you would actually save time and effort, and you would better be able to accomplish your goal! The person replies: No, I don't have time to stop working, I must keep sawing.

Without the proper tools, we exert great energy but achieve inadequate results.

In spiritual life, too, we need proper tools. If we work with old habits, with stubborn attachment to stale and futile patterns, we will not grow. We need to think more clearly about our goals and how we can best attain them. Yom haKippurim provides a day when we take off from our usual routine. It is an entirely different kind of day from any other day of the year. It is a time to sharpen ourselves spiritually; to humbly face our limitations; to cope with our perplexities; to seek atonement and purification, to return to our spiritual core.

The season of Teshuvah and Kapparah provides us with a unique spiritual opportunity. Happy are they who can experience this season with an acute mind and alert spirit.

Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Fasting and praying are important ingredients of Yom Kippur and are signs of repentance for our transgressions against God. But, as is well known, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement for sins committed against human beings.

Maimonides teaches (Laws of Repentance, 2:9): "Repentance and the Day of Atonement only atone for sins between human beings and God, but interpersonal sins are never forgiven until a person has made restitution and appeased the one whom he has wronged….Even if he merely belittled a person with words, he must appease him and go to him until he is granted forgiveness."

Rabbinic tradition has it that a person can expect to be judged by God with the same standard of judgment that a person applies to others. If one is mean-spirited and unfair in treatment of fellow human beings, these same qualities will be applied by the Heavenly court.

The Haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur is drawn from Isaiah, where the prophet reminds the Israelites that God wants purity of behavior, compassion to the poor and downtrodden. God rejects outward shows of piety and insists on genuine righteousness. God chastises those who "bend their heads as a bulrush and spread a couch of sackcloth and ashes" when

in fact they conduct their lives immorally. “Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose, to loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, sending the oppressed free and breaking every yoke? Is it not to break your bread for the hungry, and that you bring to your house the outcast poor…?”

It is said of the great 16th century sage, Rabbi Isaac Luria, that he would not recite his afternoon prayers until he first paid his workmen for their days’ labor. He reasoned: how can I appear before God if I do not meet my moral obligation to pay my workers on time? It is hypocritical to mouth pious words to God while at the same time being guilty of improper behavior and slander toward one’s fellow human beings.

It is customary among pious Jews to pay their debts on time, and certainly in advance of Yom Kippur. It is customary to make peace with those whom one has mistreated, disrespected, maligned or betrayed. It is customary to increase charitable contributions to those institutions that foster proper Torah values and that provide assistance to the needy.

Maimonides provides another very important lesson in his Laws of Repentance (2:10): “It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and to withhold forgiveness. Rather, one should be easy to pacify and difficult to anger. When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other had sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge.”

Yom Kippur can be just another external show of piety; or it can be a transformative occasion. The decision is ours to make.

Am Yisrael Hai: Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, my wife and I visited Rome. Among the historic sites we visited was the Arch of Titus--a monument to the Roman conquest of Judea in 70 C.E. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem, razed the Temple, killed and enslaved many thousands of Jews--and sent our people into an Exile that lasted until the rise of the State of Israel in 1948. On the inner wall of the Arch of Titus is a depiction of the Roman victory over the Jews, with the Romans carrying off the Menorah which had graced the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a somber "tourist attraction" for Jews, recalling one of the most horrific times in the history of our people. How painful to see enemies gloating over our downfall! How heart-wrenching to see our Menorah carried off into captivity!

The day we visited the Arch of Titus, we saw a small bit of grafitti which someone had managed to write onto the monument. We obviously do not condone grafitti, but I confess that we derived some inner satisfaction from this particular grafitti. It was written in Hebrew letters, and it said: Am Yisrael Hai, the people of Israel lives.

The great Roman Empire declined and fell, and is no more. The Jewish people are here, alive and well. The Arch of Titus in its arrogant glee over the destruction of the Jews has, in fact, become a symbol of the decadence of the Roman Empire and the ultimate victory of the Jews. Titus, and his Empire, are long gone; the Jews are here: Am Yisrael Hai.

A central feature of the Yom Kippur synagogue service is the description of the rituals performed in the holy Temples in ancient Jerusalem. These structures served as spiritual centers for the people of Israel. They symbolized the unique covenant between God and Israel. The Temples do not exist today; yet, when we read about the services that were conducted in them--we feel the power of the words: Am Yisrael Hai.

The people of Israel has found a way of living and flourishing and transmitting our teachings through the generations--even without these physical structures. Instead of animal sacrifices, we have prayers; instead of a central Temple, we have synagogues; instead of priestly spiritual leadership, we have Torah scholars.

We have not forsaken our covenant with God, nor has God abandoned HIs people Israel. While all of our ancient enemies have vanished, we continue to tell our story, to live and to build.

The Talmud reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Yosei visited Rome during the period following the Bar Kokhba rebellion in the second century C.E. Rabbi Elazar, aside from being a Torah sage, was well-versed in Roman culture; he served as a diplomat of the Jewish people to the government of Rome. While in Rome, Rabbi Elazar saw some of the artifacts that the Romans had stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem. "I saw the Parokhet (the curtain that covered the ark in the Temple) in Rome, and on it were several drops of blood from the Yom Kippur offering." (Yoma 57a)

What was Rabbi Elazar thinking at that moment, when he stood face to face with a tangible vestige of the Temple, when he saw the drops of blood recalling the awesome Yom Kippur Temple ceremonies? What was he thinking at that moment, when he was serving as a representative of the remnant of Israel that had recently been vanquished by the mighty Roman Empire?

I imagine that Rabbi Elazar may have been thinking: Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai. The God of Israel lives, the people of Israel lives--and we will ultimately prevail in bringing our message of ethical monotheism, compassion and justice to the entire world.

And that is the faith that has carried us through the generations. And that is the faith that will carry us into the future, proudly and confidently.

Happiness: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah informs us that the festival of Succoth commemorates God's providence over the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness. An old question is: why was this holiday scheduled to begin specifically on the 15th day of Tishri? The dates for Pessah (15 Nissan) and for Shavuoth (6 Sivan) are clearly linked to historical events—the day of the Exodus and the day of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. But the wandering in the wilderness was ongoing for 40 years, with no particular historic connection to Tishri 15?

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, in his *Torat Hayyim al ha-Moadim*, suggests that the Tishri 15 date was specified by the Almighty so as to be parallel to the Nissan 15 date of Pessah. Since the Exodus from Egypt is so central to Jewish thought and observance, Pessah and Succoth

were set exactly six months apart, to the day, in order to ensure that we experience the power of the Exodus on a regular basis every six months.

The great 18th century sage, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (known popularly as the Hidah), offers a different explanation in his *Midbar Kedeimot*. He notes that the lives of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob overlapped for fifteen years. When Abraham died, his grandson Jacob was 15 years old. In rabbinic tradition Abraham is identified with Pessah, Isaac with Shavuoth, and Jacob with Succoth. (See Tur O.H. 417). Because of the merit of these extraordinary 15 years, the holy days of Pessah and Succoth were both set for the 15th of the month.

The Hidah is alluding to something deeper than the clever confluence of numbers. He suggests that the 15 years of shared lifetime among Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were a period of extreme happiness for the world. These three luminaries literally changed the course of history and brought humanity to a better understanding of the One God. Succoth, which is known in our tradition as the season of our happiness (*zeman simhateinu*), commemorates the extraordinary happiness and enlightenment that emerged at the founding of our nation.

Since Pessah (symbolized by Abraham) and Succoth (symbolized by Jacob) both occur on the 15th day of the month, this highlights the special link between grandfather Abraham and grandson Jacob. When grandparents and grandchildren share ideas and ideals, this is a sign of continuity, love…and genuine happiness. When there is a “generation gap,” there is sadness and alienation. Just as Pessah and Succoth are linked together by sharing the date of 15, so Abraham and Jacob are bound together by their shared 15 years of life.

Pessah and Succoth celebrate the Exodus from Egypt in ancient times. The relationship between Abraham and Jacob suggests the key to the future redemption of Israel—when the traditions are shared, loved and experienced by the generations of grandparents and grandchildren. A teacher of mine once quipped: Who is a Jew? Someone with Jewish grandchildren! While this is not an objectively true statement, it underscores a vital principle in the Jewish adventure: the importance of transmitting our teachings and values through the generations.

The genuine happiness that derives from family and national continuity does not just happen by chance. It is the result of deep devotion, strong commitment, and many sacrifices. There is a vast difference between happiness and amusement. Happiness entails a genuine and deep sense of wholeness. It is not attained casually. Amusement, on the other hand, is a passing sense of enjoyment. It is shallow and ephemeral. We laugh at a joke, we enjoy watching a sports event—but these amusements do not touch our souls in a lasting way. Happiness is achieved through active and thoughtful involvement; amusement is essentially a passive experience in which we sit back and wait to be entertained. Succoth, the festival of our happiness, reminds us to strive for genuine happiness, to be committed to transmitting our traditions through the generations, to distinguish between real happiness and shallow amusement.

Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Interesting insights about Succoth have come from the pen of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the First Earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli was of Jewish birth, whose family had been associated with the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London. Although his father had Benjamin baptized to Anglicanism at age 12, Disraeli never denied his Jewish roots. He rose to become the first—and thus far only—British Prime Minister of Jewish ancestry.

Anti-Semites never forgave Disraeli's Jewishness and constantly identified him as a Jew in spite of his conversion to Anglicanism. In response to a vicious anti-Semitic comment made in the British parliament, Disraeli famously retorted: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon."

Disraeli writes about Succoth in his novel, *Tancred*, originally published in 1847. Tancred was a young British nobleman who had a spiritual longing to visit the Holy Land. When he arrived, he spent time with a Jewish family and became acquainted with Jewish religious life. His visit coincided with Succoth, and he was told that this is a great national festival celebrating the harvest. He was shown the lulav and etrog, symbols of the autumn harvest. Tancred was deeply impressed.

Disraeli writes: "The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!"

Disraeli notes that it is easier for "the happier Sephardim, the Hebrews who have never quitted the sunny regions that are laved by the Midland Ocean," to observe the festival, since they can identify with the climate and setting of the early generations of Israelites who celebrated Succoth. "But picture to yourself the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine! The law has told him, though a denizen in an icy clime, that he must dwell for seven days in a bower…."

He continues with a description of the ignominies which Jews suffer in their ghettos in Europe "living amid fogs and filth, never treated with kindness, seldom with justice....Conceive such a being, an object to you of prejudice, dislike, disgust, perhaps hatred. The season arrives, and the mind and heart of that being are filled with images and passions that have been ranked in all ages among the most beautiful and the most genial of human experience; filled with a subject the most vivid, the most graceful, the most joyous, and the most exuberant…the harvest of the grape in the native regions of the vine."

The downtrodden Jews, in observance of Succoth, find real joy in life. They decorate their Succahs as beautifully as they can; their families gather together to eat festive meals in the Succah. The outside world may be cruel and ugly; but their inner life is joyous and noble. Their external conditions may not seem too happy, but their internal happiness is real.

The Jews, while remembering the glories of the Israelite past, also dream of the future glories of the Israelites when their people will be restored to their ancient greatness.
Disraeli points to an important truth: happiness is essentially an internal phenomenon, a matter of one's attitude and interpretation of reality. External conditions are less vital to genuine happiness than one's internal state of mind.

By celebrating Succoth over the many centuries of exile, the Jewish people was able to maintain an inner strength and happiness, a vivid sense of the past and a powerful vision for the future. We are fortunate today to be living at a time when the sovereign State of Israel has been re-established. We may celebrate Succoth with the added joy of knowing that our historic dreams have begun to be realized.

We have regained our vineyards…we must aspire to the day when we may enjoy our vineyards in peace and security, free from the threats and hatred which continue to be aimed against our people. “A race that persist in celebrating their vintage…will regain their vineyards.” A people who persist in dreaming of a messianic era will ultimately see that dream fulfilled.

Succoth: Transience and Permanence

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Sometimes it takes a crisis to remind us of the transience of life. It might be an illness, the death of a loved one, an accident, a shocking and tragic news report. At these crisis moments, we suddenly and starkly remember that we are mortal, that life on this earth is temporary.

When people confront their own mortality, they often come to the realization that time is precious; that life is too valuable to be frittered away on nonsense; that it is self-destructive to engage in petty feuds or egotistical competitions. It can take a crisis to help us live on a higher, happier level. Facing the transience of life, we take our living moments more seriously.

Succoth is a festival tuned in to the issue of life’s transience. The succah is a temporary structure, reminiscent of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness in ancient times. It doesn’t have a roof, reminding us that we are subject to the vicissitudes of nature. The lulav, etrog, aravot and hadasim remind us of the harvest, of the recurring cycles of nature, the cycles of birth, growth, decline and death.

Interestingly, Succoth is known in our tradition as *Zeman Simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. On one level, this refers to the rejoicing of the harvest. On a deeper level, though, it may be alluding to the joy and inner freedom we attain when we confront the transience of life.

If we sulk in gloomy thoughts of the ephemeral quality of life, we can become grim and depressed. Succoth teaches that thoughts of life’s transience actually lead to happiness—not self-pity. It is our very mortality which provides the intensity and excitement of life.

That being said, we are strengthened when we turn our minds from human mortality to God’s eternality. There is an all-encompassing, undying Power that embraces and transcends all time and all change.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist muses: “I lift my eyes unto the mountains, whence comes my help? My help is from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth.” Why does the Psalmist look to the mountains? What do mountains have to do with the Psalmist’s call for help?

Most natural phenomena reflect change. The sun rises and sets. The moon goes through its phases. The stars sparkle at night, but are not visible during the day. Oceans, rivers and

lakes are in constant motion. Mountains, though, are steady and unchanging (at least to the human eye). The Psalmist is crying out for help, and is seeking an image of something with permanence, something that can be depended upon: mountains.

In a similar vein, one of the names attributed to God is *Tsur*—Rock. In turning to the Lord, we seek an image of something powerful and unchanging.

While Succoth highlights the transience of life, it also turns our thoughts to the Eternal God who is not transient. The succah recalls the wanderings of the Israelites—but also the Divine Providence that watched over them for forty years. The lulav and etrog remind us of the changing seasons; but also of the Eternal God who created nature and the natural rhythms. We wave the lulav and etrog in all directions, as a symbol that God's presence is everywhere, all-encompassing, and complete.

There is a story of a man who was given one wish by God. The man said: "I don't want to die suddenly. My wish is that You give me fair warning before I die." God agreed to this request.

Years later, the angel of death came to the man and said his time had come. The man objected, and called out to God: "But You promised that I would not die suddenly. You agreed to give me warning before I would die."

God replied: "I gave you plenty of warnings. Look at your hair; it is all gray. Think of how your body has weakened and declined over these past years, how you walk so slowly, how your hands tremble when you write. All of these were warnings. You are not dying suddenly."

The man bowed his head, and gave himself over to the angel of death. He realized that he had been given many warnings, but had never taken heed.

Succoth reminds us to pay attention to the warnings, to keep things in perspective, to appreciate the transience of life and the Eternity of God. It is the time of our rejoicing in the beauties of life, and the meaning of life.

Religion: Public and Private: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Most of our religious observances are indoors--in our homes, in our synagogues. We generally do not like to create a public spectacle of our religious experiences, but we behave modestly and try not to call attention to ourselves as we perform mitzvoth.

There are some exceptions to this. On Hanukkah, it is a particular mitzvah to publicize the miracle by placing our hanukkiyot where they can be seen by the passers-by. Succoth also has some aspects of taking our religious observances into the public square. The Talmud records the custom in ancient Jerusalem where people carried their lulavim into the street when they went to synagogue, when they visited the sick, and when they went to comfort mourners. Even today, many Jews carry their lulavim in public. When it comes to the succah itself, this structure is generally in view of the public: it's built on a patio, or yard, or courtyard etc. i.e. where Jews and non-Jews can see it

Although so much of our religious life is indoors--in the private domain of family and friends--we are sometimes obligated to make a public demonstration of our religious commitments. On Hanukkah, we want to remind the entire world that the Jews heroically defended

themselves against the Syrian Hellenists and won independence for the Jewish people. We want everyone to know that, with God's help, we were victorious against powerful and far more numerous enemies.

On Succoth, we also want to convey a message to the general public. The lulav and etrog are symbolic of weapons; they indicate that we are proud of our faith and we are prepared to fight for the honor of our Torah and for our people. The succah is a symbolic statement that although we wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God's providence protected us, and we ultimately entered the Promised Land. The public demonstration of these mitzvoth indicates our pride and commitment in who we are and what we represent. If we have respect for ourselves and our traditions, we can expect that the nations of the world will also come to respect Judaism.

Sometimes it is necessary for us to stand up in public on behalf of our faith and our people. When Jews betray their faith and their people in public, this undermines the entire Jewish enterprise. If Jewish storekeepers open their shops on Shabbat and holidays, why should non-Jews respect our Sabbath and holy days? If Jews ignore the laws of kashruth, why should non-Jews respect our dietary laws? If Jews don't live up to the high standards of Torah ethics, why should non-Jews admire the Jewish way of life? If Jewish political figures hold press conferences and public meetings on Jewish holy days, why should non-Jews show any deference to our holy days?

Succoth is an important reminder that being Jewish also entails a public stance, the courage to be who we are and stand for our traditions without embarrassment or apology. If we do not stand up for ourselves, who will stand up for us? And if we do stand up for ourselves, we will be worthy heirs of a great people who have given so much--and have so much more to give--to our world.

Lies, Cries, Arise: Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Psalm associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah seems to be a strange choice. It is Psalm 12, a Psalm that Martin Buber has described as a prophecy “against the generation of the lie.” The Psalmist cries out: “Help, O Lord, for the pious cease to be…They speak falsehood each with his neighbor, with flattering lip, with a double heart they speak.” The generation is led by oppressors who say “our tongue will make us mighty,” who arrogantly crush the downtrodden.

Buber comments: “They speak with a double heart, literally ‘with heart and heart’…The duplicity is not just between heart and mouth, but actually between heart and heart. In order that the lie may bear the stamp of truth, the liars as it were manufacture a special heart, an apparatus which functions with the greatest appearance of naturalness, from which lies well up to the ‘smooth lips’ like spontaneous utterances of experience and insight.” (*Good and Evil* , New York, 1953, p. 10)

The Psalmist is not merely condemning his “generation of the lie,” but other future generations that also will be characterized by lying, bullying, oppressing; that will be led by smooth talking and corrupt demagogues. But the Psalmist turns prophet in proclaiming that

God will arise and protect the victims of the liars. Truth will prevail. “It is You, O Lord, who will guard the poor, You will protect us forever from this generation.” And yet, the Psalm ends on a realistic note: “But the wicked will strut around when vileness is exalted among humankind.”

Although God will ultimately redeem the world from the “generation of the lie,” this will not happen right away. As long as people submit to the rule of the wicked, the wicked will stay in power. In the long run, God will make truth prevail over lies. In the short run, though, it is the responsibility of human beings to stand up against tyranny, lies, and arrogant smooth talking liars. If the wicked are not resisted, they will continue to strut around and feel invincible.

What does this Psalm have to do with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah, known in our tradition as *Zeman Simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing? On a simplistic level, the Psalm might have been chosen because it opens with *Lamnatseah al ha-Sheminith*, to the Chief Musician on the Eighth (the “eighth” being a musical instruction). Since it mentions eight, it is thus connected with Shemini Hag Atsereth, the eighth day closing festival.

It would seem, though, that our sages must have had something deeper in mind in choosing Psalm 12 to be associated with this festival. In the Amidah of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we include prayers asking the Almighty to inspire awe in all His creations and to have humanity acknowledge Him as Ruler of the universe. We pray for a time when “iniquity shall close its mouth and all wickedness vanish as smoke when You will remove the rule of tyranny from the earth.” On Succoth, our ancestors offered 70 offerings in the Temple, symbolically praying for the well-being and harmony of all humanity (understood by the rabbis to be composed of 70 nations). Psalm 12 is an appropriate continuation of these themes, and is a fitting reminder at the end of the holiday season that we depend on God to bring truth and peace to humanity.

But Psalm 12 adds an important dimension. Although we certainly must pray to the Almighty for redemption, we also bear responsibility for the sad state of human affairs. Prayer alone isn’t enough to solve our problems. We need to muster the courage to stand up against lies and tyranny, to uproot “the generation of the lie.”

Throughout the world, we see examples of simple people rising up against harsh and powerful tyrants. They risk their lives, their livelihoods, their families—but they have reached the breaking point where they can no longer tolerate the unjust tyrannies under which they live. Many suffer and die in the process—but ultimately, it is hoped that the masses of good people will prevail over the dictators and demagogues. People in power rarely cede their power peacefully and gracefully. The entrenched powers will do whatever they need to do to maintain their control.

Fortunately, we live in free societies. Although we certainly have our share of imperfect rulers and leaders, we also have a system that allows for change and peaceful transition. The people can take control by voting, by peaceful protests, by peaceful strikes. Many people are not willing to stand up and be counted. They are happy to pray for God to bring peace and truth to the world. They are comfortable letting others take the risks of fighting the establishment’s power base. Psalm 12 comes at the end of the holiday season to remind us: yes, God will make truth and justice prevail; but in the meanwhile, evil will persist as long as we let it persist.

Unless we are willing to stand up against the tyrants and demagogues, they will continue to crush us. They will continue their lies and p.r. spins and political manipulations. The concluding lesson we should take from this holiday season is: building a true, just and moral community and society depends on us.

Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth and Simhat Torah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

On August 21, 1911, Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," one of the world's most famous paintings, was stolen right off the wall of the Louvre museum in Paris. The crime wasn't discovered until the next day. The Louvre was closed for a week due to the police investigation.

When the Louvre was re-opened, a line of people visited the museum to stare solemnly at the empty space on the wall where the "Mona Lisa" had once hung. One visitor left a bouquet of flowers. Indeed, until the painting was ultimately returned to the Louvre on December 30, 1913, throngs of visitors came to the museum to gaze at the blank wall! More people seem to have come to see the blank wall than had come in the previous two years to see the actual painting.

What motivated so many visitors to come to see the blank wall?

Perhaps it was sadness at the loss of a great art treasure.

Perhaps it was due to regret. Why hadn't we come to see it more often while it was hanging? Why was security at the museum so lax?

Perhaps it was concern for the future. Will the "Mona Lisa" ever be found and returned?

Whatever the motivation, thousands of people came to the Louvre to stare at an empty space.

I think this episode can be understood as a parable of life.

Our lives are a collection of pieces of art—our family, friends, experiences, careers, successes.

We come to a blank wall: failures, losses.

We are struck with sadness. We have lost possibilities, opportunities, relationships.

We are struck with regret. We could have and should have done better with our lives.

We are concerned for the future. Can we restore our losses, or can we at least learn to live with our losses and failures?

We have come to the closing days of our holy day period. Rosh Hashana is a time to tour events of our past year and to re-examine the artwork of our lives. Yom Kippur is a time to recount sins and errors and to think about what we could have done better. Succoth is a time to celebrate our accomplishments in a spirit of happiness.

Then we come to Shemini Hag Atsereth—a blank wall. This is a holiday with no frills, no shofar, no fasting, no lulav, no succah. The blank wall symbolizes our sadness, regrets, possibilities, hopes, and aspirations.

After what we have experienced during the holiday season, we now reach a blank wall; we are called upon to start working on our new masterpiece—the life still ahead of us. It is time to rally our strength, our wisdom, our sensitivities to the needs of others.

The “blank wall” attracts us because it is latent with opportunities, it opens new challenges, it calls on us to imagine what we can be and what we can create in the year and years ahead.

It is fitting that Simhat Torah is associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth. This is a reminder that the art of the blank wall can be meaningfully restored if we ourselves rejoice in our Torah heritage. The spiritual power of Torah has infused the Jewish people for thousands of years—and it has the power to help each of us develop our lives into a new, beautiful masterpiece.

Above Tragedy: Thoughts for Simhat Torah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We have spent many months reading about the life of Moses. Today, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the Torah, we read about his death—a very agonizing scene. Moses, the great leader, teacher, and prophet, climbs to the summit of Mount Nebo and looks out over the horizon at the Promised Land. As he stands silent and alone, God tells him: “You are beholding the land that I have promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saying, ‘I shall give it to your descendants.’ See it with your eyes. You shall not cross into the land.”

What thoughts must then have tortured Moses! What anguish must have filled his soul! To dream, to work a whole lifetime for something and then to be told in final terms that your hopes would never be realized…Is this not the heart of tragedy?

Most commentators seek a reason for such a tragic ending to Moses’ life. They look for a sin committed by Moses to explain his punishment. Some say it was the breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Others suggest that it was his striking the stone with his staff, rather than speaking to it.

I could never understand these commentators. Certainly, Moses sinned; but which human being has never sinned? Moreover, his sins were really not serious. He had good reason to be enraged when he found his people worshiping the golden calf. And the difference between striking the stone and speaking to it is, after all, insignificant. The event was still miraculous. Certainly, Moses did so many great things for which he deserved reward. He was the only human being to see God “face to face.” He was the greatest prophet, the greatest teacher, the most dedicated leader. Certainly, he was worthy of entering the Promised Land.

Moses was not being punished for a sin. Rather, the Torah is describing in a very vivid way something about the human predicament. Death is a built-in part of human existence. Though we may have noble ideals, though we may work hard, we cannot expect to fulfill all of our ambitions. Moses, perhaps the most ideal character in the Bible, was plagued by being mortal; and great mortals simply cannot realize all of their hopes. This is a profound truth of the nature of humankind.

Today, we are also introduced to another biblical character, Adam. I think it is very ironic that the birth of Adam and the death of Moses are juxtaposed in today’s Torah readings. Adam was given paradise. He was a man who had no dreams or ambitions, for he had everything

he wanted. He was complacent, satisfied, and untroubled by ideals.
Existing in such a state, though, is problematic, because there is no motivation for living. If there is no place for one to advance, he must fall back. And so, Adam fell. But whereas Moses was a tragic hero, Adam was just plain tragic. Whereas Moses had lived his life working toward a dream so that when death came it tragically cut off a living force, Adam never knew the value of life; his fall from paradise is far less climactic.

Ultimately, being mortals, we each have the choice of being either tragic heroes or simply tragic. In which category do we belong?

Unfortunately, many of us are satisfied with ourselves, with our wealth, with our social position. We are especially complacent in the realm of our religious attainments. We think we practice our religion properly and do enough mitzvoth.

Today, on Simhat Torah, we completed the reading of the Torah. We could have said that we have finished our study, we are content. But we did not do these things. We began immediately to read Bereishith. We started the Torah all over again. We know that we will never fully comprehend the Torah or fully realize its sacred dreams—but we move forward and onward. We cannot rest from the Torah; to rest is to become tragic.

As Jews, therefore, we are part of a tradition that not only thrives on noble ideals, but which loves noble actions. Like Moses, we should seek to keep our religious ideals and practices on fire within us, so that they give light not only to ourselves but to all who come near us. We should devote our lives to attaining religious perfection for ourselves and for our society; and though we may never enter the Promised Land, we will be able to stand on a summit and see our dreams realized in the future through our children. We may never walk into the land, but we will have led an entire generation to the point where they can enter.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism:
The Binding of Isaac as a Test Case for the Limits of Devotion[1]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

The *Akedah*, or binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–19),[i] is a foundational narrative in Jewish tradition. It plays a prominent role on Rosh Hashanah, and many communities include it in their daily morning liturgy.

The *Akedah* is a religiously and morally challenging story. What should we learn from it with regard to faith and religious life? Perhaps more than any other narrative in the Torah, the *Akedah* teaches how one can and should be extremely religious, but also teaches how to avoid the dangers of religious extremism. This essay will consider the ideas of several modern thinkers who explore the religious and moral implications of the *Akedah*.

Why Did Abraham Not Protest?

Although the idea of child sacrifice is abhorrent to us, it made sense in Abraham's historical context. Many of Israel's neighbors practiced child sacrifice. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham may have surmised that perhaps God required this of him. Of course, God stopped Abraham and went on to outlaw such practices as a capital offense (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). We find child sacrifice abhorrent precisely because the Torah and the prophets broke rank with large segments of the pagan world and transformed human values for the better.[ii]

In its original context, then, the *Akedah* highlights Abraham's exemplary faithfulness. He followed God's command even when the basis of the divine promise for progeny through Isaac was threatened.[iii]

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was deeply troubled by the *Akedah*. He maintained that nobody is certain that he or she is receiving prophecy, whereas everyone knows with certainty that murder is immoral and against God's will. Therefore, Abraham failed God's test by acquiescing to sacrifice Isaac. According to Kant, Abraham should have refused, or at least protested.[iv]

However, the biblical narrative runs flatly against Kant's reading. After the angel stops Abraham from slaughtering Isaac, the angel proclaims to Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). God thereby praises Abraham's exceptional faith and commitment.[v]

Adopting a reading consistent with the thrust of the biblical narrative, Rambam draws the opposite conclusion from that of Kant. The fact that Abraham obeyed God demonstrates his absolute certainty that he had received true prophecy. Otherwise, he never would have proceeded:

> [Abraham] hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved…. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and [Abraham's] soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24).[vi]

Although Rambam correctly assesses the biblical narrative, there is still room for a different moral question. After God informs Abraham about the impending destruction of Sodom, Abraham pleads courageously on behalf of the righteous people who potentially lived in the wicked city, appealing to God's attribute of justice (Gen. 18:23–33).[vii] How could Abraham stand idly by and not challenge God when God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son?

By considering the Abraham narratives as a whole, we may resolve this dilemma. Abraham's actions in Genesis chapters 12–25 may be divided into three general categories: (1) responses to direct commands from God; (2) responses to promises or other information from God; and (3) responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly with Abraham.

Whenever God commands an action, Abraham obeys without as much as a word of protest or questioning. When Abraham receives promises or other information from God, Abraham

praises God when gratitude is in order, and he questions or challenges God when he deems it appropriate. Therefore, Abraham's silence when following God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac is to be expected. And so are Abraham's concerns about God's promises of progeny or information about the destruction of Sodom. The Torah thereby teaches that it is appropriate to question God, while simultaneously demanding faithfulness to God's commandments as an essential aspect of the mutual covenant between God and Israel.[viii]

The Pinnacle of Religious Faith

Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz suggests that Abraham and Job confronted the same religious test. Do they serve God because God provides all of their needs, or do they serve God under all conditions? Both were God-fearing individuals prior to their trials, but they demonstrated their unwavering commitment to God through their trials.[ix]

Professor Moshe Halbertal derives a different lesson from the *Akedah*. God wishes to be loved by us, but pure love of God is almost impossible, since we are utterly dependent on God for all of our needs. We generally express love through absolute giving. When sacrificing to God, however, we always can hold out hope that God will give us more. Cain and Abel could offer produce or sheep to God, but they likely were at least partially motivated to appeal to God for better crops and flocks next year. What can we possibly offer God that demonstrates our true love?

Through the *Akedah*, God gives Abraham the opportunity to offer a gift outside of the realm of exchange. Nothing can replace Isaac, since his value to Abraham is absolute. As soon as Abraham demonstrates willingness to offer his own son to God, he has proven his total love and commitment. As the angel tells Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12).

Halbertal explains that Abraham's offering a ram in place of Isaac becomes the paradigm for later sacrifice. Inherent in all sacrifice in the Torah is the idea is that we love God to the point where we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves or our children to God. The animal serves as a substitution. The *Akedah* thereby represents the supreme act of giving to God.[x]

> The ideas explored by Professors Leibowitz and Halbertal lie at the heart of being extremely religious. Abraham is a model of pure, dedicated service and love of God. Such religious commitment is ideal, but it also comes with the lurking danger of religious extremism. We turn now to this critical issue.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) composed a classic work on the *Akedah*, entitled *Fear and Trembling*. He argued that if one believes in religion because it appears reasonable, that is a secular distortion. True religion, maintains Kierkegaard, means being able to suspend reason and moral conscience when God demands it. Kierkegaard calls Abraham a knight of faith for his willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son.

Although Kierkegaard did not advocate violence in the name of religion, his view is vulnerable to that horrific outcome. In his philosophy, serving God must take precedence over all moral or rational concerns. A fatal problem arises when the representatives of any religion claim that God demands violence or other forms of immorality.

In a powerful article written in the wake of the terrorist attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, Professor David Shatz addresses this urgent question.[xi] He observes that in general, one must create a system that balances competing ideals in order to eliminate ideological extremism. For example, one may place law against liberty, self-respect against respect for others, and discipline against love. In religion, however, there is a fundamental problem: Placing any value against religion, especially if that competing value can prevail over religion, defeats religious commitment.

> Professor Shatz suggests a way to have passion for God tempered by morality and rationality without requiring any religious compromise. One must embrace morality and rationality as *part* of the religion. The religion itself must balance and integrate competing values as part of the religion. This debate traces back to Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, who insisted that God chooses moral things to command. In contrast, the medieval Islamic philosophical school of *Ash'ariyya* maintained that whatever God commands is by definition good.[xii]
> Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* fails Professor Shatz's solution to religious extremism and is therefore vulnerable to the dangers of immorality in the name of God. In fact, Kierkegaard's reading of the *Akedah* fails the Torah itself: God stops Abraham, and then repudiates child sacrifice in the Torah. Whereas Kierkegaard focuses on Abraham's willingness to suspend morality to serve God, God rejects immorality as part of the Torah's religion. The expression of religious commitment in the Torah is the fear of God, which by definition includes the highest form of morality.[xiii] There must never be a disconnect between religious commitment and moral behavior, and Israel's prophets constantly remind the people of this critical message.[xiv] Thus, the Torah incorporates morality and rationality as essential components of its religious system.
> In a similar spirit, Rabbi Shalom Carmy maintains that the *Akedah* teaches religious passion without fanaticism, and that even when a God-fearing individual keeps God's commandments, he or she remains responsive to the validity of the ethical.[xv]

It also is important to stress that people who act violently in the name of religion generally are *not* crazy. Rather, they are following their religious system as they understand it and as their clerics teach it. Such manifestations of religion themselves are evil and immoral. Postmodernism thinks it can relativize all religion and thereby protect against the violence generated by religious extremism. In reality, however, postmodernism achieves the opposite effect as its adherents no longer have the resolve to refer to evil as evil and to battle against it. Instead, they try to rationalize evil away. This position empowers the religious extremists.[xvi]

Professor Shatz acknowledges that, lamentably, there are negative extremist elements among some Jews who identify themselves as religious. However, their attempts to justify their immorality with Torah sources in fact do violence to our sacred texts.[xvii] Such Jews are *not* extremely religious, but rather pervert the Torah and desecrate God's Name. Similarly, all religions must build morality and rationality into their systems so that they can pursue a relationship with God while avoiding the catastrophic consequences of religious extremism. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has remarked, "the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion."[xviii]

Conclusion

The *Akedah* teaches several vital religious lessons. Ideal religion is about serving God, and is not self-serving. We aspire to be extremely religious, and Abraham serves as a paragon of the ideal connection to God. The *Akedah* also teaches the key to avoid what is rightly condemned as religious extremism. Morality and rationality must be built into every religious system, or else its adherents risk lapsing into immorality in the name of their religion.

One of the best means of promoting our vision is to understand and teach the underlying messages of the *Akedah*. We pray that all faith communities will join in affirming morality and rationality as being integral to their faiths. It is imperative for us to serve as emissaries of a different vision to what the world too often experiences in the name of religion, to model the ideal fear of Heaven that the Torah demands, and ultimately to sanctify God's Name.

Notes

[1] This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, *The Keys to the Palace: Essays Exploring the Religious Value of Reading the Bible* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2017), pp. 132-142.

[i] The Hebrew root for *Akedah* appears in Gen. 22:9, and refers to binding one's hands to one's feet. This is the only time that this root appears in the entire Bible.

[ii] Samuel David Luzzatto suggests that this legislation was in part an anti-pagan polemic, demonstrating that the Torah's idea of love of God does not involve the immoral sacrifice of one's child.

[iii] Cf. *Lev. Rabbah* (Margaliot) 29:9.

[iv] Kant was not the first person troubled by the moral implications of the *Akedah*. In the second century BCE, the author of the non-canonical book of Jubilees (17:16) ascribed the command to sacrifice Isaac to a "satanic" angel named Mastemah, rather than God Himself as presented in the Torah. Adopting a different tactic, Rabbi Eleazar Ashkenazi b. Nathan Habavli (fourteenth century) maintains that the *Akedah* must have occurred in a prophetic vision. Had the *Akedah* occurred in waking state, he argued, Abraham surely would have protested as he did regarding Sodom (in Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* [Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, p. 70]).

[v] See Rabbi Yonatan Grossman, *Avraham: Sippuro shel Massa* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), pp. 300–301.

[vi] Translation from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 501–502.

[vii] See especially Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 62–88.

[viii] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Abraham Narratives and Commentary," in *Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp.

192–212; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127–154; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 99–122.

[ix] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 48–49, 259. Cf. Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005), pp. 351–366.

[x] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 22–25.

[xi] David Shatz, "'From the Depths I Have Called to You': Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism," in *Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*, ed. Michael J. Broyde (New York: Beth Din of America and K'hal Publishing, 2011), pp. 197–233. See also Marvin Fox, "Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism," in *Collected Essays on Philosophy and on Judaism*, vol. 2, ed. Jacob Neusner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 29–43.

[xii] See Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 38.

[xiii] See, for example, Gen. 20:11; 42:18; Exod. 1:17, 21; Deut. 25:18.

[xiv] See, for example, Isa. 1:10–17; Jer. 7:9–11; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–25; Mic. 6:4–8.

[xv] Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "Passion, Paradigm, and the Birth of Inwardness: On Rabbi Kook and the *Akeda*," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 459–478.

[xvi] For a chilling study of the virtual elimination of the very concept of sin and evil from much of Western literature, see Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

[xvii] See Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, "Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and Moral Constraints," *Tradition* 34:4 (Winter 2000), pp. 39–60.

[xviii] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 11.

THE MEANING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Talmud ascribes the composition of the Twelve Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly (*Bava Batra* 15a). Rashi explains that the books were bound together in one scroll because each was so short that some might get lost if not combined into a scroll of greater size.

Together they span a period of some 250-300 years. Jonah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah were eighth century prophets; Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Obadiah prophesied in the seventh-early sixth century; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in the late sixth century. Of the twelve, Joel is the most difficult to date, and we will discuss him in the fourth chapter on the Twelve Prophets.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find a comprehensive theory to explain the purpose of the book, or why Jonah fled from his mission. For millennia, great interpreters have scoured the Book of Jonah's forty-eight verses for their fundamental messages.

One midrashic line suggests that unrepentant Israel would look bad by comparison were non-Israelites to repent.[xviii] Another proposes that Jonah was convinced that the Ninevites would repent and God would pardon them. Jonah feared that he then would be called a false prophet once his prediction of Nineveh's destruction went unfulfilled.[xviii]

Abarbanel does not find either answer persuasive. Perhaps Israel would be inspired to repent in light of Nineveh's repentance. Moreover, since the Ninevites did repent, they obviously believed Jonah to be a true prophet. Nowhere is there evidence of Jonah's being upset about his or Israel's reputation. It is unlikely that Jonah would have violated God's commandment for the reasons given by these midrashim.

Abarbanel (followed by Malbim) submits that Jonah feared the future destruction of Israel by Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital (cf. Ibn Ezra on 1:1). Rather than obey God's directive, Jonah elected to martyr himself on behalf of his people. However, the Book of Jonah portrays Nineveh as a typological Sodom-like city-state, not as the historical capital of Assyria. Jonah's name appears eighteen times in the book, but nobody else—not even the

king of Nineveh – is named. Additionally, there is no mention of Israel or its king in the story. The Book of Jonah appears to have a self-contained message that transcends its historical context.[xviii]

Seeking another approach, the twentieth century scholars Yehoshua Bachrach,[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem,[xviii] and Uriel Simon[xviii] cite Jonah's protest from the end of the book:

He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)

These scholars understand Jonah's protest as a rejection of the very idea of repentance. To support their reading, they cite a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

It was asked of wisdom: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, Misfortune pursues sinners (Prov. 13:21). It was asked of prophecy: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, The person who sins, only he shall die (Ezek. 18:4, 20). It was asked of God: what is the punishment for a sinner? He replied, let him repent and gain atonement. (J.T. *Makkot* 2:6 [31d])

From this point of view, there is a fundamental struggle between God on the one hand and wisdom and prophecy on the other. Jonah was not caught up in the details of this specific prophecy; rather, he was protesting the very existence of repentance, preferring instead that God mete out immediate punishment to sinners.

Although this approach is more comprehensive than the earlier interpretations, it remains incomplete. Much of the book has little to do with repentance or God's mercy – particularly Jonah's lengthy encounter with the sailors in chapter 1 who never needed to repent, and his prayer in chapter 2 where Jonah likely did not repent. Aside from downplaying the role of the sailors in chapter 1, Uriel Simon sidesteps Jonah's prayer by contending that it was not an original part of the story.[xviii] Regardless of its origins, however, Jonah's prayer appears integral to the book, and likely contains one of the keys to unlocking the overall purposes of the narrative.[xviii] Finally, most prophets appear to have accepted the ideas of repentance and God's mercy. Why should Jonah alone have fled from his mission?

Although these interpreters are correct in stressing Jonah's protest against God's attribute of mercy in 4:2, Jonah also disapproved of that attribute particularly when God applies it to pagans. It appears that this theme lies at the heart of the book, creating an insurmountable conflict between Jonah and God. Jonah was unwilling to accept God's mercy even to the most ethically perfected pagans because that manifestation of mercy was antithetical to Jonah's desired conception of God.

CHAPTER 1

Although they were pagans, the sailors were superior people. They prayed to their deities during the storm, treated Jonah with respect even after he had been selected by the lottery as the cause of their troubles, and went to remarkable lengths to avoid throwing him overboard even after he confessed. They implored God for mercy. When they finally did throw Jonah into the sea, they made vows to God.

Jonah, on the other hand, displays none of these lofty qualities. He rebelled against God by fleeing and then slept while the terrified sailors prayed. Remarkably, the captain sounds like a prophet when addressing Jonah— “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish” (1:6)—while Jonah sounds like the inattentive audience a prophet typically must rebuke. The captain even uses the same words in 1:6 (*kum kera*) that God had in commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh in 1:2 (*kum lekh…u-kera*).

When Jonah finally does speak in the text, the narrator divides the prophet’s words between a direct quotation and narrative:

“I am a Hebrew! (*Ivri anokhi*),” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land.” The men were greatly terrified, and they asked him, “What have you done?” And when the men learned that he was fleeing from the service of the Lord – for so he told them . . . (1:9-10)

Although Jonah told the sailors what they wanted to know, that his flight from God had caused the storm, it is the narrator who relates those crucial words rather than placing them into Jonah’s direct speech. Moreover, Jonah’s statement that he was a Hebrew who worshipped the true God appears tangential to the terrified sailors’ concerns. Why would the narrator frame Jonah’s statement this way?

The term “*Ivri* (Hebrew)” often is used when contrasting Israelites with non-Israelites.[xviii] In this vein, Elyakim Ben-Menahem notes that Jonah’s usage of *Ivri* in 1:9 is fitting, since he was contrasting himself with pagans. Jonah’s perceived dissimilarity to the pagan sailors is the main emphasis of chapter 1. Ben-Menahem further suggests that the text does not report Jonah’s response to the captain so that his dramatic proclamation in 1:9 could appear as his first words recorded in the book.[xviii] This contrast with the sailors was most important to Jonah; therefore, the narrator placed only these words in his direct quotation.

To explain the bifurcation of Jonah’s statement, Abarbanel advances a midrashic-style comment: “The intent [of the word *Ivri*] is not only that he was from the Land of the Hebrews; rather, he was a sinner [*avaryan*] who was transgressing God’s commandment.” Abarbanel surmises that the sailors deduced from this wordplay on *Ivri* that Jonah was fleeing! For Abarbanel’s suggestion to work as the primary meaning of the text, of course, the sailors would have to have known Hebrew and to have been as ingenious as Abarbanel to have caught that wordplay. Though not a compelling *peshat* comment, Abarbanel’s insight is

conceptually illuminating regarding the overall purpose of chapter 1. Jonah emphatically contrasted himself with the pagan sailors; however, the narrator instead has contrasted Jonah with God. In chapter 1, Jonah was indeed Abarbanel's *Ivri*—a prophetic hero of true faith contrasting himself with pagans, and an *avaryan*—a sinner against God.

CHAPTER 2

After waiting three days inside the fish, Jonah finally prayed to God. Some (for example, Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel and Malbim) conclude that Jonah must have repented, since God ordered the fish to spew Jonah out, and Jonah subsequently went to Nineveh. However, there is no indication of repentance in Jonah's prayer.[xviii] One might argue further that God's enjoining Jonah to return to Nineveh in 3:1-2 indicates that Jonah had indeed not repented.[xviii] In his prayer, Jonah was more concerned with being saved and serving God in the Temple than he was in the reasons God was punishing him (2:5, 8).

Jonah concluded his prayer with two triumphant verses:

> They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's! (2:9-10)

Ibn Ezra and Radak believe that Jonah was contrasting himself with the sailors who had made vows in 1:16. Unlike their insincere (in Jonah's opinion) vows, Jonah intended to keep his vow to serve God in the Temple. Abarbanel and Malbim, however, do not think that Jonah would allude to the sailors. In their reading of the book, the sailors are only tangential to their understanding of the story, which specifically concerns Nineveh as the Assyrian capital. Instead, they maintain that Jonah was forecasting the insincere (in Jonah's opinion) repentance of the Ninevites.

One may combine their opinions: the sailors and Ninevites both are central to the book of Jonah, each receiving a chapter of coverage. They were superior people—the sailors all along, and the Ninevites after their repentance—but Jonah despised them because they were pagans. Jonah's prayer ties the episodes with the sailors and Ninevites together, creating a unified theme for the book, namely, that Jonah contrasts himself with truly impressive pagans. It seems that Rashi has the smoothest reading:

> *They who cling to empty folly*: those who worship idols; *forsake their own welfare*: their fear of God, from whom all kindness emanates. *But I*, in contrast, am not like this; *I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You*. (Rashi on Jon. 2:9-10)

As in chapter 1, Jonah's contrasting himself with pagans is the climactic theme of his prayer in chapter 2. To paraphrase the prayer in chapter 2, Jonah was saying "*Ivri anokhi* [I am a Hebrew]" (1:9)! I worship the true God in contrast to all pagans—illustrated by the sailors, and

later by the Ninevites. At the same time, Jonah still remained in his rebellion against God; he still was an *avaryan* [sinner]. According to this view, God allowed Jonah out of the fish to teach him a lesson, not because he had repented.

CHAPTER 3

Did Jonah obey God when he went to Nineveh? Radak assumes that he did. In contrast, Malbim believes that Jonah rebelled even as he walked through the wicked city. He should have explicitly offered repentance as an option, instead of proclaiming the unqualified doom of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites, on the other hand, effected one of the greatest repentance movements in biblical history. The king of Nineveh even said what one might have expected Jonah to say: “Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish” (3:8-9). We noted earlier that the same contrast may be said of the captain of the ship, who sounded like a prophet while Jonah rebelled against God.

Nineveh’s repentance might amaze the reader, but it did not impress Jonah. Abarbanel and Malbim (on 4:1-2) suggest that Jonah was outraged that God spared the Ninevites after their repentance for social crimes, since they remained pagans. This interpretation seems to lie close to the heart of the book. Jonah did not care about the outstandingly ethical behavior of the sailors nor the impressively penitent Ninevites. Jonah still was the *Ivri* he proclaimed himself to be in 1:9, sharply contrasting himself with the pagans he encountered, and thereby remaining distanced from the God he knew would have compassion on them.

CHAPTER 4

> This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, “O Lord! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.” (4:1-3)

Outraged by God’s sparing of Nineveh, Jonah revealed that he had fled initially because he knew that God would not punish the Ninevites. In his protest, Jonah appealed to God’s attributes of mercy, but with a significant deviation from the classical formula in the aftermath of the Golden Calf:

> The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness . . . (Exod. 34:6)

For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)[xviii]

Jonah substituted “renouncing punishment (*ve-niham al ha-ra’ah*)” for “faithfulness (*ve-emet*).” Jonah’s God of truth would not spare pagans, yet God Himself had charged Jonah with a mission to save pagans! Thus, God’s prophecy at the outset of the narrative challenged Jonah’s very conception of God. Jonah would rather die than live with a God who did not conform to his religious outlook. Ironically, then, Jonah’s profound fear and love of God are what caused him to flee initially, and to demand that God take his life.

In an attempt to expose the fallacy of Jonah’s argument, God demonstrated Jonah’s willingness to die stemmed not only from idealistic motives, but also from physical discomfort:

“O Lord! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish . . . . Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.” The Lord replied, “Are you that deeply grieved?” (4:1-4)

And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah’s head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, “I would rather die than live.” Then God said to Jonah, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” “Yes,” he replied, “so deeply that I want to die” (4:8-9)

God added a surprising variable when explaining His sparing of the Ninevites. Although it had seemed from chapter 3 that the Ninevites had saved themselves with their repentance, God suddenly offered a different reason[xviii]:

Then the Lord said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (4:10-11)

God had been willing to destroy the Ninevites for their immorality, but forgave them once they repented. Although the Ninevites had misguided beliefs, God had compassion on them without expecting that they become monotheists. After all, they could not distinguish their right from their left in the sense that they served false deities. For Jonah, however, true justice required punishing even the penitent Ninevites because they still were pagans.

To paraphrase God’s response: You, Jonah, wanted to die for the highest of ideals. However, you also were willing to die rather than face heat. Your human limitations are now fully exposed. How, then, can you expect to understand God’s attributes?[xviii] God has little patience for human immorality, but can tolerate moral people with misguided beliefs. Jonah’s stark silence at the end of the book reflects the gulf between God and himself. He remained an “*Ivri*” to the very end.

CONCLUSION

The story of Jonah is about prophecy, the pinnacle of love of God, and the highest human spiritual achievement. But prophecy also causes increased anguish, as the prophet apprehends the infinite gap between God and humanity more intensely than anyone else. Jonah's spiritual attainments were obviously far superior to those of the sailors or the people of Nineveh – he most certainly could tell his right hand from his left. The closer he came to God, the more he simultaneously gained recognition of how little he truly knew of God's ways. This realization tortured him to the point of death.

God taught Jonah that he did not need to wish for death. He had influenced others for the better and had attained a deeper level of understanding of God and of his own place in this world. Despite his passionate commitment to God, Jonah needed to learn to appreciate moral people and to bring them guidance. He had a vital role to play in allowing God's mercy to be manifest.

The Book of Jonah is a larger-than-life story of every individual who seeks closeness with God. There is a paradoxical recognition that the closer one comes to God, the more one becomes conscious of the chasm separating God's wisdom from our own. There is a further challenge in being absolutely committed to God, while still respecting moral people who espouse different beliefs. A midrash places one final line in Jonah's mouth: "Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy!"[xviii] This midrash pinpoints the humbling lesson Jonah should have learned from this remarkable episode, and that every reader must learn.

[xviii] This chapter appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 163-172.

[xviii] See, for example, *Mekhilta Bo*, J.T. *Sanhedrin* 11:5, *Pesahim* 87b, cited by Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, and Radak.

[xviii] *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 9, cited by R. Saadyah (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 3:5), Rashi, Kara, Radak, and R. Isaiah of Trani.

[xviii] See further discussion and critique of the aforementioned views in Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), introduction pp. 7-12.

[xviii] Yehoshua Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu: le-Hora'at Sefer Yonah al pi ha-Mekorot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Religious Department of the Youth and Pioneering Division of the Zionist Organization, 1967), p. 51.

[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem, *Da'at Mikra: Jonah,* in *Twelve Prophets* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction pp. 7-9.

[xviii] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 12-13.

[xviii] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 33-35; commentary pp. 15-17.

[xviii] See further critique of Simon in David Henshke, “The Meaning of the Book of Jonah and Its Relationship to Yom Kippur,” (Hebrew) *Megadim* 29 (1998), pp. 77-78; and see response of Uriel Simon to Henshke, “True Prayer and True Repentance,” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 31 (2000), pp. 127-131.

[xviii] See, e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; Exod. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 42:13: R. Judah said: [*ha-Ivri* signifies that] the whole world was on one side (*ever*) while [Abraham] was on the other side (*ever*).

[xviii] Ben-Menahem, *Da’at Mikra: Jonah*, pp. 6-7. In his introduction, pp. 3-4, Ben-Menahem adds that chapter 1 is arranged chiastically and Jonah’s proclamation in v. 9 lies at the center of that structure, further highlighting its centrality to the chapter.

[xviii] Cf. Rashi, Kara, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency. Even Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Malbim, who assert that Jonah must have agreed to go to Nineveh, grant that Jonah was unhappy about this concession. Adopting a middle position, Sforno suggests that Jonah repented, but the prayer included in the book is a psalm of gratitude after Jonah already was saved. Rob Barrett (“Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between Y-H-W-H and Jonah,” *JSOT* 37:2 (2012), p. 244) suggests additional ironies in Jonah’s prayer: Jonah proclaims that he has called out to God (2:3), but in fact has refused to call out to Nineveh or to God while on the boat. Jonah states that God saved him because he turned to God, while he is fleeing God’s command.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra counters that Jonah specifically stayed near Nineveh so that he would be ready to go with a second command. Alternatively, Ben-Menahem (*Da’at Mikra: Jonah*, p. 13) suggests that Jonah might have thought that God had sent someone else.

[xviii] For further analysis of the interrelationship between Joel, Jonah, and Exodus 34, see Thomas B. Dozeman, “Inner Biblical Interpretation of Y-H-W-H’s Gracious and Compassionate Character,” *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 207-223.

[xviii] For fuller exploration of this and related disparities, see Hayyim Angel, “The Uncertainty Principle of Repentance in the Books of Jonah and Joel,” in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 148-161.

[xviii] See further discussion in Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu*, pp. 66-68.

[xviii] *Midrash Jonah*, ed. Jellinek, p. 102, quoted in Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction p. 12. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that during the entire episode, Jonah needed to learn important lessons in becoming a prophet. God therefore sent him on this initial mission to Nineveh. Only after this episode did God send him on a more favorable prophetic mission to Israel (II Kings 14:23-27). “Commentary on Jonah” (Hebrew),

HaMa'ayan 51:1 (Tishri 5771-2010), pp. 8-9.

KOHELET: SANCTIFYING THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

INTRODUCTION

Tanakh is intended to shape and guide our lives. Therefore, seeking out *peshat*—the primary intent of the authors of Tanakh—is a religious imperative and must be handled with great care and responsibility.

Our Sages recognized a hazard inherent to learning. In attempting to understand the text, nobody can be truly detached and objective. Consequently, people's personal agendas cloud their ability to view the text in an unbiased fashion. An example of such a viewpoint is the verse, "let us make man" from the creation narrative, which uses the plural "us" instead of the singular "me" (Gen. 1:26):

> R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonatan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let Us make man," etc., he said: "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics (for maintaining a plurality of gods)?" "Write," replied He; "And whoever wishes to err will err." (*Gen. Rabbah* 8:8)

The midrash notes that there were those who were able to derive support for their theology of multiple deities from the this verse, the antithesis of a basic Torah value. God would not compromise truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that if they wish, people will be able to find pretty much anything as support for their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of God:

?It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, God created in the beginning, I shall make man in image and likeness. (*Megillah* 9a)

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man." For this anticipated audience, God inspired the elders to deviate from the truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

While this educational discussion is central to all Tanakh, Ecclesiastes probably concerned our Sages and later commentators more than any other biblical book. By virtue of its inclusion in Tanakh, Ecclesiastes' teaching becomes truth in our tradition. Regarding any book of Tanakh, if there are those who wish to err in the conclusions they draw, they will do so. However, our Sages worried that Ecclesiastes might cause even the most sincerely religious people to draw conclusions antithetical to the Torah, thereby causing greater religious harm than good. and consequently they considered censoring it from Tanakh:

R. Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilat said in Rav's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (*Shabbat* 30b)

Our Sages discerned *internal* contradictions in Ecclesiastes, but they also worried that Ecclesiastes contained *external* contradictions, that is, verses that appear to contradict the values of the Torah. They addressed this alarming prospect by concluding that since Ecclesiastes begins and ends with religiously appropriate teachings, those verses set the tone for the remainder of its contents. If one reaches anti-Torah conclusions from Ecclesiastes, it means that something was read out of context. A striking illustration of this principle is a midrashic teaching on Ecclesiastes 11:9. The verse reads:

O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things.

To which our Sages respond:

R. Benjamin b. Levi stated: The Sages wanted to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned toward heresy. They argued: Was it right that Solomon should have said the following: O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you

to enjoyment in the days of your youth (Ecc. 11:9)? Moshe said, So that you do not follow your heart and eyes (Num. 15:39), but Solomon said, Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes (Ecc. 11:9)! What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said, But know well that God will call you to account for all such things (Ecc. 11:9), they admitted that Solomon had spoken well. (*Lev. Rabbah* 28:1; cf. *Ecc. Rabbah* 1:3)

Were our Sages genuinely worried about people not reading the second half of a verse and consequently adopting a hedonistic lifestyle? Based on the midrashic method of reading verses out of their natural context, this verse likely posed a more serious threat in their society than it would for a *pashtan* who reads verses in context. The best defense against such egregious errors always is good *peshat*. This chapter will briefly consider the challenges of learning *peshat* in Ecclesiastes, and then outline a means of approaching Ecclesiastes as the unique book it is.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the level of *derash*, many of our Sages' comments on Ecclesiastes appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. The word "Torah" never appears in Ecclesiastes. Such midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Ecclesiastes to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to *peshat*, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of the verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Ecclesiastes appears to threaten traditional values.[xviii]

For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success: wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising, but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning:

For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache. (1:18)

Sforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the *parshan* himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is *peshat*, that is, does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the Talmudic passage

cited above.[xviii]

Some commentators attempt to resolve certain internal and external contradictions in Ecclesiastes by attributing otherwise troubling (to these commentators) statements to other people—generally evil people or fools. Take, for example, one of Kohelet's most life-affirming declarations:

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. (9:7-9)

Ibn Ezra—the quintessential *pashtan*—writes, "This is the folly that people say in their hearts." Ibn Ezra maintains that Kohelet's own view is the opposite of what this passage says.[xviii] However, such attempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.[xviii]

Commentators also devote much energy to reconciling the internal contradictions of Ecclesiastes. See, for example, the lengthy discussions of Ibn Ezra (on 7:3) and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (introduction in *Da'at Mikra*, pp. 24-33). Some reconciliations are more textually convincing than others. Regardless, it is critical to ask why there are so many contradictions in the first place.[xviii] That so many strategies were employed to bring Ecclesiastes in line with the rest of Tanakh and with itself amply demonstrates that this Megillah is unusual. Ecclesiastes needs to be understood on its own terms rather than being reinterpreted away. *Pashtanim* also developed a methodology for confronting Ecclesiastes' challenges directly, as will be discussed presently.[xviii]

ATTEMPTING A *PESHAT* READING: GUIDELINES

In order to approach Ecclesiastes, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. Ecclesiastes is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression *tahat ha-shemesh* (beneath the sun) appears twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha?shamayim* (under heaven) appears three additional times, and Rashi and Rashbam[xviii] maintain that this expression is synonymous with *tahat ha?shemesh*. In the same vein, people are called *ro'ei ha-shemesh* (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. The word *ani* (I) appears twenty-nine times, and its appearance is not grammatically necessary. The emphasis on *tahat ha-shemesh* demonstrates a this-worldly perspective, while the repetition of the word *ani* highlights the personal nature of the presentation. Michael V. Fox notes the difference between how 1:12-14 is written:

I, Kohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind.

Fox then imagines how these verses could have been written without the focus on the personal narrative:

Studying and probing with wisdom all that happens under the sun is an unhappy business, which God gave men to be concerned with! All the happenings beneath the sun are futile and pursuit of wind.

Without the personal reflections that are central to Kohelet's thought, we are left with a series of dogmatic pronouncements. Kohelet's presentation invites readers into his mind as he goes through a personal struggle and process of reflection.[xviii]

Given this starkly anthropocentric perspective, Ecclesiastes *should* reflect different perspectives than the theocentric viewpoint of revealed prophecy. All people perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. On the basis of this observation, R. Simeon ben Manasia maintained that Ecclesiastes was not inspired altogether:

R. Simeon ben Manasia says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands because it is only Solomon's wisdom. (Tosefta *Yadayim* 2:14)[xviii]

Though his minority view was rejected by our tradition (which insists that Ecclesiastes is divinely inspired), Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of human wisdom.

The word *adam* appears forty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, referring to all humanity (except for one instance in 7:28, which refers specifically to males). Kohelet speaks in a universal language and does not limit its discourse to a Jewish audience. Torah and other specifically Jewish themes do not appear in Ecclesiastes, which focuses on more universal *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *yirat Elokim* (fear of God).

Similarly, God's personal name—the Tetragrammaton—never appears in Ecclesiastes. Only the generic name Elokim appears (forty times), signifying both the universalistic discourse of Ecclesiastes and also a distant, transcendant Deity, rather than a close and personal relationship with God. In Ecclesiastes, God appears remote, and it is impossible to fathom His means of governing the world. For example, Kohelet warns:

Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few. (5:1)

Since God is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose and much harm in protesting against God (cf. 3:11; 7:13-14). Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks *about* God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience.

Tying together these strands of evidence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) attempts to explain why Ecclesiastes is read (primarily by Ashkenazim[xviii]) on Sukkot:

> It is written in Zechariah chapter 14 that in the future the nations of the world will come [to Jerusalem] on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot to bring offerings…. And this was the custom in King Solomon's time. This is why Solomon recited Ecclesiastes on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot in the presence of the wise of the nations…. This is why it contains only the name Elokim, since [non-Jews] know only that Name of God. (*Harhev Davar* on Num. 29:12)

Needless to say, this means of justifying a custom is anachronistic from a historical vantage point. Nonetheless, Netziv's keen perception of Kohelet's addressing all humanity with universal religious wisdom captures the unique flavor of this book.

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Ecclesiastes' textual contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted and often paradoxical human condition. Significantly, Ecclesiastes' inclusion in Tanakh and its consideration as a divinely inspired book elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious truth.

While Ecclesiastes contains truth, it is but one aspect of truth rather than the whole truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality:

> I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun. (4:1-3)

Kohelet never calls on God to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop it. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in 1:4-7 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history, prophecy reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

Kohelet grapples with the realities that wise/righteous people do not necessarily live longer or more comfortable lives than the foolish/wicked and that wisdom itself is limited and fallible:

> Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration…. For I have set my mind to learn wisdom

and to observe the business that goes on in the world—even to the extent of going without sleep day and night—and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them. (8:14-17)

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: God is just, but there are injustices manifested in the real world. While Kohelet cannot solve this dilemma, he discovers a productive response. Once a person can accept that the world appears unfair, one can realize that everything is a gift from God rather than a necessary consequence for righteousness.[xviii] We ultimately cannot fathom how God governs this world, but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly,[xviii] even though wisdom is limited and the wise cannot guarantee themselves a more comfortable life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.[xviii]

On a deeper level, the human psyche is profoundly attracted to being godlike. This tendency lies at the heart of the sins of Eve (Gen. 3:5, 22) and the builders of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).[xviii] Kohelet blames God for creating us with this desire while limiting us, rendering this innate drive impossible (7:14; cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra on 1:13). Confrontation with our own limitations leads to the extreme frustration manifest in Ecclesiastes. However, once we can accept that we cannot be God, this realization should lead to humility and awe of God:

He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass. Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God. I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore: Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him. (Ecc. 3:11-14)[xviii]

Michael V. Fox summarizes Ecclesiastes' purpose as follows:

When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of the matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason.[xviii]

While Kohelet challenges us at every turn, he simultaneously provides us the opportunity to find meaning beneath the unsolvable dilemmas.

Similarly, the universality of death tortures Kohelet. Once Kohelet accepts the reality of death, however, he concludes that it is preferable to attend funerals rather than parties, since focusing on our mortality will encourage us to live a more meaningful life:

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart. (7:2, cf. Rashbam)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik expands on this idea, and says that it is not that there can only be meaning in life if there is death:

The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…. For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[xviii]

Certain paradoxes and limitations are inherent to human existence, and not even the wisest of all men can make them disappear. Instead, Kohelet teaches us how to confront these challenges honestly and then embark on a process of intense existential frustration that ultimately leads to a greater recognition of the infinite gap between ourselves and God, leading in turn to humility and fear of God, leading in turn to living more religiously in every sense.[xviii]

CONCLUSION

A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims. (12:9)

Kohelet relentlessly challenges received wisdom rather than blindly accepting it. This process is accompanied by formidable dangers and responsibilities; but ignoring that pursuit comes with even greater dangers. Kohelet never abandons his beliefs nor his normative sense of what all God-fearing people should do; yet he also never abandons nor solves his questions and his struggles with human existence. By presenting this process through a personal account with inspired wisdom, he becomes the teacher of every thinking religious individual.

One midrash suggests that Solomon made the Torah accessible in a manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed. He taught those who were not prophets how to develop a relationship with God:

He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (*oznayim*) to the Torah…. R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So until Solomon arose, no one ?could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah. (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:8)

Tanakh needed prophecy so that we could transcend ourselves and our limited perspectives to aspire to a more perfected self and world, and to reach out across the infinite gulf to God. Ultimately, however, it also needed Ecclesiastes to teach how to have faith from the human perspective, so that we may grow in our fear of Heaven and observe God's commandments in

truth.

Notes

This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 288-300.

[xviii] Throughout this chapter, "Ecclesiastes" refers to the name of the book, and "Kohelet" refers to the author. This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective," *Sukkot Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2008), pp. 39-54; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 190-204.

[xviii] For a survey and analysis of some of the distinctions between the readings of Rashi and Rashbam on Ecclesiastes, see Robert B. Salters, "The Exegesis of Rashi and Rashbam on *Qoheleth*," in *Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age*, ed. Gilbert Dahan, Gerard Nahon and Elie Nicolas (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), pp. 151-161.

[xviii] For a discussion of the interplay between text and commentary regarding the faith of Abraham, see Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 192-212; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127-154.

[xviii] It should be noted that Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative interpretation for these verses. Precisely because he is so committed to *peshat*, Ibn Ezra occasionally resorts to attribution of difficult (to Ibn Ezra) verses to other speakers instead of radically reinterpreting those verses. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Hab. 1:1, 12; Ps. 89:1; Ecc. 3:19.

[xviii] Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some critical scholars employed the opposite tactic, i.e., that Eccelesiastes was a work that denied beliefs found elsewhere in Tanakh, and a later "Orthodox glossator" added to the text to correct those errors. One traditional rabbinic commentator—Shadal—actually adopted this argument in his commentary (published in 1860) and expressed the wish that our Sages would have banned Eccelesiastes from Tanakh. Four years after publishing his commentary, however, he fully regretted and retracted that view and expressed appreciation of Eccelesiastes' religious value. For a discussion of Shadal's initial interpretation of Eccelesiastes in light of his anti-haskalah polemics, see Shemuel Vargon, "The Identity and Dating of the Author of Eccelesiastes According to Shadal" (Hebrew), in *Iyyunei Mikra u?Parshanut 5, Presented in Honor of Uriel Simon*, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 365-384.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra and those who followed his approach assumed that intelligent people do not contradict themselves: "It is known that even the least of the sages would not compose a book and contradict himself" (Ibn Ezra on Ecc. 7:3). However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik considered this perspective Aristotelian. Jewish thought, in contrast, accepts dialectical understandings of humanity and halakhah (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007], p. 29). Cf. Michael V. Fox:

“Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them” (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1999], p. 134).

See also Shalom Carmy and David Shatz, who write that “the Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy… Philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature” (“The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy* vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Frank & Oliver Leaman [London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 13-14).

[xviii] See further discussions in Gavriel H. Cohn, *Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 253-258; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, pp. 1-26.

[xviii] *The commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth*, ed. and trans. by Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

[xviii] Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), introduction p. xvii.

[xviii] See discussion of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 104-120.

[xviii] In Tractate *Soferim* chapter 14, the practice of reading Ecclesiastes is not mentioned when the other Megillot are. The first references to the custom of reading Ecclesiastes on Sukkot are in the prayer books of Rashi and *Mahzor Vitry* (eleventh century).

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 7:12, 19; 8:1; 9:18; 10:12.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:13-15; 6:8; 7:15-16, 23; 8:17; 9:1, 11, 16.

[xviii] In relation to the introduction of this chapter, Lyle Eslinger (“The Enigmatic Plurals Like ‘One of Us’ [Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7] in Hyperchronic Perspective,” *VT* 56 [2006], pp. 171-184) proposes that the “plural” form of God that appears three times in Genesis expresses the rhetorical purpose of creating boundaries between God and humanity. The first (“Let *Us* make man”) distinguishes between God and the godlike human; the other two occur when the boundaries are threatened by Eve and then the builders of the Tower of Babel.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 5:6; 8:12; 12:13.

[xviii] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, p. 49.

[xviii] *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, p. 33.

[xviii] In this regard, Eccelesiastes resembles the Book of Job. While a rigid system of direct reward and punishment is refuted by empirical evidence, this belief is replaced by an insistence on humble submission to God's will and the supreme value of faithfulness to God. Suffering has ultimate meaning even if we cannot fathom God's ways. See Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *ZAW* 117 (2005), pp. 351-366.