

Potomac Torah Study Center

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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.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may the new year bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

We were away last week, and I returned to discover that my computer could not connect to the Internet. I had two experienced computer technicians work for a total of seven hours to resolve the problem without requiring reinstalling Windows, all my programs, and all my data. Anyway, my computer is working again as of this evening. I did not have time or computer access to write a new message this week, so I using material from previous introductions. Hopefully I'll be back to normal by next week.

As I write, Rosh Hashanah is barely 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 Kohanim), 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.

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.

In a recent Rosh Hashanah message, when we were still coping with the horrors of Hamas, Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander asked:

[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.

This season, with Israel seeming to be more secure, Rabbi Brander reminds us:

We are living in a fractured world where redemption cannot come to one part of Israel without the other, nor to the Jewish people without humanity as a whole. God's comfort must reach every corner: to our hostages in the dark underground tunnels, to families mourning lost loved ones, to the wounded struggling to heal, and to the heroic families shouldering the national burden as their husbands and fathers serve hundreds of days in reserve duty. Our need for redemption is collective, and God offers consolation to us all, including Himself, as one.

May redemption come in 5787 to our people and to humanity as a whole – a redemption where we Jews feel secure living as Jews and where others respect us as we hopefully also respect the other people who share this world with us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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 Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezi Esther; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, 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; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, 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.

Haftarat Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelekh: Immortality in Partnership

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

Is there any logical order connecting the seven haftarot of consolation read over the Shabbatot following Tisha B'av? They are all from the book of Isaiah, but they are certainly not read in synagogue chronologically or even sequentially. In fact, the haftara for our parsha, Ki Tetze, actually precedes the haftara we read two weeks ago, on Shabbat Parshat Re'eh. Is the order random? Or is there, perhaps, a deeper logic that traces a progression of ideas?

Commentators throughout the ages have offered various suggestions. Let's explore two of the most compelling theories.

The first is offered by **Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Shouaib**, a fourteenth-century Spanish luminary and student of the Rashba, who wrote a seminal series of derashot on the different parashot of the Torah. According to Ibn Shuaib, the seven haftarot

read during these weeks correspond to different voices in the drama of Israel's exile and redemption – each of whom has its own need for consolation and salvation:

Va'etchanan: God Himself accompanies Israel in exile, and will one day return triumphantly: *"A voice calls out: 'Clear the Lord's way in the desert: smooth across the arid plain a road for our God'"* (Isaiah 40:3).

Ekev: The Messiah longs to come to console the world and bring about the resettlement and flourishing of Israel's lands and cities, but has been delayed by Israel's behavior. *"For your ruins, for your wastelands, for the land of your destruction, for you will be too narrow for your dwellers, while those who would destroy you will be far away from you"* (49:19–20).

Re'eh: The patriarchs, who looked on in sorrow as their descendants' folly led to disaster, await their rehabilitation: *"All your children will be students of the Lord, and great will be your children's peace"* (54:13).

Shofetim: The Jewish people cry out for comfort, and God answers: *"It is I, I who comfort you"* (51:12).

Ki Tetze: The land of Israel itself prays to be repopulated with life *"You shall overflow rightward and left, your children possessing nations, and filling forsaken towns with life"* (54:3).

Ki Tavo: Jerusalem longs to be rebuilt on eternal foundations: *"Your gates will be always open, day and night, never closed"* (60:11).

Nitzavim: Zion, the site of the Temple, laid waste by Israel's enemies, waits silently for God's dramatic redemption — and Am Israel yearns for this moment. *"For Zion's sake I cannot be silent, for Jerusalem's I cannot be still until righteousness bursts forth shining, and rescue burns like a brand, and all nations see your righteousness, all the kings your glory"* (60:1–2).

The beauty of Ibn Shouaib's interpretation lies in showing how the Jewish people are not alone in their pain and longing. The greatest spiritual forces in the world, God, the Messiah, the Land, Jerusalem, Zion all yearn together with us, magnifying our strength and hope.

Meanwhile, **Rabbi David Abudraham**, a Spanish commentator of the same era, offered a different perspective. He viewed the progression of the haftarot as a dialogue between three partners: God, Israel, and the prophet Isaiah.

The first haftara opens with God commanding Isaiah to console the people: *"Comfort, comfort My people"* (40:1). But the nation refuses to accept his words: *"The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord, He has forgotten me."* (49:14–15) – hence, it is God Himself who must offer them comfort. The prophet relays this message back to God, protesting that the people refuse to be consoled – *"oppressed and storm-swept, never comforted"* (54:11).

And so, over the three following haftarot, God agrees to address the people directly: *"It is I, I who comfort you"* (51:12). He recognizes their pain (*"Barren woman, never a mother"* – 54:1); announces that it will come to an end (*"Rise, give light, for your light has come"* – 60:1); and heralds the joy by the Jewish people that will replace the pain (*"I shall rejoice, rejoice in the Lord"* – 61:10).

Abudraham's approach is elegant because of the direct connection and earnest communication between God and the Jewish People and the emphasis it places on relationship in the process of redemption.

Whichever perspective we adopt on the connection between the haftarot, both resonate powerfully in our collective experience today. We are living in a fractured world where redemption cannot come to one part of Israel without the other, nor to the Jewish people without humanity as a whole. God's comfort must reach every corner: to our hostages in the dark underground tunnels, to families mourning lost loved ones, to the wounded struggling to heal, and to the heroic families shouldering the national burden as their husbands and fathers serve hundreds of days in reserve duty. Our need for redemption is collective, and God offers consolation to us all, including Himself, as one.

Shabbat Shalom.

* President and Rosh Yeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone. Rabbi Brander is on vacation, so I selected a column for Shoftim from his archives. Note: Hebrew text omitted because of software issues.

<https://ots.org.il/parshat-ki-tetze-rabbi-brander/?pfstyle=wp>

Drasha: Netzavim/Vayeilech

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1998

The final portions of the Torah don't let us escape from the harsh realities of real-world trials and tribulations. In this week's combined portions of Nitzavim & Vayeilech, and in the following portion of Ha'azinu, the Torah discusses the harsh realities of sin and consequences.

Hashem describes the scenario that will arise after the death of Moshe. *"And this nation will arise and turn to foreign gods, and they will leave the treaty that I cut with them. And my wrath shall burn upon them and I will leave them. They will be for prey and many evils, and pain will find them, and they will say on that day, 'is it not because G-d is not with us that all this evil befalls us!' And I will hide My face on that day for all the evil that they did; for turning to other gods."* (Deuteronomy 31:16-19).

The next verse seems totally out of place. *"And now write this song for them and place it in their mouths and teach it to the children of Israel, so that this song will be for Me as a testimony in the Children of Israel"* (Deuteronomy 31:20).

The juxtaposition of the verses provokes many questions. Why does Hashem tell Moshe to write the song now? Why is the impending doom called "a song"? Why does the Torah say *"it will be a testimony for Me"*? Who is testifying and to whom? What does it mean *"put it in their mouths"*? Shouldn't the Torah be put in their ears? Why would we want to sing this distressing song anyway? Of course, Rashi and many of the great medieval commentators explain these verses with great clarity. I, however, would like to take a homiletic approach.

This past Sunday I had the pleasure of meeting with William Goldberg, a true friend and supporter of Jewish education. He left me with a moving story that he heard this past Shabbos from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, who was the Scholar-In-Residence at the Atlantic Beach Jewish Center.

After World War II, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yukisiel Halberstam, of blessed memory, a survivor of the concentration camps, held a minyan in the Beth Moses Hospital in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Parshas Ki Savo arrived and with it, the section known as the tochacha (admonishment), which is filled with foreboding warnings of doom and destruction, lest the Jewish nation stray from the will of G-d.

The verses warn of unimaginable horrors: exile, starvation, rape, robbery, and torture — to name just a few.

The custom of Jews world-over is to read the verses of tochacha quietly, so as not to rile up enemies, celestial and otherwise, who may think those calamities a good idea to cast upon the Jewish Nation.

So it was the portion of Ki Savo, and the Klausenberger Rebbe and his minyan of ravaged survivors were about to read the tochacha and re-live horrors of their recent history through the words of the ancient prophecies.

The Torah-reader started the verses of doom in a hushed tone. He began reading them quietly and quickly. Suddenly the Rebbe banged on his lectern. "Hecher!" he shouted. (Yiddish for louder.)

The reader looked up from the Torah with a puzzled look on his face. Perhaps he was reading the Torah a bit too low. He raised his voice a notch, and continued in a louder undertone. But the Rebbe was not satisfied. "Louder!" he exclaimed.

By now the reader was reading as loudly as his normal recitation, and yet the Rebbe continued to bang on the lectern and exclaim, "HECHER!" The reader could not contain his puzzlement and instead of shouting the portion

he stopped and looked to the Rebbe for an explanation.

“We no longer have to read these miserable curses quietly,” the Rebbe exclaimed. “There is no curse we have not experienced. There is no affliction we have not suffered! We saw it all. We lived it all. Let us shout with pride to our Father in Heaven that we have already received all the curses! We have survived these curses, and now it is His turn to bring us the blessings and the redemption!” And with that the reader continued reading the tochacha loud and clear as if singing an anthem to his nation’s tenacity.

Hashem tells Moshe to write this song and teach it to every Jew that will face difficulties. It shall be *“a song that should be in our mouths. And it will be a testimony before the Almighty.”* Our experiences should be sung with honor as a badge of courage and fortitude. Like the Purple Hearts of wounded soldiers, they shall be a witness to Him. So that when calamities befall us we shall surmount our misfortunes. They will not be agonies that we shall cower behind. Rather, they will be a testimony to our faith, our commitment, and most importantly our eternity.

Good Shabbos!

From my archives

Sacrifices, Teshuva and Our Relationship with God

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

Parshat Nitzavim always falls immediately before Rosh HaShana, and appropriately so. For it is in this parasha that the Torah speaks at great length about the power of teshuva:

“And you will return to the Lord your God and obey God’s voice... you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” (Devarim 30:2). This process of teshuva comes, in the Torah’s narrative, after the terrible curses described in the previous parasha, have befallen the nation: *“And it will be when all these things befall you, the blessing and the curse...”* (verse 1) that you will then repent and return. And your returning – vi’shavta (the root of the word teshuva) – to God will be met with God’s return to you: *“And God will return your captivity... and God will return.”* (verse 3).

This parasha of teshuva, then, is actually the closing of last week’s parasha of blessings and curses. The Torah there ends its catalogue of curses rather abruptly, *“... and you will sell yourselves there to your enemies as slave men and slave women, and no one shall buy you.”* (Devarim 28:29). That’s it. You will be in the land of your enemies, afflicted and with no hope, more worthless than slaves. Where is the hope? Will God abandon us there? To this, Nitzavim responds – if you repent, God will return you to the Land of Israel, and you will once again prosper. You will no longer be *“cursed... in the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land,”* (Devarim 28:17), but rather *“... God will bring increase... to the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your cattle, and the fruit of your land,”* (Devarim 30:9). And in response to the devastating prophecy that: *“Just as God has rejoiced over you to do good to you and to increase you, so will God make your enemies rejoice to wipe you out and destroy you,”* (Devarim 28:63), our parsha echoes back: *“For God will once more rejoice over you to do good, just as God has rejoiced over your fathers.”* (Devarim 30:9).

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

The people – although they have confessed – have not really changed their ways, and have not really humbled their hearts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives.

Insights from Chassidic Tradition

By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

[Ed. note: Rabbi Katz is on hiatus for July and August. His outstanding parsha messages, including insights from the Chassidic tradition, will resume when he returns.]

* Chair of the Talmud Department and the Director of the Lindenbaum Center for Halakhic Studies, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY.

Paired Perspectives on Parashat Nitzavim–Vayelekh: Renewing the Covenant through Hakhel

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

Among the Torah's great educational institutions, Hakhel (Deuteronomy 31:9-13) stands alone. At the conclusion of every Shemittah (sabbatical) year, during the festival of Sukkot, the entire nation assembled to hear the Torah read publicly:

“Assemble the people: the men, the women, the children, and the stranger in your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe faithfully every word of this Torah” (Deuteronomy 31:12).

Unlike most public religious obligations, Hakhel explicitly includes every member of the covenantal community: men, women, children, and resident aliens. Torah belongs to all who reside in the Land of Israel.

The Torah never identifies who was to read the Torah publicly. The Mishnah (Sotah 7:8) assigns this responsibility to the king, whereas Josephus attributes it to the High Priest (Antiquities 4:8:12). The Talmud (Sotah 41b) likewise describes the Torah scroll being ceremoniously passed through several leaders before reaching the king. Several later commentators, including Ralbag, Malbim, and Netziv, suggest that when Israel lacked a king, another national leader such as the High Priest or head of the Sanhedrin fulfilled this role. Ezra's public Torah reading after the Babylonian exile (Nehemiah 8) likewise demonstrates that the nation's spiritual leader could gather Israel around the Torah even without a monarch.

Rambam identifies the deeper purpose of Hakhel. Rather than viewing it merely as a public Torah reading, he explains that every participant should experience the gathering as though standing once again at Mount Sinai (Laws of Hagigah 3:5-6). The Torah itself points in this direction. Earlier in Deuteronomy, Moses recalls God's command at Sinai, "*Gather (hakhel) the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words*" (Deuteronomy 4:10). The same rare root, k-h-l, links the original revelation at Sinai with the national assembly every seven years. Hakhel therefore serves as a covenantal reenactment of Israel's formative religious experience.

Why, however, does the Torah command Hakhel specifically during Sukkot following the Shemittah year? Rabbi Yaakov Medan offers a compelling explanation. Ordinarily, Sukkot celebrates the completion of the agricultural year. The crops have been gathered, and Israel thanks God for the year's abundance before beginning a new agricultural cycle with prayers for rain on Shemini Atzeret. Sukkot therefore became *he-hag*, "*the Festival*," when the greatest number of pilgrims naturally assembled in Jerusalem.

The year following Shemittah, however, is fundamentally different. Since the land lay fallow throughout the seventh year, there is no ordinary harvest to celebrate. Ibn Ezra accordingly observes that Shemittah became a year devoted to Torah study. Rabbi Medan develops this idea further. During Shemittah, the Land of Israel itself temporarily resembles the wilderness. Just as Israel depended entirely on God's daily provision of manna after leaving Egypt, so too during the sabbatical year the nation relinquishes normal agricultural labor and relies upon God's blessing. At the culmination of that remarkable year, the celebration shifts naturally from agricultural abundance to spiritual renewal. Instead of celebrating the produce of the land, Israel celebrates the Torah that gives the land its meaning.

Hakhel is therefore far more than a periodic public reading. Every seven years, after experiencing a year of radical dependence upon God, the nation gathers once again as it gathered at Sinai. The covenant is renewed, the Torah is heard anew, and every generation is invited to stand once more before God alongside its ancestors. The ultimate celebration of the Land of Israel is not its harvest alone, but the covenant that transforms the land into the home of God's people.

* National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and faculty of Yeshiva University for many years. Rabbi Angel is a prolific scholar who speaks frequently at many venues.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3487>

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A Trans-Generational Covenant: Thoughts for Parashat Nitsavim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel **

"You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God....that He may establish you this day unto Himself for a people and that He may be to you a God as He spoke to you and as He swore to

your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath but with him that stands here with us this day before the Lord our God and also with him that is not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:9-14).

The Torah presents the eternal covenant between God and the People of Israel in three dimensions. First, it is addressed to the current generation, rich and poor, old and young, men and women. We are standing before God this day. The covenant is experienced directly and personally.

Second, the covenant harks back to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and their wives!). Our relationship with the Almighty has a long history, going back to our founding generations. We are not born in a vacuum. We have a deep history that sustains our covenant.

Third, the covenant is with the generations yet to come *“who are not here with us this day.”* Our actions and decisions today will have impact on our descendants.

Living as a thinking Jew requires a trans-generational approach. We are rooted in our history and strive to be faithful to the ideals of our ancestors. But the world changes. We don't live in the days of Abraham and Sara, or in Temple times, or in the Middle Ages or even in more recent generations. We face new circumstances and challenges and must be wise enough to apply ancient wisdom to our current realities. When I was rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel (a historic congregation dating back to 1654), I used to say: *“Our ancestors have a vote; but not veto power.”* We don't make changes casually; we take into consideration the traditions of the past. But a living covenant necessarily entails ongoing development and renewal. We are standing before God this day.

We also must take into account generations yet to come. Decisions today impact on our descendants in many ways. People often worry about “a slippery slope,” i.e. once changes of any kind are introduced, the whole framework may come apart. One thing leads to another until the original traditions slip away altogether. Our task is to take into consideration the “slippery slope,” but also to strive not to become a relic chained to a frozen past.

A story is told of an episode that occurred years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 1947 that set the stage for the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The Zionist leadership, headed by David Ben Gurion, was offered a very meager parcel of land; Ben Gurion was unsure whether this offer should be accepted or rejected. He had high regard for a fellow Zionist leader, Yitzhak Tabenkin, and turned to him for advice. Although Ben Gurion was not one to shun making decisions on his own, he told Tabenkin he would abide by whatever Tabenkin decided. Tabenkin asked for 24 hours so that he could consult with two individuals.

The next day, Tabenkin advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. Ben Gurion accepted the decision, but asked Tabenkin who his two advisors were. Tabenkin replied: *“I had to ask two very important individuals, my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet born.”*

Tabenkin understood the trans-generational covenant which binds the Jewish people together. He understood that contemporary decisions must factor in the generations that came before and the generations yet to come.

When decisions are made without adequately consulting our earlier generations, we create a breach in our tradition. When decisions are made without consulting our future generations, we create a breach in Jewish continuity.

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God....that He may establish you this day unto Himself for a people.” This is a singular honor...and awesome challenge.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Nitzavim–Vayelekh -- We Are All Connected

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

In addition to the covenant at Sinai where the Jews accepted the Torah with the words, “*Naaseh V’Nishma – We accept*,” (Shemos 24:7) another covenant is described in this week’s Parsha. Shortly before Moshe died, he gathered the entire people including the leaders, the people, the women and the children. Literally, everyone was present. As the Torah specifies, including “*your woodchoppers and watercarriers*.” (Devorim 29:9-10) In front of this gathering, Moshe declared, “*You stand before Hashem today... to enter into a covenant*.” The commentaries explain that this new covenant is that of “*Arvus*” the idea that we are all connected. The souls of Jews are intertwined with each other. When one person rises, we all rise. When one person fails, we are all affected.

The Medrash (Vayikra Rabbo 4:6) explains by telling the story of a person on a boat who begins to drill a hole under his own seat. When his boatmates objected he said, “But I am only drilling under my seat.”

Similarly, a Jew cannot say, “My deeds are mine alone,” because whatever one of us does affects us all.

This concept is true in a positive sense as well. The story is told of a community that had a tax on the people so they could light the streets at night. One day someone suggested that instead of collecting money and then buying oil to fill the street lamps, they could just have everyone contribute oil to fulfill their obligation. Unfortunately, many people decided that just a little dilution of their oil wouldn’t hurt anyone, so they did not contribute 100% oil. The total water content from the contributions was so great that they could not light the lamps.

Similarly, an individual might say, “I don’t really count. I am just a number within the people.” The Torah teaches that everyone is connected and everyone counts. For this reason, we do not assign a number to Jews when we count them. We must never think of ourselves or others as merely “another” in the greater system. Each of us is critical for the success of the nation.

Interestingly, when Moshe described the practical application of this covenant, he gave the example of a person who considers “in his heart” to turn away from Hashem, and says, “in his heart,” all will be well for me. (29:18) As much as Moshe was talking to the people as a group, the message Moshe was sharing through his example was aimed at the individual. He described the happenings in a person’s heart, known only to him. “Know,” Moshe was saying, “that you count. If you stray it will affect everyone.” Likewise, when you stand strong it lifts everyone up.

One of the great tactics of the Yetzer Horah is to tell us that what we do doesn’t matter. The message comes in many different forms and applications. But the message is the same. “Does Hashem really care what I do? How does what I do matter in the great cosmos of creation.” Yet, Judaism teaches that we all emanate from one person — Adam, first man — so that we should all see ourselves as an extension of the message given to the first man, “Pay attention, what you do does make a difference. Take heed not to destroy My world.” (Koheles Rabboh 7:13) Similarly, the Talmud (Baba Basra 9b) says that one who contributes to a Tzedaka cause is given credit as a partner in the whole. The message is that we are all connected.

As we approach Rosh Hashana and the start of a new year it is helpful to remind ourselves that we each count. It is the unified prayer and song from each of us that creates the wondrous experience of the Yom Tov. We each count. No one is merely a number. Let us try as individuals, to count big, to stretch ourselves to be just a bit greater in the coming year.

For Family Discussion:

Moshe gathers "your woodchoppers and watercarriers" along with the leaders. Why does the Torah specify the lowest-status people by name rather than just saying "everyone"?

In the boat story, the person says, "I am only drilling under my seat." What makes that argument *feel* logical, and why is it wrong?

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 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, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Netzavim - Choose Carefully by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

[Mazel-Tov to Rabbi Yehoshua and Serena Singer and family on the Bar Mitzvah of their son Kalman this Shabbat]

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, at 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!

* Rav at Sha'arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer's recent Devrei Torah normally come as podcasts rather than texts.

Nitzavim: Seek God, Find... By Rabbi Haim Ovadia * (2014)

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 מִיִּבְנֵי. 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 – מְכִישָׁר, 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.

Many 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 rights to this material.

* Senior Rabbi, Congregation Ramath Orah (New York, NY); Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Previously, 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 include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

Over the past two weeks, we have been discussing the three things that Chazal teach us can change the course of our judgment as we approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah.

Two weeks ago, we spoke about Tzedakah, recognising that everything we have ultimately comes from Hashem, and that one of the greatest ways to acknowledge that is by taking what we have been given and passing it on to others.

Last week, we spoke about Tefillah, our communication with Hashem, and the way that turning towards Him can actually change us. Tefillah isn't simply asking Hashem for what we want; it is about developing and strengthening our relationship with Him.

This week, I want to focus on the third: Teshuvah. If you look at most English translations, you will find the word teshuvah translated as repentance. I did something wrong. I regret it. I say I'm sorry. I promise to do better. And now we can turn the page. But there is a problem with that translation.

Teshuvah doesn't actually mean repentance. The word teshuvah comes from the Hebrew root בּוּשׁ — to return. And perhaps there is something incredibly powerful in that distinction. Teshuvah isn't simply about feeling guilty for what we have done wrong. It isn't about beating ourselves up over our mistakes. And it isn't even fundamentally about changing our behaviour. Of course, our behaviour matters.

The classic process of teshuvah involves recognising what we have done, regretting it, asking forgiveness, and committing ourselves to change. Rambam even takes this one step further: true teshuvah is demonstrated when we are placed in the same situation again and choose differently. But underneath all of that is something much deeper. Where are we returning to? The answer is: Hashem.

Sometimes we think that teshuvah means returning to the mitzvot. But the mitzvot are the expression of the relationship. They are not the relationship itself. Teshuvah means recognising that somewhere along the way, I stepped away. I stopped talking to Hashem. I stopped listening. I stopped caring about what Hashem wanted from me. I became disconnected. And teshuvah is the decision to turn around and come back. Think about a relationship between two people. If someone hurts the person they love, they don't simply regret the action because it was unpleasant or because they got caught.

True regret comes when they recognise who they hurt. The same is true in our relationship with Hashem. I don't regret doing something wrong simply because I am afraid of punishment. I regret it because I recognise that my actions affected my relationship with Hashem. And suddenly, teshuvah becomes something much more beautiful. I'm not just trying to become a better person. I'm coming home. I'm returning to a relationship that was always there.

And once I return to that relationship, everything else begins to follow. I want to pray more — because I want to speak to Hashem. I want to give more tzedakah — because I recognise that what I have comes from Him. I want to keep more mitzvot — because I want to understand what Hashem wants from me. I want to learn more — because I want to know Him better. The mitzvot are no longer simply a list of things I am supposed to do. They become the way I express the relationship I have chosen to return to.

So, what does teshuvah look like in practice? As we enter these final days before Rosh Hashanah, I want to suggest something very simple. Don't try to fix everything. Choose one place where you have stepped away from Hashem and take one step back. Maybe it is Tefillah. Maybe it is Shabbat. Maybe it is learning Torah. Maybe it is giving tzedakah. Maybe it is the way you speak to another person. Maybe it is simply making five minutes a day to talk to Hashem. Ask yourself: Where have I become disconnected? And then ask: What is one small thing I can do to return? That is teshuvah. Not perfection. Returning. And perhaps this is the message we most need as Rosh Hashanah approaches: Hashem isn't asking us to become someone completely different overnight. He is asking us to come back. Come back to the relationship. Come back to the connection. Come back to who we can be. And sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do before Rosh Hashanah isn't to take on ten new commitments. It is simply to take one step back towards Hashem. Shanah Tovah, and may we all merit a year of connection, growth, and closeness to Hashem. As we approach Rosh Hashanah, the goal isn't simply to get through the davening. The goal is to understand it, experience it, and connect through it.

Shabbat Shalom.

Be'Ahavat Yisrael,
Rabbi Netanel Kaszovitz

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

Rav Kook Torah **VaYeilech: The Song of Torah**

Near the end of his life, Moses commanded the people:

Now write for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites (Deut. 31:19).

This verse is the source-text for the obligation of each Jew to write a Torah scroll.[1]

But why did Moses refer to the Torah as a 'song'? In what way should we relate to the Torah as song?

Studying Mussar

A young scholar once wrote Rav Kook a letter probing certain philosophical issues, raising difficult questions that troubled him. Rav Kook was delighted to see the young scholar immerse his talents analyzing the philosophical aspects of Torah, unlike most Torah scholars who dedicate themselves solely to the study of Talmud and practical Halachah. Exploring abstract philosophical issues, Rav Kook stressed, is especially important in our times.

Nonetheless, Rav Kook urged the scholar to approach this field only after a prerequisite study of mussar texts.

You should first acquire expertise in all moralistic tracts that you come across, starting with the easier texts. Great scholars, wise-hearted and exceptionally pious, wrote this literature from the heart. Many subjects of inquiry cannot be fully grasped until one's emotions have been properly prepared.

In other words, it is important to precede the analysis of Torah philosophy with the study of simpler texts that clarify the unique holiness of Torah. What is the function of this preparatory study? By studying mussar, we gain a proper appreciation and reverence for the subject at hand. Only after this emotional preparation are we ready to delve into an intellectual analysis of Torah thought.

Engaging the Emotions

It is for this reason, Rav Kook explained, the Torah is called a 'song.' Just as the beauty of song stirs the heart, so too, the special power of mussar literature lies in its ability to awaken our inner sensitivity to the divine nature of Torah. This emotive preparation is essential, as only the pure of heart are successful in penetrating the philosophical foundations of the Torah.

While ethical works do not engage the intellect to a high degree, they nonetheless enable the soul to recognize the Torah's inner foundations. Of course, one should not be content with reading moralistic literature, but should continue with in-depth, analytical study of the Torah and its worldview.

(Gold from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Igrot HaRe'iyah vol. I, p. 94.)

Footnote:

1. Sanhedrin 21b. However, the Shulchan Aruch quotes the opinion of Rabbeinu Asher (the Rosh) that *"Nowadays it is a mitzvah to write books of the Pentateuch, Mishnah, Talmud, and their commentaries,"* since we no longer study directly from Torah scrolls.

https://ravkooktorah.org/vayeilech_66

Vayeilech: Torah As Song (5775, 5782)

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

Moses' long and tempestuous career is about to end. With words of blessing and encouragement he hands on the mantle of leadership to his successor Joshua, saying "I am a hundred and twenty years old now, and I may no longer be able to enter and to leave, since the Lord has told me, 'You shall not cross this Jordan.'" (Deut. 31:2)

As Rashi notes, it is written, "shall not", although Moses is still physically capable. He is still in full bodily vigour, "his eyes had not grown dim, nor his vitality fled." (Deut. 34:7) But he has reached the end of his personal road. The time had come for another age, a new generation, and a different kind of leader.

But before he takes his leave of life, God has one last command for him, and through him, for the future.

“So now write down this Song and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouths, that this Song may be My witness against them.”

Deut. 31:19

The plain sense of the verse is that God was commanding Moses and Joshua to write out the song that follows, that of Ha'azinu (Deut. 32:1-43). So Rashi and Nahmanides understand it. But the Oral Tradition read it differently. According to the Sages, “So now write down this Song” applies to the Torah as a whole. Thus the last of all the 613 commands is to write – or at least take part in writing, if only a single letter – a Torah scroll. Here is Maimonides' statement of the law:

Every Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, “Now therefore write this song,” meaning, “Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song,” since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll.[1]

Why this command? Why then, at the end of Moses' life? Why make it the last of all the commands? And if the reference is to the Torah as a whole, why call it a “song”?

The Oral Tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, “We received the Torah from Moses,” or “from our parents.” We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now - but not without our making the effort to write it again.

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: *nachalah* and *yerushah/ morashah*. They convey different ideas. *Nachalah* is related to the word *nachal*, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

A *yerushah / morashah* is different. Here the verb is active. *It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort*. The Israelites received the land as a result of God's promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, their *nachalah*, but they nonetheless had to fight battles and win wars. *Lehavdil*, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work. Torah is a *morashah*, not a *nachalah*. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

And why call the Torah a Song? Because if we are to hand on our faith and way of life to the next generation, it must sing. Torah must be affective, not just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in *Descartes' Error*[2], though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the affective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke, and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of humankind.

Music has a close association with spirituality. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it:

Words still go softly out towards the unsayable.
And music always new, from palpitating stones
Builds in useless space its godly home.[3]

Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we *daven*, meaning we sing the words we direct toward Heaven. Nor do we read the Torah. Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studies; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon, or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival, or one of the High Holy Days. There

are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the *Ketuvim*, 'the writings'. Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it modulates into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. If we are to make Torah new in every generation, we have to find ways of singing its song a new way. The words never change, but the music does.

A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great rabbinic Sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: when it came to *seudah shlishit*, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs. His message was clear. Without an affective dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of God.

Some years ago, one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the “missing Jewish children” of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christians families and brought up as Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organised a large banquet and placed advertisements in the Polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* ('Raisins and Almonds') the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all that is left of Jewish identity is a song.

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829-1908) in the introduction to the *Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat*, writes that the Torah is compared to a song because, to those who appreciate music, the most beautiful choral sound is a complex harmony with many different voices singing different notes. So, he says, it is with the Torah and its myriad commentaries, its “seventy faces”. Judaism is a choral symphony scored for many voices, the Written Text its melody, the Oral Tradition its polyphony.

So it is with a poetic sense of closure that Moses' life ends with the command to begin again in every generation, writing our own scroll, adding our own commentaries, the people of the book endlessly reinterpreting the book of the people, and singing its song. The Torah is God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung God's Song. We are the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, because words are the language of the mind but music is the language of the soul.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah, 7:1

[2] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, London, Penguin, 2005.

[3] “Sonnets to Orpheus,” book II, sonnet 10.

Around the Shabbat Table:

[1] What links can you find between the Torah and music?

[2] Why is it important for each Jew to write (or help write) a new Torah scroll?

[3] How can we take the Torah and make it new in our generation? Can you suggest some ideas?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayelech/torah-as-song/>

Nitzavim-Vayeilech: How to Cut Out Your Inner Adversary

By Eliezer Shemtov *

One of the most formidable adversaries one must confront is oneself.

The reason is simple: the ideas and feelings one knows best are one's own. And since they are personal, one tends to grant them enormous weight. "I think this and I feel that, and that is justification enough for doing everything I can to act on them."

But the reverse often turns out to be true. The person who designs their entire life around what seems right and feels good often ends up missing opportunities whose value far exceeds the reach of any limited, temporary personal idea or preference.

Comfort and familiarity can be one's greatest enemies, not one's allies.

In this week's combined reading, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, Moses addresses the Jewish people: *"You are all standing today before the L-rd your G d, your heads of tribes ... from your woodcutters to your water-carriers."*

The founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, known as the Alter Rebbe, interprets the tasks of cutting wood and drawing water not only in their literal sense but also as necessary inner work. The word used for "your wood" is *eitzecha*, which can also be read as "your eitzot," the unrestrained thoughts of the heart.. And the "water" referenced corresponds to the water element of the animal soul: the source and engine of physical pleasures.

The message, says Rabbi Schneur Zalman, is that one must "chop" the personal desires that serve the material self. Only when these two driving forces are neutralized can a person be in optimal condition to fulfill their life's mission, freed from the bribery of personal comfort.

One might assume this applies only to the spiritually inclined — to scholars and seekers. What about commerce, profession, and all the "non-religious" areas of life? Isn't everyone free to do what seems right and satisfying there?

The Rebbe notes that the answer to this question is embedded in Rashi's commentary on the verse. Who exactly were these *"woodcutters and water-carriers"*? Rashi explains that they were Canaanites who had come in Moses's time hoping to convert, and Moses assigned them these tasks. The Hebrew word for Canaanite — *kena'ani* — also implies *"merchant."* The implication is that not only in spiritual and religious pursuits, but also in commerce — in all worldly activity — one must put the "woodcutters" and "water-carriers" to work: cutting back personal ideas and desires, and engaging in all activities with the intention of illuminating the world with the light of Torah and the Divine soul.

Some might experience this as oppressive; "I'm not allowed to just do what I want." Others might see in it an extraordinary opportunity: even in the most apparently mundane and insignificant activities, one has the chance to accomplish something of infinite and eternal value.

The tool for this week: If you feel that much of your life lacks meaning or real value, remember that it is up to you to choose the direction: trace the path according to your own ideas and feelings — which leave no lasting mark — or free yourself from them and dedicate yourself to something infinitely greater.

* Chabad-Lubavitch emissary in Montevideo, Uruguay.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/7480793/jewish/How-to-Cut-Out-Your-Inner-Adversary.htm

Netzavim-Vayeilech: Our Underlying Unity

By Rabbi Moshe Wisniewsky *

Moses wrote down this Torah and gave it to the priests, the Levites, who carried the Ark of the Covenant of G-d, and to all the elders of Israel. (Deut. 31:9)

There is only one Torah; its lessons apply equally to all of us and we are all equally obligated in its laws. Nevertheless, Moses wrote a copy of the Torah for each tribe, recognizing that each tribe, both due to its hereditary qualities and due to the unique environment in which it would settle, would develop its own sub-culture within the general culture of the Jewish people.

This flowering of the Jewish people into unique sub-cultures is reflected in today's various Jewish communities – Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, and so on. This celebration of diversity is a beautiful phenomenon, reflecting how G-d's oneness expresses itself in infinite ways.

The underlying unity behind this diversity was reflected in the Torah scroll that Moses wrote for the Levites. This scroll was kept in the Temple, and all subsequently written scrolls had to conform to that authoritative copy.

We can learn from this to cherish both sides of the dichotomy: to celebrate our own culture while always remaining true to the underlying unity that is sourced in G-d's Torah.

– From *Daily Wisdom 3* *

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom 3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Why Be Jewish?

In the last days of his life, Moses renews the covenant between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of the covenant – how it came about, what its terms and conditions are, why it is the core of Israel's identity as an am kadosh (a holy people) and so on. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a national rededication to the terms of its existence as a holy people under the sovereignty of God Himself.

Moses, however, is careful not to limit his words to those who are actually present. About to die, he wants to ensure that no future generation can say, "Moses made a covenant with our ancestors but not with us. We didn't give our consent. We are not bound." To preclude this, he says these words:

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

As the commentators point out, the phrase "whoever is not here" cannot refer to Israelites alive at the time who happened to be somewhere else. That condition would not have been necessary since the entire nation was assembled there. Moses can only mean "generations not yet born." The covenant bound all Jews from that day to this. As the Talmud says: we are all mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai, "foresworn from Sinai" (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a). By agreeing to be God's people, subject to God's laws, our ancestors obligated us all.

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 and responsible for our actions, at the age of twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A bat or bar mitzvah is not a "confirmation." It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said, "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us

today," meaning all future generations, including us.

But how can this be so? Surely a fundamental principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation without consent. How can we be bound by an agreement to which we were not parties? How can we be subject to a covenant on the basis of a decision taken long ago and far away by our distant ancestors?

The Sages, after all, raised a similar question about the Wilderness Generation in the days of Moses who were actually there and did give their assent. The Talmud suggests that they were not entirely free to say 'No.'

"The Holy One, blessed be He, suspended the mountain over them like a barrel and said: If you say 'Yes,' all will be well, but if you say 'No', this will be your burial-place." Shabbat 88b

On this, R. Acha bar Yaakov said: "This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the covenant." The Talmud replies that even though the agreement may not have been entirely free at the time, Jews asserted their consent voluntarily in the days of Ahasuerus, as suggested by the Book of Esther.

This is not the place to discuss this particular passage, but the essential point is clear. The Sages believed with great force that an agreement must be made freely in order to be binding. Yet we did not agree to be Jews. We were, most of us, born Jews. We were not there in Moses' day when the agreement was made. We did not yet exist. How then can we be bound by the covenant?

This is not a small question. It is the question on which all others turn. How can Jewish identity be passed on from parent to child? If Jewish identity were merely racial or 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. There is a halachic principle: zachin le-adam shelo be-fanav, "You can confer a benefit on someone else without their knowledge or consent" (Ketubot 11a). And though it is doubtless a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices, with grave

consequences if we transgress. Had we not been Jewish, we could have worked on Shabbat, eaten non-kosher food, and so on. You can confer a benefit upon someone without their consent, but not a liability.

In short, this is the question of questions of Jewish identity. How can we be bound by Jewish law, without our choice, merely because our ancestors agreed on our behalf?

In my book *Radical Then, Radical Now*[1] I pointed out how fascinating it is to trace exactly when and where this question was asked. Despite the fact that everything else depends on it, it was not asked often. For the most part, Jews did not ask the question, 'Why be Jewish?' The answer was obvious. My parents are Jewish. My grandparents were Jewish. So I am Jewish. Identity is something most people in most ages take for granted.

It did, however, become an issue during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel says, "What is in your mind shall never happen - the thought, 'Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone'" (Ez. 20:32). This is the first reference to Jews actively seeking to abandon their identity.

It happened again in rabbinic times. We know that in the second century BCE there were Jews who Hellenised, seeking to become Greek rather than Jewish. There were others who, under Roman rule, sought to become Roman. Some even underwent an operation known as epispasm to reverse the effects of circumcision (in Hebrew they were known as meshuchim) to hide the fact that they were Jews.[2]

The third time was in Spain in the fifteenth century. That is where we find two Bible commentators, Rabbi Isaac Arama and Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, raising precisely the question we have raised about how the covenant can bind Jews today. The reason they ask it while earlier commentators did not was that in their time – between 1391 and 1492 – there was immense pressure on Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity, and as many as a third may have done so (they were known in Hebrew as the anusim, in Spanish as the conversos, and

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derogatively as marranos, “swine”). The question “Why stay Jewish?” was real.

The answers given were different at different times. Ezekiel’s answer was blunt: “As I live, declares the Lord, God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be King over you” (Ezek. 20:33). In other words, Jews might try to escape their destiny but they would fail. Even if it were against their will, they would always be known as Jews. That, tragically, is what happened during the two great ages of assimilation, fifteenth century Spain and in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In both cases, racial antisemitism persisted, and Jews continued to be persecuted.

The Sages answered the question mystically. They said that even the souls of Jews not-yet-born were present at Sinai and ratified the covenant (Exodus Rabbah 28:6). Every Jew, in other words, did give their consent in the days of Moses even though they had not yet been born. Demystifying this, perhaps the Sages meant that in their innermost hearts, even the most assimilated Jew knew that they were Jewish. That seems to have been the case with public figures like Heinrich Heine and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived as Christians but often wrote and thought as Jews.

The fifteenth-century Spanish commentators found this answer problematic. As Arama said, we are each of us both body and soul. How then is it sufficient to say that our soul was present at Sinai? How can the soul obligate the body? Of course the soul agrees to the covenant. Spiritually, to be a Jew is a privilege, and you can confer a privilege on someone without their consent. But for the body, the covenant is a burden. It involves all sorts of restrictions on physical pleasures. Therefore if the souls of future generations were present but not their bodies, this would not constitute consent.

Radical Then, Radical Now is my answer to this question. But perhaps there is a simpler one. Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince or princess. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is even possible for a monarch to abdicate. But no one can choose to become heir to a throne. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God Himself said, “My child, My firstborn, Israel” (Ex. 4:22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It is almost certainly both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to

think that the only significant things about us are those we choose. For the truth is that we do not choose some of the most important facts about ourselves. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are no longer here, and the question for all of us is: Will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory the words of Moses continue to resonate. “It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today.” We are each a key player in this story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid, and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us.

[1] Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, London: HarperCollins, 2000, (published in North America as *A Letter in the Scroll*, New York: Free Press, 2000).

[2] This is what R. Elazar of Modiin means in *Mishnah Avot* 3:15 when he refers to one who “nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham.”

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Our International Covenant

“Not with you alone do I establish this Covenant and this oath, but with those who are here with us standing today before the Lord our God and with those who are not here with us today.” (Deuteronomy 29:13–14)

So begins this week’s biblical portion of Nitzavim which is usually read on the Sabbath before Rosh HaShana. We must question the connection between our biblical portion and Rosh HaShana, especially since our Talmud records that “Ezra decreed that the curses of the book of Deuteronomy be publicly read before Rosh HaShana” (Megilla 31b).

Furthermore, the Almighty continues to proclaim that “it is not with you alone that I am entering into the covenant and this oath, but it is rather with those who are not here with us today” (Deut. 29: 13–14). To whom is the Lord referring when He includes “those who are not here with us today”? Are these our ancestors, who dreamt and may even have fought and died for the Promised Land, but never lived to see the day when Israel would be poised to enter it? Or are these our descendants yet unborn, to whom this eternal covenant certainly applies but who are not themselves here to agree to enter into it together with this generation of Israelites? Or perhaps to neither of the above, referring to another group entirely?

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To add a further question to our analysis of this covenant, you will remember that in last week’s biblical portion of Ki Tavo, wherein this covenant is described as the writing of the universal laws of blessings and curses on stones to be set up in all seventy languages immediately after Israel passes through the Jordan River, God describes His relationship with Israel using a word which the commentaries struggle to define and understand:

“This day the Lord your God commands you these laws and commands.... You have joined [cleaved, united – which is the way Targum translates the Hebrew “he’emarta,” presumably from the verb a-m-r] with the Lord this day to be for you a God...and to obey His voice. And the Lord has joined [cleaved, united] with you this day to be His treasured nation...and to establish you as higher than all the nations which He has made for [His] praise, renown, and glory and to establish you as a sanctified nation to the Lord your God.” (Deut. 26:16–19)

What does this strange Hebrew causative (hif’il verbal form) verb, he’emir actually mean? And in what way are we “the treasured nation (segula), higher than all other nations”?

Rashi, the most classical of all commentaries, tells us (ad loc.), “this word (amor) has no witness to testify on its behalf [as to its meaning] throughout the Bible,” which is to say that such a causative verbal usage for a root which usually (in its simple form) means “to speak” appears nowhere else in the Bible. He nevertheless goes on to say that it means “to separate” or “to set apart”; God has separated or set apart Israel unto Himself (to the exclusion of all other nations) and Israel has separated God unto itself (to the exclusion of all other gods). Targum apparently accepts this basic understanding in his translation as well.

Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak) maintains that it means “uplifted,” which may perhaps be linked to a word used for marriage, nissuin (the groom lifting his bride across the threshold of the new home he is providing for her, a metaphor for covenant). The Malbim suggests that it means “sanctified” in the sense of betrothed (kadosh, kiddushin); from the Hebrew ma’amar, an engagement (of a levirate wife). The linguistic logic of all of this emanates from the fact that marriage is the entrance into a totally new status of being – change in personal status by two individuals, on the strength of an acquisition which must be accompanied by a verbal declaration: “Behold you are sanctified unto me with this ring in accordance with the laws of Moses and of Israel.” And marriage with the words of our prophets is certainly the prime metaphor for God’s covenant with Israel (especially Hosea,

"I shall betroth you unto Me forever," recited while winding the tefillin on one's finger as a prelude to prayer, a symbol of our – Israel's – engagement with the Lord).

Let us take our verbal understanding one step further. The Kohanim, or Aaronite priest-teachers in Israel, are commanded to call upon God to bless the Jewish people during specified times of prayer and Temple ritual. The Bible commands in God's name, "Speak to Aaron and his sons saying, so shall you bless the children of Israel, say unto them (amor lahem)..." (Num. 6:23). This last phrase seems superfluous. The Talmudic sages deduce from it that the cantor must first declare (amor, speak out) each word of the blessing, after which the word is to be repeated by the Kohen. One French commentary explained the Hebrew amor as coming from the Latin-French-Spanish word amore which means love, thereby explaining why the priestly benediction must be recited by priests "with love" (be'ahava). Perhaps our verb in the Third Covenant is truly linked to this verb surrounding the priestly benediction, with both verbs related to a covenantal love relationship between God and His nation Israel

Now certainly I am not claiming that the Hebrew amor comes from the French amore; that would be absurd. But what I would suggest is that if indeed our God is a God of love (Ex. 34:6), and if indeed He created the human being, as an expression of His love (love requires another being to love, love does not exist in a vacuum), and if the essence of the human being created in the image of the Divine is his power of communication, of speech, amira becomes closely identified with love (see Gen. 2:1, Targum Onkelos ad loc.). Having said this, I would presume to provide a different understanding to Rashi's interpretation of the verse Ki Tavo; God has "separated" Israel unto Himself not to the exclusion of the other nations of the world but rather for the sake of the other nations of the world. After all, God created the world, not only Israel, and God loves all of humanity, not only Israel. Did not R. Akiva teach, "Beloved is the human being who was formed in the divine image" (Mishna Avot 3:18)? And is not this Third Covenant focused on the world? For what other reason would the Bible have its laws translated into all seventy languages of the world (Deut. 26:8)?

Just as the Kohanim are the priest-teachers of the Israelites, so is Israel the priest-teacher of the nations of the world, a "goy kadosh umamlekhet Kohanim" (holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers). (See Sforno, Ex. 19:6).

God has entered into a covenant or engagement with and betrothal of Israel which

has two parts: Israel must bear God's message of morality and peace to the world (a message which Israel accepted at Sinai) and God, in turn will guarantee Israel's eternity.

This is the divine charge in Ki Tavo, where God defines us as being above the nations not in terms of our being qualitatively higher than them – we were all formed in the womb of the Shekhina – but rather functionally higher in terms of our mission to teach them the ways of God. It is our task as a people to educate the world towards recognition of a God of morality, love, and peace; in our global village, the nations must become united as a source of praise and glory to a God of compassionate righteousness and moral justice rather than a means of nuclear weaponry which will destroy the world in a Jihadic race for totalitarian power.

Now we understand that those who did not stand at Sinai and Arvot Moab – the seventy nations of the world – must stand with us when God's Revelation will be "repeated a second time before the eyes of all living beings," as the Third Covenant becomes universally accepted and realized (see the Sabbath Amida, the Kedusha of Musaf). Indeed God's covenant must encompass Jew and gentile alike. And it makes perfect sense that our biblical reading precedes Rosh HaShana, when Jews must realize their true mission: to turn the wicked of the world towards a God of morality, to perfect the world with the Kingship of the Divine. And this, after all, is the entire point of the Third Covenant.

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

Accepting the Inevitable

All men are mortal.

Yankel is a man.

Therefore, Yankel is mortal.

You have just read a basic lesson in logic, one that appears in almost every textbook on the subject.

It is undoubtedly true that all of us, Yankel or Yentel, are mortal and will someday die. Yet, it is also true that we deny our mortality and live our lives as though death was not inevitable.

Our tendency to exclude our deaths from our awareness leads to some peculiar results. For example, in the graduate program which was designed to prepare me for a career as a psychotherapist, death was not part of the curriculum. The entire topic of death and dying was not something discussed in the graduate psychology programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

How well I remember attending a workshop by the then little known Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-

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Ross which introduced me and numerous other mental health professionals to the issues of death and dying. Her book, "On Death and Dying", became the first in a flood of similar works designed to train professionals to be aware of the psychology of the dying person, and of the ways in which people coped with the death of loved ones. That book continues to occupy a place of prominence on my personal bookshelf.

The Jewish tradition encourages us to contemplate our ultimate end. Especially at this time of year, so soon before the days of awe and judgment, death preoccupies our consciousness. Those of us who are familiar with the Rosh Hashanah liturgy can already hear the cantor chant, "who will live and who will die?"

This week we read two Torah portions, Nitzavim and Vayelech, the first of which contains the last public address which Moses made before his death, and the second of which tells us so much about his inner feelings as he prepared to die.

A careful reading of these two parshiyot demonstrates that in Parshat Nitzavim Moses stands before a huge audience, all of Israel, judges and chieftains and the lowly wood choppers and water fetchers, and delivers a powerful inspirational message.

Then, Parshat Vayelech opens with the phrase "and Moses went and spoke..." the commentaries tell us that Moses left the podium from which he addressed the public, and went down to the people, visiting each of them individually. He did this in order to take leave of each person, and to assure him that his death did not mean that the people's mission would fail.

He told them that like every other mortal he was about to die and that he could no longer "go out and come in." He was exquisitely conscious of his waning powers and wanted to use his final moments to say his goodbyes to his people face to face.

Rashi tells us that by saying "I can no longer go out and come in," he was indicating that "the traditions and wellsprings of wisdom" were no longer available to him. He sensed that he no longer had access to his inner sources of inspiration and creativity. What a lucid glimpse into the emotional experience of our great shepherd, in his last hours on earth!

As you may know, Rashi is so great a biblical commentator that there are commentaries written upon his commentary. These are known as "supercommentaries", and one of them, Sifsei Chachamim, offers us an even more profound insight into Moses's psyche.

This author suggests that as Moses realized that his wisdom was failing him, he was better able to accept his impending death, for a life without wisdom would not be worth living.

Toward the end of this week's Torah reading, indeed just at the point where maftir begins (Deuteronomy 31:28), we find Moses asking that all the elders be again assembled for him to address them. Here Rashi wonders why Moses did not simply called for the trumpets to be sounded, signaling that assembly was in order. After all, throughout the sojourn in the wilderness Moses would gather the people to him by sounding the "chatzotrot", the trumpets. Rashi suggests that at this moment, just before his death, Moses no longer had the symbols of power and authority available to him. He quotes Kohelet (Ecclesiastes 8:8), "there is no authority in the day of death."

One of the lessons I learned from Dr. Kubler-Ross so very long ago is the importance of the helper, be he or she a family member or a professional, to help the patient reach this stage of acceptance of impending death. To help teach us about this stage of acceptance, she quoted the following poem by the Indian poet Tagore:

I have got my leave. Bid me farewell, my brothers!
I bow to you all and take my departure.

Here I give back the keys of my door — and I give up
all claims to my house. I only ask for last kind words
from you.

We were neighbours for long, but I received more
than I could give. Now the day has dawned and the
lamp that lit my dark corner is out. A summons has
come and I am ready for my journey.

Studying Parshas Vayelech gives us a unique opportunity to learn about what a man's life is like in his last moments, as he prepares for his death. True, that man is Moses, and we cannot all aspire to his example. But there is nevertheless much to learn from this greatest of men, not only about how to live, but about how to die.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis **When Rosh Hashanah Cannot Be.**

Rosh Hashanah can only begin on four specific days of the week. It will never start on a Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday. Our Rabbis have given us a way to remember this with the phrase, "Lo Adu Rosh." Rosh refers to Rosh Hashanah, and Adu represents the three days it

can't start on: Aleph (Sunday), Daled (Wednesday), and Vav (Friday). But why is this? The reasoning is as follows:

If Rosh Hashanah were to start on a Sunday, then Hoshana Rabbah would fall on Shabbat. Since Hoshana Rabbah involves beating the willows and performing other practices, this would lead to the violation of Shabbat. So, Rosh Hashanah can't begin on a Sunday.

Rosh Hashanah also cannot start on a Wednesday because Yom Kippur would then fall on a Friday. Preparing for Shabbat while fasting on Yom Kippur would be extremely difficult!

Similarly, Rosh Hashanah can't commence on a Friday because Yom Kippur would end up on a Sunday. Preparing for Yom Kippur during the restrictions of Shabbat would create significant challenges!

Isn't it fascinating that the scheduling of Rosh Hashanah, often seen as one of the most significant days in the Jewish calendar, is directly influenced by Shabbat, the day we celebrate every single week?

This reminds us that, while seasonal Jewish experiences like Rosh Hashanah are important and deeply meaningful, it is the regular observance of Shabbat that holds even greater significance.

As we prepare for Rosh Hashanah, let us also commit to experiencing Hashem in an extraordinary way every week, not just on special occasions. Because, ultimately, as important as Rosh Hashanah is, Shabbat is even more so.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Return to Me and I Will Return to You – Courtship and Closeness Between Israel and God - Noa Nagen Nussbaum

The portion of Nitzavim is always read on the final Shabbat of the year, serving as the seal of Elul and as a spiritual preparation for the year ahead.

Last week we read the portion of Ki-Tavo, which recounts the renewal of the covenant between Israel and God before their entry into the Land. In this week's portion, just before his farewell, Moshe delivers to Israel what has become known as Parashat HaTeshuva—the portion of repentance. This passage does not merely set forth the demand to repent, but, perhaps more accurately, reveals the privilege and the enduring possibility of returning and drawing near once again.

Rav Yoni Grossman raises the question of why this section on Teshuva is not included within

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the covenant described in the previous chapters, together with the blessings promised to Israel should they uphold it. From its unusual placement, he derives a profound principle regarding the nature of Teshuva:

"It seems to me that the distinctive standing of Teshuva is hinted at by its distinctive placement. Teshuva cannot be mentioned as part of the covenant, for in the legal framework of any covenant—in which two parties commit themselves to one another—there is no room for Teshuva. If the people were to violate the Divine Covenant, they would, ostensibly, have no standing... Yet after the covenant is sealed, Moshe introduces Teshuva, just as he speaks of God's love for His people. It does not belong to the legal categories that form the foundation of the Covenant of Arvot Moav. But the possibility of Teshuva—resting upon God's mercy and His love for His people—remains open to them for all time."

The very fact that Israel was granted the capacity to repent and return—even though they are destined to break the covenant, the contract—is itself a radical innovation. Teshuva transcends the constitutional legal framework of the covenant, adding to it a dimension of love, dialogue, longing, and closeness.

Parshat HaTeshuva appears in the opening ten verses of Devarim 30, and it brims with words of comfort for the people of Israel, who will one day face exile, alongside promises of future redemption. The Ramban's comments on these verses are profoundly moving: "I have already noted that this portion speaks of the future, for all of its content has not yet been, but it is destined to be." One can picture him writing these words in Spain, while we, sitting today in the Land of Israel—descendants of those who gathered from the four corners of the earth—read these very same verses describing a reality we have merited to witness with our own eyes:

"Then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. If any of your dispersed are at the ends of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers." (Devarim 30:3–5)

Guided by these words of consolation and redemption, I wish to look more closely at the stages of Teshuva.

The opening verse of this section describes the initial moment of awakening to repent, which will overtake Israel in exile. Although the verse speaks of a national process, it is written in the singular, and can certainly be understood on the personal level as well: “When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart...”

This verse highlights two forces that can spark transformation: blessing and curse. The curses of the previous parasha depict horrifying calamities, both national and personal. The blessings, in contrast, describe abundance, prosperity, and security in the land. According to the verse, the impulse for change arises from a profound encounter with life’s extremes. At times, it is a curse—a fracture, a pain, a deep struggle—that stirs the yearning for clarity and renewal. At other times, it is a blessing—an encounter with abundance, love, or freedom—that awakens a sense of vitality and the desire to grow and move forward. On the national level, we can recognize examples from the past year in which both curses and blessings have prompted us to seek change. Personally, I pray that the awakenings yet to come will arise from the side of blessing.

After describing the awakening, the parasha turns to the process of Teshuva itself. The root **ש.ו.ב.** (to return, to repent) appears three times in close connection with the phrase “with your entire heart and with your entire being,” teaching us that Teshuva is, above all, an inner and spiritual journey, demanding profound and absolute soul-searching. The phrase echoes the words of the Shema prayer: “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might.” It seems that the Torah wishes to bind together the mitzvah of loving God with the mitzvah of returning to Him in repentance. In the Shema, we proclaim our love for God; in Teshuva, God reveals His love for us.

Up to this point, the Torah has described the “initial awakening” and the decision to change “with all your heart and with all your soul.” Yet the verses remain silent on the pressing, practical question: How does one actually begin? How does one move from decision to action? Many testify to the gap between the recognition that something is wrong and the capacity to transform it. Old habits, as the saying goes, die hard; changing them can be daunting and frightening. The very first step may seem unbearable.

Our Sages address this silence in a beautiful midrash in Eicha Rabbah, on the verse “Bring us back to You, O Lord, and we shall return,” which gives voice to the human struggle to begin the process of change:

“...Knesset Yisrael said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, it is Yours—return us! He said to them: It is yours, as it says (Zecharia 2): ‘Return to Me and I will return to you, says the Lord’...” (Eicha Rabbah 5:21).

The midrash describes a dialogue between Israel and God. Israel pleads: “It is Yours! We want to return, but we cannot. You, who are all-powerful, must bring us back to You.” God’s response, though filled with love, insists that Israel must be the initiators. Once they begin, He will shorten the distance and draw near.

This same theme—the difficulty of beginning and the reciprocity of Teshuva—appears in another, more famous midrash, this time not in the context of Eicha, the scroll of destruction and despair, but in Shir HaShirim, the scroll of love and longing. In Eicha, Israel is moved by curse and ruin; in Shir HaShirim, the imagery is of love and abundance, of lovers seeking one another, with Teshuva taught through verses of courtship: “Open for Me.” Rabbi Yasa said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: My children, open for Me one opening of Teshuva as tiny as the eye of a needle, and I will open for you openings wide enough for wagons and carriages to pass through. (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:2).

Remarkably, when we turn our attention from the midrash back to the Biblical text, we see that this reciprocal movement of closeness is already hinted at in the very grammar of the verses. The root **ש.ו.ב.** alternates between describing Israel’s movement toward God and God’s movement toward Israel. For example, verses 2–3 describe these two converging motions: “And you shall return [ושבת] to the Lord your God and listen to His voice” immediately followed by “Then the Lord your God will restore [ישב] thy captivity [שבותך] and have compassion upon thee.”

This mutual motion of return and nearness between Israel and God, described in the language of courtship, is among the most striking images our Sages used for the month of Elul—the month of mercy and forgiveness. Elul is read as an acronym for **א.ל.ו.ל.**—“Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li,” “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” (Shir HaShirim 6:3). The verse conveys the depth of love between the beloved and the lover, between God and Israel. It speaks of reciprocity, but once again it is the beloved—the people of Israel—who initiate: “I am my beloved’s,” and only thereafter, “my beloved is mine.”

Parashat HaTeshuva describes the human return to God, yet I wish to conclude by pointing also to the Teshuva of reconciliation

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between people. As noted earlier, the verses may be read both on the national plane, as relating to Israel as a whole, and on the personal plane, as speaking to the individual. The same is true of Teshuva between one person and another. To take the first step, to yearn for renewed closeness, demands great courage.

I wish to close this year with a prayer: that we find within ourselves the strength to be initiators, to return and to draw near to those people and communities from whom we have become distant. And just as we have begun to see words of comfort and redemption fulfilled in our own day, with the rebirth of our state and the ingathering of our people to their land, so too may we merit to see the return of all our people—the captives, the wounded, the scattered, and the displaced.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber: Rosh Hashana: Foundation and Fundamentals

Our parsha begins with the gathering of the entirety of the people of Israel “l’ovrecha bivris” to cause them to enter into a covenant with Hashem. The concept of b’ris or covenant is an oft-repeating theme throughout the Torah: b’ris mila, b’ris Sinai, the b’ris of Bechukosai and the b’ris of Ki Savo. Essentially, it indicates that individual mitzvos are not to be viewed as isolated acts of Divine service but rather are part of a binding commitment forged between the Jewish people and Hashem Yisborach.[1] The commentaries offer different explanations as to the reason why a new b’ris was required at this point in the midbar experience. (See, among others, Ramban and Abravanel.)

Another understanding emerges from the assertion of the Zohar that wherever the Torah uses the term “hayom” as in the beginning of our parsha, “Atem nitzavim hayom,” it refers to Rosh Hashana. Why was the renewal of the b’ris scheduled for Rosh Hashana?

In addition, many ask why we don’t seem to directly do teshuva on Rosh Hashana. No vidui or selichos are recited; hardly any mention of **א.ת.ת.** appears. The cryptic comment of Mishna Berura (584:3) that we do not mention sin **שלא** Berura (584:3) that we do not mention sin **ליתן פה למקטרג**—not to allow for the prosecuting angels to mention our sins, leaves one guessing as **א.ת.ת.** לא עכשיו? When else should one do teshuva if not on the Day of Judgment of the whole world?!

Among the many approaches offered in answer to this question, many commentaries present variations of the following theme: Teshuva primarily focuses on a return to Hashem, a correction of our deficiencies in His service and a commitment to strive ever higher in our life’s mission of sanctity charged by our

Creator. But a prerequisite to pursuing those lofty corrective and additive goals is to recognize the core truths of the Existence of the Creator and the fundamental purpose of His creating us. In the famous language of Mesilas Yesarim (1:1): "The foundation... and root of perfect service is that it should be clarified and realized by the individual what his obligation is in the world and toward what he shall direct his... sights in all that he strives for during his entire life." Consequently, although Rosh Hashana is filled with "thoughts of Teshuva,"[2] we don't focus on actually "doing" teshuva. Rather, the day is dedicated to realigning our priorities in our lives based on the fundamental truths upon which our mission is built. What specific concepts are highlighted?

Firstly, we restate the fundamentals of our belief system which inform our entire life. Rav Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer Ikkarim* (1:4), establishes that the three core principles of faith – from which all of the Rambam's famous list of 13 emerge – are Existence of G-d, the Giving of the Torah and Divine Providence including Reward and Punishment.[3] He further explains that these three principles are the subject of the three middle blessings of the musaf prayer of Rosh Hashana, the climax of the entire prayer service. The first blessing, that of malchuyos, focuses on G-d's Existence, expressed through the concept of kingship, his total mastery of the entire universe. Then, the second blessing, that of zichronos, discusses Divine Providence as well as Divine judgment which is a manifestation of the former core concept. Finally, the third blessing, that of shofaros, highlights Divine Revelation which is manifested by the giving of the Torah and the future Revelation in the messianic era which will cause the truth of Torah to be accepted by the entire world. The blessing begins "You have revealed Yourself to Your holy nation... when, our King, You revealed Yourself on Mount Sinai..." and ends with verses about the shofar of the final redemption.[4]<

Secondly, many explain that the theme of declaring Hashem as King which permeates the entire Rosh Hashana service, is fused into the very blessing of kedushas hayom of every amida and is mentioned hundreds of times in the piyutim, reinforces our commitment to the Master of the world's plan for us as obedient servants. "We are your servants and You are our king; we are your children and You are our Father." The fundamental awareness and acceptance of this truth, kabbalas ol malchus shamayim, is meant to obligate and add a greater sense of urgency to the corrective process of teshuva.

Thirdly, Rav Soloveitchik noted that the blessing of zichronos clearly highlights the

concept of b'ris. Most of the pesukim quoted in this blessing mention b'ris[5] and the blessing ends with "zocher hab'ris." It has been explained that on Rosh Hashana both Hashem and the Jewish people "renew their vows" through "chiddush hab'ris," recommitting to the covenant of Sinai. Perhaps this is the connection the above-mentioned Zohar sees between the day of Rosh Hashana and the renewal of the covenant in our parsha; Rosh Hashana would always be designated as the day of chidush hab'ris. Based on this, it is possible to explain the need for another covenant in our parsha even after one was already forged. The Torah is teaching us that there is a need especially on Rosh Hashana – and in a smaller way, even every day[6] – to renew this same commitment.

Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 3:3) writes that beinonim are neither inscribed for life nor death on Rosh Hashana; rather, their judgment is placed in abeyance until Yom Kippur. If they do teshuva in the interim, they are inscribed for life; if not, the opposite occurs. Many commentaries question why it is insufficient for the beinoni just to do one mitzvah in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in order to be judged as a tzadik since Rambam defines a tzadik as someone with more mitzvos than aveiros. Among the many approaches offered in answer to this question, Rav Yitzchak Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak, Rosh Hashana, 18) suggests that the status of tzadik, beinoni and rasha is not determined merely by the quantitative number of merits and sins the person has done. Otherwise, one could switch in the same day from being a tzadik to a beinoni to a rasha and back multiple times! This is highly illogical to assume. Rav Hutner therefore explains that these categories are "middos b'nefesh ha'adam," characteristics of the individual's soul. A tzadik is someone who is fully committed to keeping the d'var Hashem. Even if he occasionally sins, his trajectory is always to repent and climb the ladder of avodas Hashem ever higher. A beinoni is only occasionally committed to Divine service; at other times, his focus is self-service. Consequently, becoming a tzadik cannot be accomplished merely by doing one extra mitzvah; it is only achieved by changing one's entire attitude from occasional commitment to total commitment. Perhaps we can suggest that this is similar to the concept of chiddush hab'ris, one of the primary themes of Rosh Hashana. Rav Hutner's approach allows for this to occur, b'dieved, even during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, allowing one to merit being inscribed in the Book of Life.

May we all experience a renewed commitment to the foundational aspects of the service of Avinu Malkeinu, and may all of Klal Yisrael merit a year of blessing, of the return of all of the hostages, of individual and national

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salvation and everlasting peace in the Holy Land **בבנין בית המקדש במהרה בימינו אמן!**

[1] Also see Y'tzias Mitzrayim: The Source of Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim where the Avudraham is quoted who explains that reciting a birchas hamitzva frames the performance of the commandment within the context of total commitment.

[2] Rav Y. D. Soloveitchik explained the famous words of the Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 3:4) that the shofar awakens within us the need to return to G-d and the folly of meaningless life activities which often pre-occupy our time as indicating this "hirschur teshuva" mindset.

[3] The Rambam's list of 13 neatly fit into these three as sets of the first 5, the middle 4 and the final 4 (ibid.).

[4] Contrast this approach with that of Rav Soloveitchik (Yemei Zikaron) that the blessing refers to three occasions of revelation: that of Sinai, that of the future, and that of the present during the High Holidays during which the Jewish people gather in intense prayer and introspection.

[5] The Rav even emended the common nusach in the siddur, adding the verse "זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה" זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה "לא"ף דור" which appears in earlier versions of the machzor (including that of Rambam), explaining that the verse "זכר עשה לנפלאותיו חנוך ורחום ד'" neither talks of Hashem's remembering us nor mentions b'ris.

[6] See article mentioned in footnote 1.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Can Good Come From Affluence? (1972)

The question in this title sounds strange indeed. It might be more appropriate coming from the context of Christianity, which is frank in its prejudice against the affluent, holding that the chances are indeed poor for a rich man to enter the "kingdom of heaven." Judaism, however, has never entertained such economic discrimination. It believes in צדקה to the poor, but it does not deny גמילת חסדים (lending money) to the rich too. It holds to the ideal of absolute justice, and this may not be weighed in favor of the rich or even the poor – ודל לא – תהדר בריבו, you may not discriminate in favor of the poor and thus cause a miscarriage of justice.

Why, then, bother to ask the question?

My explanation is that the question is based on the practicalities of sociology, not the abstractions of theology. Of course we do not discriminate against the rich – the Talmud even tells us that רבי מכבד עשירים, Rabbi Judah respected rich people. But the hard fact of life is that success often leads to failure, that material plenty is frequently the prelude to spiritual poverty. Moses already complained רישמן ישרון ויבעט, that when Israel grows fat it begins to rebel against God. Maimonides plaintively noted that in his generation when a man became wealthy or achieved social or political prominence, he began to leave his Judaism, and that the degree of his defection was in clear proportion to the degree of his rise on the social ladder. In the United States, as a

general rule (but with significant exceptions), the spectrum of Orthodox-Conservative-Reform follows an ascending economic pattern. So, unfortunately, economic opportunity and social mobility, which are the pride of the United States, present a formidable challenge to Jewish tradition and continuity.

The question, then, does make sense: can good come from affluence?

In attempting to answer the question, let us look at our Sidra and especially at the פרשת התשובה, the portion which speaks of repentance – both the challenge to repent and the promise that our people some day will repent collectively. This portion appears immediately after the description of the ברית (covenant) which Israel entered. The repentance portion begins “and it shall be that when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse,” that you will return to God.

Now, one can understand that קללה – curse – can lead to repentance. Man sees failure and frustration all around him; he experiences the transience of life, the ephemeral quality of his achievements, the impermanence of his conquests; he sees all his triumphs reduced to ashes and life turning sour in his mouth; and he realizes that all his social and economic accomplishments are empty and vain. In disillusionment with the material world and its chimerical nature, he turns to God, recognizing that only in Torah and in the life of the spirit can man attain immortality. But how does man come to תשובה through ברכה? Indeed, does blessing and affluence ever inspire a man to spiritual eminence?

The answer is: yes! Blessing too can lead to turning to God, but it requires moral excellence and spiritual heroism. A Hasidic teacher once said: how hard is it for a rich man to believe in God! He comes to his lavish home or to his big business, and all his possessions cry out to him, “believe in us!” And so he believes in them – and not in God...

Yet, this is the way that a true religious spirit manifests itself. A man who has come to God and to Torah because of the experience of קללה (curse), is never quite sure of why he turned toward his Creator. But if he becomes affluent, if fortune smiles upon him and his conditions improve, and nevertheless he remains a good Jew and a loyal and observant son of his people, this reveals that his original religious inclinations were genuine, that his spirituality was authentic, that his Judaism was not social but real. He had come to Torah and to God not only through קללה but through ברכה as well; not through failure but through success; not through adversity but through affluence.

A great Hasidic scholar, the author of “בני יושכר,” makes the following incisive comment on the verse we recite at the end of ברכת המזון (Grace): “יראו את ה' כי אין מחסור ליראיו” (fear the Lord, O His holy ones, for those who fear Him shall have no want.) Now, that is a patently strange remark. Surely there are many pious people who are in want and in need. Indeed, were statistics available, we might discover that it is the pious who suffer more want than the impious, the observant who are more needy than the unobservant, the religious who are more stricken than the non-observant. What then do these words mean? The author of “בני יושכר” answers: the meaning is this – the holy ones of the Lord should fear Him, and not because of many need or physical want that they experience in their lives!

American Jewry, for all its problems and concerns and its newly discovered poor, is still a quite affluent community. And hence the challenge to us is: תשובה through ברכה and not through קללה, to do the good out of affluence and not out of adversity. It is not easy. It is not easy at all, especially with regard to children. The affluence of parents apparently makes living easier for children – but life more difficult to fulfill. Yet, תשובה that comes through ברכה is infinitely superior to תשובה that comes through קללה.

What is the source for attaining good through affluence? We can become more authentically Jewish by being more truly Jewish. By that I mean, a true Jew is one who lives up to his name, and the name “Jew” is derived, via the word “Judean,” from the name Judah or Yehudah, the son of Jacob and Leah. He was called by this name, the Bible tells us, when Leah proclaimed at his birth ‘הפעם אודה את ה', “this time I will thank the Lord.” In other words, the word Jew means “–thank God.” The principle of gratitude is enshrined in the very name of the Jew. And when a man feels grateful for his blessings, he turns to God.

This is the best way in which to enter the סתיו season and the new year. Gratitude must remain the greatest spur to repentance.

May the Almighty grant us a year in which affluence and ברכות of all kinds will surround us, and through them may we achieve תשובה and return to Him. May it be a year of life, plenty, of happiness, of spiritual eminence – לברכה ולא לקללה.



BS"D

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It Is Not in Heaven (לא בשמים היא)

Translated and adapted from

Iyunim Chadashim by Nechama Leibowitz

In our previous studies we dealt with the first ten pesukim of this perek (Nitzavim 30:1–10), whose subject is teshuva, and with the closing six pesukim (30:15–20), whose subject is the choice between life and death. We saw how the Torah uses the words *shuv* and *chayim* in differing senses, giving these themes deep and varied meaning.

This time we turn to the four pesukim that stand between those two sections — brief in wording, but weighty in substance. Like much of what is written in the Torah's closing parshiyos, they sum up great and foundational ideas about the Torah as a whole.

(Nitzavim 30:11) כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחקה היא — For this mitzvah, which I command you today, is not concealed from you, nor is it far off.

(30:12) לא בשמים היא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה — It is not in heaven, that you should say: who will go up to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?

(30:13) ולא מעבר לים היא לאמר מי יעבר לנו אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו — Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say: who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?
(30:14) כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו — For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

Two Ways to Read These Pesukim

The commentators disagree over how to read this passage. Is it a continuation of what precedes it — the ten pesukim of our perek that speak entirely of teshuva, so that the words המצוה הזאת, "for this is the mitzvah," refer back to teshuva? Or do these pesukim mean to speak, in summary fashion, of the Torah as a whole?

Ramban's Approach: These Pesukim Continue the Theme of Teshuva

Ramban (30:11) holds the first view: that the passage speaks of teshuva, and that the Torah stresses here that nothing stands in its way — that no one can excuse himself on technical grounds, citing considerations of place or time that supposedly hold him back from returning:

But "this mitzvah" refers to the teshuva already mentioned, as in "and you shall take it to your heart" (30:1) and "and you shall return to Hashem your G-d" (30:2) — a mitzvah He commands us to fulfill. So it continues (30:4): "if your outcasts be in the ends of heaven..." — even at such a distance, you can still return to Hashem and do it, "according to all that I command you today," for the matter is not concealed from you nor far off, but very close to you. And the reason it says "in your mouth and in your heart, to do it" is that a person must confess his sin and the sin of his fathers with his mouth, and his heart must return to Hashem — and they shall accept upon themselves that day to fulfill the Torah for all generations, as it is written, "you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul" (30:2).

Ramban thus links our pasuk (30:11) to pesukim 2 and 4, stressing again and again that teshuva depends on no place, no time, no circumstance, no external condition, and no pressure from foreign nations or foreign cultures — it rests solely on a person's free will to return, and to return completely, out of the depths of his heart, out of a soul's longing to return to its Divine source even from the depths of sin, even after growing distant from Hashem and His Torah through the pull of foreign cultures, customs, and habits of mind. It is within a person's power to break down every barrier erected between himself and his Creator:

— כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו — For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

Rav Yosef Albo's Approach

Rav Yosef Albo interprets these pesukim in similar fashion, attempting to weave the three sections of the perek into a single unit. He writes in *Sefer HaIkkarim*, Ma'amar 4, Perek 25:

Examining parashas Nitzavim carefully, we find that the verse's statement, "see, I have set before you today... which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d... to listen to His voice and to cling to Him" (30:15–20), speaks of teshuva, following the flow and connection of the parasha. At the outset it says, "and you shall return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice" (30:2), introducing the topic of teshuva and stating that one must be complete in it so that Hashem will respond in kind. It repeats this at the end: "for you will

return to Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul" (30:10). Afterward it speaks at length in praise of teshuva — of its virtue together with the ease of attaining it: "for this mitzvah... is not concealed... for it is very close to you" (30:11–14) — and all of this, without doubt, speaks of teshuva.

A proof of this is the phrase "in your mouth and your heart, to do it" (30:14), for teshuva depends precisely on confession of the mouth and remorse of the heart. And the verse goes to great length in praising it when it says, "it is not in heaven, nor is it beyond the sea" (30:12–13) — as though to say that the matter would be worth every effort in the world, even ascending to heaven or crossing the sea to attain it, so precious a thing is it... for reason dictates that a sinner should not be forgiven merely on account of his sin, and all the more so that teshuva should not be accepted through words alone, as the prophet says, "take words with you and return to Hashem" (Hoshea 14:3) — were it not for the kindness of Hashem. And so the Torah goes on to warn, "see, I have set before you today life and good... choose life... that you may live" (30:15, 19). Having shown how easily it is attained — "for the matter is very close to you" (30:14) — it is therefore not fitting to be lazy in attaining it, since it is life itself for your soul; and just as one ought not be lazy in the pursuit of life, so too here. This is why "choose life" is juxtaposed to it. And the verse explains that the life attained through this mitzvah is itself the very end the Torah seeks, for it is attained through the mitzvah of which it is said, "to love Hashem your G-d, to listen to His voice, and to cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days" (30:20).

Rav Yosef Albo thus reads *כי המצוה הזאת* as referring to teshuva, supporting his view with *כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו*, since teshuva depends on confession of the mouth and remorse of the heart.

A Third View: These Pesukim Speak of the Torah as a Whole

There is much to appreciate in Rav Yosef Albo's approach, yet it nonetheless seems forced. More compelling is the view of the majority of commentators, who hold that these pesukim speak not of any single, particular mitzvah, but of the mitzvos in general — of the Torah in its entirety.

This is how the Sages of the Gemara already understood it, in *Maseches Eruvin* (54b–55a), in a passage discussing the paths and signs by which Torah is acquired:

Rava said: make fixed times for Torah — set aside regular periods for study, so that your feet not grow lazy about coming to learn. This is what Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Dosa meant in asking: what is the meaning of the verse, "it is not in heaven... nor is it beyond the sea" (30:12–13)? "It is not in heaven" — for were it in heaven, you would have had to go up after it. "Nor is it beyond the sea" — for were it beyond the sea, you would have had to cross over after it. Rashi explains that one must exert oneself, using whatever resourcefulness is needed, so that Torah endures among those who study it — this is Rabbi Avdimi's point in expounding the verse's precise language: had it been in heaven, one would have had to go up after it. Rashi says the same, in brief, on our pasuk (30:12): "had it been in heaven, you would have had to go up to learn it."

A Difficulty, and Its Resolution

Rabbi Avdimi's reading is puzzling, since on its face the pasuk seems to say the very opposite of what he derives from it — a difficulty already raised by Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi (the Re'em):

Although this verse would seem to imply that had it been in heaven, no one could have brought it to you to learn it, he is forced to say that this is not its meaning — rather, that had it been in heaven, you would have had to go up to heaven yourself to learn it.

The simplest answer may be that the Sages derived this from the extended language of *לנו השמימה*, *מי יעלה* *לא נפלאה*, "who will go up to heaven for us." The pasuk could have said, briefly: *לא נפלאה* — and the contrast would already have been understood from pasuk 14, which gives the reason: *כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך*, "for the matter is very close to you, in your mouth." But since it goes on at length — "that you should say, who will go up to heaven for us and take it for us... that you should say, who will cross the sea for us and take it for us" — the Sages derived that even had it been in heaven or beyond the sea, one would have had to go up and reach it.

Two Ways to Understand "Who Will Go Up for Us"

Rabbi Yitzchak Horowitz, in his sefer *Be'er Yitzchak* on Rashi's commentary, shows how these pesukim sustain two different readings:

These verses can be understood in two ways.

(a) That fulfilling this mitzvah required great exertion — even crossing over to acquire knowledge of it from beyond the sea — such that one would need to say, "who will go up to heaven for us?" But now you have no such excuse, for no such exertion is involved: the matter is very close to you.

(b) That fulfilling this mitzvah — even had it truly required knowledge from heaven or from beyond the sea — would have been worth it to you, given its great importance and preciousness, so that you would long and yearn after it, saying "who will go up for us... in order that we go out and attain knowledge of it." How much more so now, when it is so close, is there any need to urge you to cling to it lovingly, "as a belt clings to the loins of a man" (Yirmiyahu 13:11). We are left, then, with two possible readings. It should be noted that under both, these are rhetorical questions — and a rhetorical question can either negate, as in "who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?" (Yeshayahu 40:12) or "shall a man make gods for himself?" (Yirmiyahu 16:20), or express a wish or longing, as in "who will give me water to drink from the well of Beis Lechem?" (Shmuel Bet 23:15).

Although at first glance our pasuk's *מי יעלה*, "who will go up," seems to follow the first reading, the author of *Be'er Yitzchak* ultimately favors the second, explaining:

As to which of these two readings is true, the reader may decide for himself — but the second is the correct interpretation, and the proof comes from the very subject under discussion: the preciousness of His mitzvos, may He be blessed. The first reading is difficult for another reason too: on that reading, the entire statement contains no new insight — merely an exhortation, not fresh information, for did we not already know that it is not in heaven and not beyond the sea? ...Rather, it is written only to make this mitzvah beloved and not something concealed. On the true, second interpretation, the

statement is sweetened by this very awareness and by the exhortation that flows from it.

On this reading, the pesukim declare the greatness and glory of the Torah, and how greatly we are bidden to cherish it, to long for it, and to pursue it — for had it been in heaven, we would have had to go up to heaven to attain it.

The Weight of Responsibility

Our Sages, for their part, saw in these very pesukim the weight of responsibility placed upon us — for since *לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא*, "it is not in heaven," it has been given over to us, and it falls upon us to cherish it and to draw out its conclusions.

This pasuk served as the deciding word in the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanos and the Sages over the laws of the *tanur shel Achnai* (an oven built of separate segments). So the Gemara relates in Maseches Bava Metzia (59b):

On that day Rabbi Eliezer put forth every argument in the world, but the Sages in the study hall did not accept them from him.

He said to them: If the halacha is as I say, let this carob tree prove it! The carob tree was uprooted from its place a hundred amos — some say four hundred amos. They said to him: one does not bring proof from a carob tree.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let the stream of water prove it! The stream of water turned backward. They said to him: one does not bring proof from a stream of water.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let the walls of the study hall prove it! The walls leaned as if to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them: if Torah scholars are debating a matter of halacha, what business is it of yours? The walls did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, and did not straighten, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer — and they remain leaning to this day.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let it be proven from Heaven! A heavenly voice went forth and said: why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, for the halacha follows him in every place? Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: "it is not in heaven" (30:12) — we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, for You already wrote at Har Sinai, "one must incline after the majority" (Mishpatim 23:2).

What the Story Teaches

A great lesson emerges from this story. Rabbi Eliezer could not persuade the Sages of Israel through arguments of the intellect — he put forth every argument in the world, and they did not accept them from him — and out of his great confidence in the rightness of his position, and his inner conviction that his words were true, he turned to Hashem, seeking help through signs and wonders from heaven. That, too, was not accepted from him. In the end he sought Hashem's own direct help, as it were, to prove the truth of his words — and that too was not accepted.

It is as though Hashem Himself, in His glory, may not intervene in the determination of halacha, since that determination is no longer His alone to make, but has been given over to us. So the Maharsha (Rabbi Shmuel Eidels), in explaining this passage, puts it with characteristic brevity: *אין משגיחין בבית קול* — we do not pay attention to a heavenly voice — meaning, one may not decide halacha by means of it; one may only engage with it in the ordinary give-and-take of Torah study.

The Rambam's Formulation

Halacha may be decided only by the Torah itself, through its own methods, from within it. When the Rambam stresses the eternity of the Torah against every sort of enticer, from within and from without, he too turns to our pasuk. He writes in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (9:1, 4):

It is clear and explicit in the Torah that it is a mitzvah standing forever, for all eternity; it has no change, no diminishing, and no addition, as it is said, "every matter that I command you, that shall you observe to do; you shall not add to it, nor take away from it" (Re'eh 13:1), and it is said, "and the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah" (Nitzavim 29:28). From this you learn that we are commanded to fulfill all the words of the Torah forever. And so it says, "an eternal statute for your generations," and it is said, "it is not in heaven" (30:12). From this you learn that no prophet is permitted to innovate anything from now on.

Therefore, if a man should arise — whether from among the nations of the world or from Israel — and perform a sign or a wonder, and say that Hashem has sent him to add a mitzvah or take one away, or to interpret one of the mitzvos in a manner we have not received from Moshe, or says that the mitzvos Israel was commanded are not for all time and all generations but were only for a limited time — he is a false prophet.

So too, if he uproots any matter we have received by tradition, or says regarding a matter of Torah law that he has heard the halacha follows so-and-so's opinion — he is a false prophet... even if he performs a sign, for one may not contradict the Torah, since it says, "it is not in heaven."

A Dual Responsibility

Ramban (and, similarly, Sforno and many others) took our pasuk as proof of how readily attainable the Torah's fulfillment is — that no external factor prevents us from fulfilling it. Yet from another angle, our pasuk also proves the tremendous responsibility placed upon us to study it. For since *לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא* — it is not in heaven, but has been given from there to human beings — no further direct instruction or guidance can come from heaven in matters of Torah. The Torah has been given, and it falls upon those who study it to learn it and interpret it, in order to fulfill it.

It is not the inheritance of a select class — of magicians and Brahmins, of priests and sorcerers who guard secrets to which only they and their heirs have a share. It is no longer in the heavens above; it is with us and within us — to study, to teach, and to do. Indeed, our pasuk has already served, in this vein, as the proof-text for the great question of whether, once the Torah was given at Sinai, its determination lies entirely in the hands of the Sages of each generation, to be decided by majority on the strength of intellectual argument alone — or whether one ought to look, in such matters, for decisions of a higher, supra-human character, for a light from above.

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Exploring Themes from the Thirteen Attributes Of Mercy
Rav Eli Baruch Shulman

The drama of repentance and forgiveness that plays out each year and culminates on Yom Kippur is rooted in, and prefigured by, the story of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe's impassioned prayers on behalf of the Jewish people, and the forgiveness that is finally extended by ה'הקב on Yom Kippur.

TEXTUAL SOURCES FOR THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 17b) describes that event: ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו, למד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין, יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם. ה' ה', אני הוא קודם שיחטא אל רחום וחנון, אמר רב יהודה: האדם, ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה. ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות שאין חוזרות ריקם, שנאמר הנה אנכי כרת ברית. And Hashem passed before him and [He] called...; R' Yochanan said,

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS TO PONDER ABOUT THE MIDDOS

והנותני את אשר אהון, אע"פ שאינו: גמרא (ברכות דף ז') This is explicit in the הגון, ורחמתי את אשר ארחם, אע"פ שאינו כדאי And I will have mercy upon those on whom I wish to have mercy, even if they are not fit, and I will be compassionate for those for whom I have compassion, even if they aren't worthy.

their just reward; but to someone with no merit I give freely, as it says: And I will give grace to whomever I shall give grace." This Midrash is echoed in one of the פיוטים that we read on the first night of סליחות: לחוננם חינוּם מאוצר המנוּר... To give freely from the stored treasure...

For that matter, what of the concept, which forms one of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith, that שכר and עונש, reward and retribution, are meted out strictly according to merit?

Another matter that demands attention is the striking image of הקב"ה wrapping himself in a טלית as a שליח ציבור and saying these thirteen מידות. The Gemara itself takes note of how radical this image is and prefaces it by saying: אַלמלא מְקרא חַתּוּב א"א לאמרו: had it not been written we could not have said it!

There is a general theological problem which recurs in many forms, but can be stated as follows:

How can we reconcile human freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, with G-d's power to drive history forward, on the other?

The problem is addressed by the רמח"ל in דרך השם. He answers by distinguishing between two different processes that are continually at work in G-d's Providence. On the one hand, there is the process of reward and retribution, שכר ועונש, in which הקב"ה relates to man in a way that is correlated with man's behavior. The רמח"ל calls this process הנהגת המשפט, the Divine system of justice. Within the framework of that system, Hashem's role is reactive, doling out reward and punishment according to man's merits and demerits. But at the same time, there is a different Divine system at work, which is the unfolding of הקב"ה's plan for the world and, ultimately, the fulfillment of His purpose, which is to bring the world to that point when G-d will be One and His name will be One. The רמח"ל calls this הנהגת הייחוד, the Divine system of unification, which means the process of revealing הקב"ה as the One power at work in the world. Both of these systems are at work simultaneously, with one sometimes overriding the other. In the system of justice, הנהגת המשפט, man is free to do good or evil, to fulfill G-d's will or to flout it, and

he is rewarded and punished accordingly. Yet in the system of unification, His plan unfolds inexorably, and cannot be thwarted by man's actions.

Hence, the question of what caused the enslavement in Egypt can be asked from two different perspectives: From the perspective of הנהגת המשפט, the question is: what did we do to deserve it, in which case the answer connects to מכירת יוסף.

From the perspective of הנהגת היחוד, in which the question is: Why did the enslavement have to happen, in which the answer is related to the Covenant and the actualization of G-d's plan.

This sheds a bright light on the נחומא on the verse "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt": זה שאמר הכתוב: לכו וראו מפעלות אלקים נורא: עליה על בני אדם (תהלים כ"ה). א"ר יהושע בן קרחה אף הנוראות שאתה מביא עלינו בעליה אתה מביאן... וכן אומר ויראו אחיו כי אותו אהב אביהם, ע"י לשון של ארגמן שעשה לו כתנת פסים... גרם לכל השבטים לירד למצרים, וא"ר יודן ה' הקב"ה מבקש לקיים גזירה ידוע תדע, והביא עליה לכל דברים אלו כדי שיאהב יעקב את יוסף וישנאוהו אחיו ומכרוהו לישמעאלים וירידוהו למצרים, וישמע יעקב שיוסף חי ירד עם השבטים וישתעבדו שם... This is as the verse says: Go and see the works of the Almighty, awesome in machinations (עלילה) on the sons of Man. R' Yehoshua Ben Karcha said: Even when it comes to the awesome things that you bring upon us, you bring them about through machinations... As it says: "And [Joseph's] brothers saw that his father loved him"; through a purple fabric which he made for him into a coat of colors... He caused the tribes to descend to Egypt. And R' Yuden said, The Holy One Blessed be He wanted to fulfill the decree [of the Covenant with Abraham], but He brought about a plot for all these things, so that Jacob would love Joseph and the brothers would hate him and sell him to the Ishmaelites and bring him down to Egypt, and Jacob would hear that Joseph lives, would go down with the brothers, and they would be enslaved there... Behold: Awesome in machination. The Theological Question: Egyptian Free Will vs. G-d's Plan for the Jews.

Let us consider a related issue, which is discussed at length by the ראשונים. If the הקב"ה had foretold and decreed the Egyptian slavery, why were the Egyptians punished for fulfilling Hashem's plan? Both the רמב"ם and the רמב"ד address this question. The רמב"ד's answer is that the Egyptians acted out of wicked motives, and were therefore held accountable even though they acted as unwitting agents of the הקב"ה's plan. The רמב"ם answers that even though there was a pre-ordained decree that Egypt would enslave the Jews, it was never decreed that any particular individual Egyptian had to participate in the oppression.

In the light of the רמח"ל's distinction, we can re-phrase these two answers in such a way that we will see that they are really complementary:

The רמב"ד is saying that on the level of המשפט each Egyptian was free to persecute the Jews or not. The fact that on a deeper level they were fulfilling Hashem's plan is irrelevant. Man is judged on the level of הנהגת המשפט, not on the level of הנהגת היחוד.

The רמב"ם tells us why, in fact, man is judged on the level of הנהגת המשפט: Because that is the level on which individual freedom operates. Any individual was free not to persecute the Jews, and Hashem's plan would have been fulfilled by someone else.

If we follow this thought, it emerges that the primary arena of human freedom, and hence of הנהגת המשפט, functions on the level of the individual. But if we enlarge our scale, and consider whole peoples and the whole sweep of history, then human freedom may be constrained by הנהגת היחוד and the necessary unfolding of the הקב"ה's plan for the world.

This is reminiscent of a well-known concept in physics. On the subatomic level, the "quantum" level, there is no determinism, and no way to predict the behavior of any individual subatomic particle. But if we pull back to the larger, macro-atomic level, then the iron hand of the laws of physics takes over.

This gives us a new way to think about the רמח"ל's distinction. הנהגת המשפט operates on the quantum level, on the level of the individual, which is the arena of חפזית. But on the macro-atomic level, the further we move up from the level of the individual, the more the הנהגת היחוד starts to predominate.

The word חטא means "to miss"; as in: קולע אל השערה ולא יחטיא. Every חטא represents a departure from השם's purpose. But that only makes sense on the "quantum" level, the level of הנהגת המשפט, where each individual is free. But on the level of הנהגת היחוד there is no such thing as thwarting חטא; רצון השם cannot thwart His purpose.

What the Middos Tell Us about the Nature of G-d Himself

Let's return to the מידות. They begin with the words: השם השם.

What does this double-expression mean? Says the גמרא: ראש השנה: I am He before man sins and I am He after man sins.

אני הוא קודם שיחטא ואני הוא לאחר: (ליקוטים סוף משלי) elaborates גר"א. The שיחטא, כמו שנאמר (מלאכי ג') כי אני ה' לא שנית ואתם בני יעקב לא כליתם, ביאורו מפני שאני ה' איני משתנה בין קודם החטא בין לאחר החטא כי לא תשתנה מהד"ר שלי לכן אתם בני יעקב לא כליתם אע"פ שחטאתם ועזבתם אותי. I am He before he sins and I am He after he sins; as it says (Malachi ch. 3) For I Hashem have not changed, and you the sons of Jacob have not perished. The explanation is, that because Hashem is not changed by sin, therefore the attribute of Mercy is not changed by it, and therefore, you the sons of Jacob have not perished even though you sinned and abandoned Me.

That's why מידות חנים, לחונם חנים are י"ג מידות. We might ask: We saw that man is judged on the level of הנהגת המשפט, not of הנהגת היחוד. As we saw in the case of the מצרים: On the level of הנהגת היחוד, they were fulfilling the הקב"ה's own plan; yet they were judged and punished on the level of הנהגת המשפט, for their personal culpability in persecuting the Jews. So how can we as quantum individuals invoke the רחמים of השם, of the מידות, of the השם?

The answer is that the Egyptians were judged as individuals. and, as we said earlier, no individual is necessary to the הקב"ה's plan. Each individual faces judgment only on the level of המשפט. הנהגת המשפט means that חטא, in the sense of a thwarting of the הקב"ה's will, can never affect השם Himself; moreover, in the largest sense, that of הנהגת היחוד, it is impossible to thwart His will. On that level חטא is impotent.

The גר"א tells us that the רחמים of the מידות י"ג flows from this fact. The מידות י"ג flow from the level of השם, of הנהגת היחוד, where חטא has no power to damage, and where limitless רחמים is therefore possible.

But when the Jew says נביא מלאכי, he speaks of the Jewish people as a whole, בני יעקב. And בני יעקב as a people are very much necessary to His plan, because the very essence of the ברית is that we are His agents in history. כלל ישראל is inseparable from the היחוד; like it or not, we are bound up with His purpose.

אני הוא קודם שיחטא אני is connected to that level on which I, G-d, am the same before sin and after sin, in which חטא is not and cannot be thwarted by חטא. And that is an inexhaustible source of רחמים.

Therefore, there is no contradiction between the idea of חינוך and the שכל of עיקר.

The latter relates to the level of the individual, the arena of בחירה, and on that level, we cite the phrase, whoever says G-d overlooks, his life shall be overlooked, וכן. But the former relates to the level of הנהגת היחוד, the broad sweep of history, and on that level, חטא is powerless to thwart השם; that is the level of לא כליתם בני יעקב.

WHY MUST WE RECITE THE MIDDOS ONLY WITH A MINYAN?

It follows that the מידות של רחמים are bound up with the idea of גמרא. I would suggest that that is what the גמרא is intimating when it describes the מידות של רחמים as the מידות של רחמים. This is as if to say, these מידות flow from the special eternal connection that binds ישראל with ה'.

Hence the מידות can only be recited with a ציבור.

And yet, clearly, we invoke the מידות not only on behalf of the ציבור, but also on behalf of every individual within the ציבור. How? Because כלל ישראל is unique in that each individual is necessary to the drama of מצרים. But every Jew is necessary for כלל ישראל to fulfill its role; so much so, that חז"ל say that had one Jew been absent, תורה could not have taken place.

That is the mystery of the Jew. He appears to be significant only to himself. But in reality, he is necessary to the totality of ישראל which bulks large in the רב"ש's plan for history.

But to invoke the רחמים that flows from that, we need to rise to an awareness of that connection, to attach ourselves to כלל ישראל.

Perhaps that is why when we invoke the מידות we emphasize כמו. The essence of משה's mission was his complete dedication to ישראל, to the point of נא, Erase me, of complete self-effacement.

When the Shunamite woman asked the הנביא, shall I speak for you to the king, she answered אני יושבת, I dwell amongst my people. The Zohar explains that it was השנה, and he was offering to intercede on her behalf before the King of Kings. To which she answered: לא יתפרש. אלא בשעתא דדינא תליא בעלמא לא יתפרש. בר נש בלחודי, דהא בזמנא דדינא תליא בעלמא אינון דאשתמודעון ורשימין בלחודיהו אף על גב דזכאין אינון איתפסן בקדמיתא, ועל דא לא לבעי ליה לאיניש לאתפרשא מבין עמא לעלם דבכל זמנא רחמי דקודשא בריך הוא על עמא כלהו כחד, ובגיני כך אמרה בתוך עמי אני יושבת ולא בעינא לאתפרשא מנייהו כמה. But when it is a time of judgment in the world, a man should not separate himself, for at a time of judgment, those who are distinguished as being apart, even if they are meritorious, will be caught up first, and therefore a man should not seek ever to

separate from the people, for at all times the Holy One Blessed be He's mercy is on His people as one, and therefore she said: I dwell amongst my people, and I do not want now to be separated from them, just as I have not done so in the past.

Hence, the message of the מידות is that the greatest source of רחמים we can invoke is that which flows from identifying with כלל ישראל. when these מידות are recited. There is no greater source of רחמים than the consciousness that Among my people is where I dwell.

Excerpted and Adapted by CS from שבת ומועד

By Rav Yitzchak Kossowsky

Parshas Vayeilech – גוי אחד בארץ – One Nation on Earth

Written circa 1947 or 1948

Rav Kossowsky was Rav of Iyve, Volkovisk & Johanusburg הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשעריך למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו - Gather the people, the men, the women, the children, and your stranger within your gates, so that they may hear and learn, fear Hashem your G-d, and observe all the words of this Torah (Devarim 31:12)

את ה' האמרת היום להיות לך לאלקים וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו ומשפטייו - You have distinguished Hashem today to be your G-d, to walk in His ways and observe His statutes, mitzvos, and laws, and Hashem has distinguished you today to be His treasured people (Devarim 26:17-18)

And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth (II Shmuel 7:23)

I. Hakhel and the Meaning of a Single People

Our parsha is the shortest parsha in the Torah, containing only thirty pesukim. Yet within this brief parsha Moshe Rabbeinu speaks to all Israel at the close of his life, transfers leadership to Yehoshua, warns of the dangers that will face the nation, commands that the Torah be preserved for the generations, and gives the mitzvah of Hakhel. The brevity of the parsha therefore conceals an extraordinary concentration of the great questions concerning the continued existence of Israel after Moshe.

The mitzvah of Hakhel is especially striking. Once in seven years, after the shemittah year, all Israel is to assemble, not merely the scholars and not merely those obligated in Talmud Torah, but the men, the women, the children, and the ger. The Torah itself gives the purpose: the entire people is to hear, learn, fear Hashem, and guard the Torah. Hakhel is therefore not merely a public lesson. It is a manifestation of the nation itself standing together before Hashem and His Torah.

Chazal illuminate this point through the celebrated account of Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma, who came to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Pekiin. Rabbi Yehoshua asked what new teaching had been given in the beis midrash that day. They answered that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah had expounded the parsha of Hakhel. He taught: הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף אנשים באים ללמוד נשים באות - Gather the people, the men, the women, and the children. The men come to learn, the women come to hear; why do the children come? In order to give reward to those who bring them (Chagigah 3a) Rabbi Yehoshua responded: you have just a valuable explanation (a precious pearl) and you

almost withheld it from me! The presence of the children, who cannot yet understand the teaching as adults do, shows that the gathering is larger than the intellectual act of study. The child belongs to the assembly because he belongs to Bnai Yisrael. His very presence links the next generation to the same *Torah* and the same people.

The *Gemara* there in Chagigah 3a then records another *derashah* delivered by *Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah* that day, and its placement alongside *Hakhel* is not accidental. It turns from the gathering of Bnai Yisrael to the mutual distinction between *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael.

On the words *היום האמריך היום וה' האמריך היום* - *You have distinguished Hashem today, and Hashem has distinguished you today* (Devarim 26:17-18), *Chazal* explain: **אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת** - *You have made a distinct entity (the one G-d) in the world, and I will make you the a distinct entity (treasured nation) in the world* (Chagigah 3a; Berachos 6a)

Bnai Yisrael makes *Hashem* one distinct entity by proclaiming *שמע ישראל* - *Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One* (Devarim 6:4). Correspondingly, *Hashem* makes Bnai Yisrael one distinct entity: *ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ* - *And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth* (II Shmuel 7:23)

The two teachings complement one another. *Hakhel* gathers every part of Israel into one assembly, and the second *derashah* reveals what that assembly means. Israel is not merely a collection of individuals who happen to share a religion or a history. It is a single chativah, a distinct whole. The many become one without ceasing to be many.

II. What Does Echad Mean?

The word *echad* has more than one use. At times it is numerical: one object rather than two. But when we speak of *Hashem* as One, numerical counting plainly cannot be the point. *Hashem* is not one member of a class. His oneness means that there is no second to Him and that His unity is not composed of parts. The same word, used of Bnai Yisrael as *goy echad*, must therefore be examined more deeply than the bare number one.

If the *Torah* meant only that Israel is one nation in the numerical sense, there would be no special praise in the expression. France is one nation, England one nation, and every other people may be counted as one people. The praise is that Israel is a chativah achas baolam, a distinct entity in the world, a nation whose identity cannot be duplicated by another nation.

At the same time, *echad* describes an inner unity. A thing may contain many limbs and elements and still be one because all of them belong to one living whole. So too Bnai Yisrael contains tribes, families, generations, scholars and ordinary Jews, men, women, and children, each with a different place and task. *Hakhel* does not abolish these distinctions. It brings them together so that their membership in one people becomes visible.

This also explains why the praise of Bnai Yisrael is attached to the proclamation of *Hashem's* unity. Bnai Yisrael says *Hashem* Echad, and *Hashem* answers by calling Bnai Yisrael *goy echad*. The people that bears witness in history to the One G-d is itself fashioned as a unity. Its existence is bound to that testimony.

Tosafos, in explaining the passage in Chagigah, cites a *Midrash* that speaks of three who testify concerning one another: *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, Israel, and *Shabbos*. *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael testify that *Shabbos* is the day of rest; Bnai Yisrael and *Shabbos* testify that *Hashem* is One; and *Hashem* and *Shabbos* testify that Bnai Yisrael is one, unique among the nations. On this basis the *Shabbos Minchah tefillah* joins all three ideas.

We say: *אתה אחד ושםך אחד ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ* - *You are One and Your Name is One, and who is like Your people, like Bnai Yisrael, one nation on earth* (*Shabbos Minchah* liturgy; Tosafos to Chagigah 3b)

The formula is exact. The oneness of *Hashem*, the sanctity of *Shabbos*, and the oneness of Bnai Yisrael are not three unrelated subjects. *Shabbos* is the sign of the covenant between *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael, and the covenant itself creates a people whose unity is unlike ordinary political unity.

III. One Nation in the Land

The verse does not stop with *goy echad*. It says *goy echad baaretz*, one nation in the land. The *Zohar* emphasizes the word *baaretz* and teaches that Bnai Yisrael attains the revealed fullness of its oneness in *Eretz Yisrael*. The land is not merely the geographical place in which an already existing people happens to reside. It belongs to the very form in which the unity of Bnai Yisrael is realized.

The *Zohar* says: *ודאי בארץ הם גוי אחד עמה אקרון אחד ולא אינן בלחודייהו* - *Certainly, in the Land they are one nation; together with it they are called one, and not by themselves alone* (*Zohar* III 93b)

In *galus* the people are scattered among countries, languages, and civilizations. The eye sees separate communities, separate customs, and separate conditions of life. In *Eretz Yisrael* those scattered parts can again stand together as one public body. The physical gathering of the people corresponds to the spiritual gathering of *Hakhel*.

Yet dispersion does not mean that the inner bond has disappeared. The long centuries of *galus* themselves testify to the opposite. Nations normally disappear when their land, government, and common social framework disappear. Israel remained Israel under radically different conditions because its unity rests on a covenant deeper than ordinary political organization. For that reason the Jew cannot be understood as an isolated individual whose Jewishness is merely one private belief among others. He is a member of a historic and covenantal people. Even where external conditions pull Jews in different directions, the inner connection remains and repeatedly reveals itself in common responsibility and common fate.

Look at the bitter experience of modern Jewish history: Jews who believed that complete assimilation would make them indistinguishable from their surroundings nevertheless discovered, in an hour of persecution, that the world continued to identify them with the Jewish people. What men attempted to dissolve, history itself forced into view again.

The catastrophe that overtook European Jewry gave this truth a terrible form. The persecutor did not inquire into the private philosophy of the Jew, nor did he distinguish between one Jewish camp and another. The attack was directed against the Jewish people as such. The shared suffering cannot itself be the ideal content of Jewish unity, but it demonstrated how false it is to imagine that a Jew can simply cut himself away from the fate of Israel.

The positive side of that same truth is the extraordinary solidarity found among Jews. A Jew hears of the distress of Jews far away and feels that the matter concerns him personally. That response is not merely sentiment. It is the response of one limb of a body to the pain of another limb. The nation is one organism, and therefore the responsibility of one Jew for another follows from the nature of the people itself.

This unity does not remove differences and does not demand sameness. Israel has never been a colorless mass. The twelve tribes were not identical, and the blessings of Yaakov and Moshe assign different qualities and tasks to different tribes. Genuine unity is not achieved by destroying distinctiveness, but by joining distinct parts to one center and one purpose.

That center is the *Torah*. Without it the expression one Jewish people becomes increasingly difficult to explain, for ordinary national bonds are weakened by dispersion and by the passage of generations. The *Torah* accompanied Israel from country to country and made it possible for communities separated by continents to recognize the same covenant, the same sacred history, and the same destiny.

The command of *Hakhel* therefore becomes a model for Jewish unity. Everyone comes, but everyone comes to hear the *Torah*. The unity is not created by ignoring the differences between truth and error or between

fidelity and rebellion. It is created by remembering that all Israel stands before one *Hashem* and has received one *Torah*.

IV. Unity, Teshuvah, and Redemption

The setting of these ideas in Parshas Vayeilech and *Shabbos Shuvah* gives them an additional meaning. Teshuvah is return. For an individual Jew it is a return from sin to *Hashem*, but the return of Israel throughout history is also a return from dispersion to its source, from fragmentation to its unity, and ultimately from *galus* to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Moshe Rabbeinu speaks in Vayeilech with full knowledge that Israel will sin after his death. The *Torah* does not conceal the future rebellion. Yet the same *parsha* commands that the *Torah* be written, taught, preserved, and publicly heard. Sin will occur, but it will not terminate the covenant. The *Torah* will remain the witness through which Israel can return.

The *parsha* says of the song and the *Torah*: כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו - *For it will not be forgotten from the mouth of its descendants* (Devarim 31:21)

This promise is one of the foundations of the hope of *teshuvah*. A Jew may become distant, and a generation may become confused, but the bond has not been erased. What has been forgotten in one place survives in another; what seems extinguished in one generation can reappear in the next. The nation that is one across space is also one across time.

The same principle applies to redemption. The prophets repeatedly describe the future *geulah* not only as rescue from foreign rule, but as the reunification of Israel. Yechezkel is commanded to join the stick of Yehudah and the stick of Yosef until they become one in his hand, and *Hashem* promises:

ועשיתי אתם לגוי אחד בארץ בהרי ישראל ומלך אחד יהיה לכלם למלך ולא יהיו עוד לשני גוים ולא יחצו עוד לשתי ממלכות עוד - *I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king will be king over them all; they will no longer be two nations and will no longer be divided into two kingdoms* (Yechezkel 37:22)

The language returns us to the phrase *goy echad baaretz*. The perfection of redemption is not complete while the people remains broken into hostile fragments. Just as the old division of the kingdom embodied national rupture, the prophetic future is one people, in one land, under one sovereignty, serving *Hashem* together.

The work of *Shabbos Shuvah* therefore includes an obligation toward the whole of Israel. A person cannot seek closeness to *Hashem* while cultivating hatred of other Jews. At the same time, unity cannot mean indifference to *Torah*, because the *Torah* is precisely the covenant that makes the Jewish people the singular nation that it is. The task is both fidelity and fraternity. There is a danger on both sides. One can speak of religion while forgetting the people, treating Jews who have become distant as if they were strangers. One can also speak of the people while attempting to detach Jewish nationhood from the *Torah* that formed it. Neither half can provide the full meaning of *goy echad baaretz*. The nation, the *Torah*, and the Land belong to one historical calling.

Accordingly, the call to unity is not a sentimental slogan. It asks every part of Israel to recognize that it is a part and not the whole by itself. The scholar needs the ordinary Jew, the older generation needs the child who is brought to *Hakel*, communities of different lands need one another, and all need the common center of *Hashem* and His *Torah*.

When Israel lives in that consciousness, the reciprocal words of *Chazal* are fulfilled in their deepest sense. We make *Hashem* a chativah achas baolam by accepting His unity and His *Torah*, and He makes us a chativah achas baolam by sustaining a people that remains one through all the changes of history.

At the Margins of the Essay

The foregoing also helps clarify a question that has become especially pressing in our time: what do we mean when we speak of Israel as a nation? If nationhood is defined only by the ordinary political and social characteristics by which other nations are defined, the historical existence of

Israel in *galus* becomes inexplicable. The Jewish people endured when those ordinary supports were absent.

Nor can the answer be that Israel is only a religious association. A religious association is formed by the present beliefs of its members and can ordinarily be left by changing one's beliefs. Israel did not function in that way. Jews who abandoned observance or even attempted to deny their connection to their people did not thereby create a new ancestry and a new historical identity. The covenantal nation remained the framework into which they were born.

The truth therefore cannot be expressed by severing Jewish religion from Jewish nationhood. The *Torah* did not create a church standing beside a Jewish nation. It created the people Israel as a covenantal people. Its religion is national, and its nationality is permeated by the covenant with *Hashem*. This is why our language constantly moves between *Am Yisrael*, *Toras Yisrael*, and *Eretz Yisrael* without treating them as unrelated compartments. Political rebirth in *Eretz Yisrael* can provide the external vessel for renewed national unity, but the vessel cannot be confused with the whole content. Sovereignty by itself does not explain why this people survived for millennia in order to return. The distinctive content of Israel remains the mission for which it became a people.

On the other hand, those faithful to *Torah* cannot treat the return of multitudes of Jews to *Eretz Yisrael* and their renewed common life as irrelevant to the destiny of Israel merely because the spiritual condition of the generation is imperfect. The prophetic vision itself speaks of gathering, joining, and then purification. The one people must be addressed as one people, with responsibility for every one of its parts.

The tensions of the present are therefore not a reason to despair of unity.

They are a summons to labor for a unity that is neither empty uniformity nor surrender of conviction. Israel must become visibly what it is at its root: one nation bound to one *Hashem*, one *Torah*, and one Land.

Then the ancient words will be heard not merely as praise but as fulfilled reality: ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ - *And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth* (II Shmuel 7:23)

Rav Schachter on the Parsha

Insights and Commentary Based on the Shiurim of

Rav Hershel Schachter - Adapted by Dr. Allan Weissman

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PARSHAS NITZAVIM

BECHIRAH CHOFSHIS

העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך - *I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you – I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring.* (Devarim 30:19)

The *Torah* here formulates the principle of *bechirah chofshis* (free will), a term taken from the words בחרת בחיים.

Rav Soloveitchik pointed out that when the Rambam (Hilchos

Teshuvah 5:1-2) writes that the possibility of *teshuvah* is based on the premise that Man was created with *bechirah chofshis*, he uses a noteworthy expression in this regard: – רשות לכל אדם נתונה לו – “Every man is given the ability [to sin].” Of course, the word רשות does not mean “permission,” that a person has the right to choose to do aveiros, but rather that he has the ability to choose to do aveiros.

The Rav felt that this phrase has a more inclusive connotation than the expression *bechirah chofshis*. *Bechirah* refers to the option that one has to choose from any one of a number of alternatives that he is presented with, similar to the usage of the word *bechirah* (elections) in Modern Hebrew. In contrast, the implication of רשות is that we have the capacity to select a path that is distinctly different from any of the alternatives that we are given.

A child raised in a totally religious environment has the ability to become

totally secular. A young man whose parents present him with numerous options of secular universities to attend may insist of his own accord that he instead attend a yeshiva, an option that was never offered to him. One can choose a different way of life than the ones presented to him, similar to how a prisoner may release himself from prison. The Rambam depicts this stronger form of bechirah chofshis as a fundamental principle of teshuvah. [See MiPninei HaRav, 2001 ed., p. 131.]

This type of decision-making is, in a sense, tantamount to creating something yesh mei'ayin (ex nihilo). The Meshech Chochmah interprets the description of how Adam was created, בצלם אלקים ברא אותו – “in the image of G-d He created him” (Bereishis 1:27), as a reference to the bechirah chofshis that was given to Man. The Torah instructs us, והלכת בדרכיו – “And you shall go in His ways” (Devarim 28:9), and by imitating the ways of Hashem, we preserve the צלם אלקים that was implanted within us. This includes a charge to make original decisions for ourselves; we were given the ability to determine the way in which we lead our lives.

Rav Soloveitchik related that Rav Simcha Zelig Rieger, the Dayan of Brisk, told him that on one occasion, he accompanied Rav Chaim Soloveitchik on a visit to someone's home. While waiting for the host, Rav Chaim glanced at a sefer consisting of a compilation of Chabad chassidus that examined the question of why Hashem created the world (see Tanya, Sha'ar HaYichud V'Ha'Emunah, perakim 4, 7). One suggestion was that it is the nature of a being that is tov (good) to be meitiv (bestow goodness). Hashem therefore created the world to enable Him to shower His kindness upon others. A second explanation was that Hashem desired to be a Melech, and since אין עמ מלך בלא עמ – “there can be no king without a people,” Hashem needed subjects over whom to rule.

The discussion in the sefer upset Rav Chaim, whereupon he closed the sefer and asserted that it is not proper to discuss what motivated Hashem to do something. Such a discussion suggests that Hashem lacked something – either the ability to act kindly to others or to be known as a melech – and that He created the world to meet that need. In truth, Hashem is completely perfect; it may not be said that Hashem was missing something. Only a human being has needs, and his desire to provide for his needs motivates him to act. Instead, we must say that Hashem created the world purely because it was His ratzon (will) to do so (see Ish HaHalachah, p. 52; Marbitzei Torah U'Mussar 1:136). Divrei Harav, p 249.

Just as nothing forced Hashem to create the world, and He did so out of His pure ratzon, Man, who was created בצלם אלקים, is not pressured into his decisions. Of course, a person may have certain tendencies or predispositions that lead him in one direction or another, and he may take these considerations into account when he makes a choice, but ultimately he is the one who chooses whether he will follow those tendencies or disregard them. Likewise, one's life may be more comfortable if he follows a certain expected course, but again, there is nothing forcing him to make a decision one way or the other. The final decision to do mitzvos or aveiros remains in our own hands. In other words, our צלם אלקים gives us the ability to make decisions in all facets of life that are completely yesh mei'ayin, in the same manner in which Hashem decided to create the world.

Most psychologists in our day do not accept this concept. They believe that every person is born with a mind that is already “preprogrammed” to make certain choices that determine what kind of life he will lead. For example, it has already been decided what sort of person he will marry, which career he will pursue, the type of community he will live in, etc., as if all of his future decisions are “built-in” from the start.

We do not accept this view. The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3) writes that we believe, as one of our ikarei ha'emunah (Principles of Faith), that a person has bechirah chofshis. This is in accordance with the Gemara's principle, הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים – “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven” (Niddah 16b). The Rambam includes under the heading of yir'as Shamayim the totality of human activities in

which one chooses to do mitzvos or aveiros. In fact, exercising one's bechirah chofshis properly in accordance with yiras Shamayim is the only thing worthy of praise, because only such decisions are made solely by us and not by Hashem.

It is obvious that Man's observance of mitzvos is only meaningful if Man has bechirah chofshis. If Man would not have bechirah, there could not be a system of s'char v'onesh (reward and punishment). This explains why the Rambam did not include bechirah chofshis in his thirteen ikarei ha'emunah. He felt it was subsumed under the eleventh ikar of s'char v'onesh – Hashem rewards those who choose to observe His mitzvos and He holds responsible those who choose to violate them.

It emerges from the above discussion that the phrase ובחרת בחיים is not a mitzvah per se, but instead a statement of fact: Man has bechirah chofshis, and he is urged to exercise that bechirah and observe all of the mitzvos haTorah. It is therefore interesting to note that the Sefer Chareidim (9:20) counts ובחרת בחיים as one of the taryag mitzvos – the mitzvah of sfeika d'oraisa l'chumrah, that doubtful cases involving Torah law are decided stringently.

Most Rishonim view the halachah of sfeika d'oraisa l'chumrah as a din d'oraisa (Rashba, Toras HaBayis 4:1, s.v. u'mistavra; Ran, Kiddushin, 15b in dapei haRif, s.v. garsinan; Rashi, Kiddushin 73a, s.v. v'iba'is eima). The Rambam (Hilchos Tum'as Meis 9:12), however, maintains that this halachah is a din derabbanan (see Shev Shmaita 1:1-5). According to the Rambam, on a level of d'oraisa, a safek with regard to any issur is permissible; the Torah forbade only definite prohibitions, not questionable ones.

The Mesillas Yesharim (perek 11) writes that logic dictates that sfeika d'oraisa should be l'chumrah mid'oraisa. He assumes that forbidden food is poison to the heart and soul. Accordingly, which intelligent person would allow himself to eat food about whose permissibility there is some question? In this view, issurei Torah are considered issurei cheftza (prohibitions that take effect on objects); that is, there are properties of issur contained within a forbidden item that have a negative effect upon one's neshamah.

The Rambam, in contrast, apparently views issurei Torah as issurei gavva (prohibitions that take effect on people), and he maintains that the Torah adjures a person to abstain only from a definite issur. Even if a questionably prohibited food was later discovered to be assur, since the person was not aware of that when he consumed it, he did not act inappropriately (mid'oraisa).

The question of whether issurei Torah are issurei cheftza or issurei gavva seems to be the subject of a machlokes Rishonim. Accordingly, the Mechaber (Yoreh De'ah 215:5-6) cites two opinions with regard to whether a neder takes effect upon something that is already prohibited by the Torah. If issurei Torah are classified as issurei gavva, there is a new dimension of issur added by means of the neder, since a neder creates an issur cheftza on an object (Nedarim 2b), and this element was not present earlier. However, if issurei Torah are viewed as issurei cheftza (which always places a prohibition on the gavva as well), a status of issur cheftza was present on the prohibited item even before the neder was made. Therefore, a neder cannot be made

on a prohibited item, since אין איסור חל על איסור – “a prohibition cannot take effect upon a similar preexisting prohibition.”

If we do not accept the mashal of the Mesillas Yesharim comparing issurim to poison, and instead consider issurei Torah as issurei gavva, there must be a different rationale that forms the basis of the opinion that sfeika d'oraisa is l'chumrah mid'oraisa. Rav Shimon Shkop (Sha'arei Yosher, Sha'ar HaSefeikos, perek 8) suggests the following explanation. The other Rishonim agree with the Rambam that the Torah's concept of issur neveilah, for example, is limited to something that is definitely neveilah. A safek neveilah is not forbidden due to the issur of neveilah per se; as far as the issur of neveilah is concerned, one would not be adjured to abstain from it.

Instead, Rav Shimon explains, the halachah of sfei'ka d'oraisa l'chumrah is a new, independent issur d'oraisa that is derived from s'vara (logic): The Torah expects that we abstain from a safek issur as from an issur vadai.

Accordingly, even if the questionably prohibited food turns out to be permissible, one who ate it when it was questionable violated this independent issur. If the food turns out to be neveilah, he violated two different issurim – the command to avoid a safek issur, as well as the issur neveilah. Rav Shimon's approach is thus analogous to the way the Sefer Chareidim understands בחיים ובחרת בחיים, as positing an independent mitzvah d'oraisa to act stringently whenever one is faced with a doubt regarding an issur.

The Rashba and the Ran present a challenge to the Rambam's position that sfei'ka d'oraisa is l'chumra only miderabbanan from the institution of Asham Taluy. One offers this korban when he is uncertain whether he violated an aveirah that would require a Chatas had he been certain that he violated the aveirah unintentionally. If a sfei'ka d'oraisa is really l'kula mid'oraisa, as the Rambam maintains, one is actually permitted (mid'oraisa) to partake of a questionable issur, and there should be no need for him to offer an Asham Taluy for atonement!

The Acharonim (see Pri Megadim, Shoshanas Ha'Amakim, end of klal 11, and Mishbetzos Zahav, Orach Chaim 439:1; Pnei Yehoshua, Pesachim 9b, s.v. u'b'Tosfos) explain that the Rambam should be understood in light of his ruling in Hilchos Shegagos (8:2) that one offers an Asham Taluy only in a case in which ikva issura (the presence of a prohibited object has definitely been established) – namely, when one ate “one piece out of two pieces.” For example, one had before him two pieces of fat, one of which was definitely cheilev (prohibited fat) and the other shuman (permissible fat). If he inadvertently ate one of the pieces without knowing which piece he ate, he is obligated to bring an Asham Taluy. If, however, he had before him only one piece of fat, and it is not known whether the piece was cheilev or shuman, he does not bring an Asham Taluy if he ate the piece (Kereisos 17b).

Had the Rambam ruled that Asham Taluy is offered in every case of safek, he would necessarily have to maintain that sfei'ka d'oraisa is l'chumrah mid'oraisa. However, since the Rambam restricts the institution of Asham Taluy to an ikva issura type of safek, he is free to adopt the position that in a standard safek, a case of “a single piece of fat,” sfei'ka d'oraisa is l'kulah mid'oraisa. In a case of ikva issura, however, since this is a more stringent form of safek, the Rambam would agree that sfei'ka d'oraisa would be l'chumrah mid'oraisa.

Translated and adapted by CS from

דינה של תשובה ודרכה The Law of Teshuva and Its Path

By Rav Yehudah Leib Kagan zt"l

Rav Yehuda Leib Kagan (1894–1972) served in the rabbinate in Poland, led the rabbinical court in Belgium, and headed an Orthodox congregation in France. He later immigrated to New York, becoming a prominent Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef (RJJ), Lower East Side and wrote the recently republished (and expanded) *Halichos Yehudah* on Chumash <https://tinyurl.com/vc5ea7k6>.

Originally printed in the monthly Talpote, New York, Tishrei 5714 (1953) והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלהיך שמה ושבת עד ה' אלהיך ושמעת בקולו ככל אשר אנכי מצוך היום *And it will be, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse... and you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul* (Devarim 30:1–2)

To our deep sorrow, we lack the strength even to speak. We do not have the words to express the terrible pain and continuing tragedy of our nation. We cannot begin to recount all that has befallen us. The scroll written in blood and fire is enough to make one's hair stand on end.

A year passes and another begins, and once again we stand at the threshold between them, in these days of accounting, judgment, and teshuva. Yet this year, beyond the personal cheshbon hanefesh demanded of every individual, we carry a sacred obligation to make a broader *cheshbono shel olam*, an accounting of the state of the Jewish world.

It is a long, bitter, and terrible reckoning, without parallel in our history. If only there were among us one of the prophets of old, capable of giving voice to the suffering of our generation. If we could count not merely the tears of the oppressed, but the countless korbanos who were delivered to the sword and abandoned as prey to the wild beasts of the forest, we would have to add another scroll of mourning, darker than all the scrolls of tears that preceded it.

Yet this is a hidden scroll. Who can weigh it? Who can count it? Who can number and lift up the heads of those of Yisrael who ascended heavenward in a storm, al kiddush Hashem? Their number exceeds twice the number of those who left Mitzrayim. Who can measure the rivers of blood that were spilled during the past year, reddening the lands of the exile across the sea like the flames of the Beis HaMokeid?

Personal Soul Searching

But if the accounting of the world is beyond our control, and we are in no position to demand explanations for the ways of Heaven, we can at least turn inward and examine our own path.

We travel along a crooked road and sink ever more deeply into it. At least once a year, we must engage in an honest cheshbon hanefesh, refusing to avert our eyes or blur the truth about our own small world.

Teshuva stands first among the three things that avert a severe decree. A Jew who lives as part of the community fulfills, at least to some degree, the other two, Tefillah and tzedakah. When a person gives something to a poor person, the mitzvah of tzedakah is in his hand, even if he has not performed it on its highest level. So too with Tefillah. If a person turns to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and asks Him for his needs, even in his own language, then even if he has not fulfilled every aspect of the complete obligation of Tefillah, he has at least fulfilled its basic framework, and according to the Rambam, the daily Torah obligation to pray.

But how do we fulfill the mitzvah of teshuva, the first and most essential condition for averting a harsh decree?

Surely, we all desire with all our strength to annul the harsh decrees that descend upon us day after day, the latest causing us almost to forget the one that preceded it, as one decree follows another. Yet teshuva is not only a matter of extraordinary spiritual power. It is one of the halachos of the Torah, one of the taryag mitzvos, and, in particular, an indispensable requirement of Yom Kippur.

Just as one must eat matzah on Pesach and dwell in a sukkah on Sukkos, so too teshuva is an absolute requirement of Yom Kippur. Without it, one has failed to fulfill the essential obligation of the day. Although we recite a fixed bracha concerning teshuva three times each day, Yom Kippur is different. On Yom Kippur, teshuva is not simply desirable or praiseworthy. It is indispensable to the very mitzvah of the day.

We must therefore not imagine that merely wrapping ourselves in a white kittel and tallis, striking our chests, and reciting the words of vidui is enough to fulfill the law of teshuva. That is not teshuva itself.

With many other mitzvos, even when they are performed in the manner described by the Navi, ותהי יראתם אותי מצות אנשים מלומדה - *their fear toward Me has become a commandment of men learned by rote* (Yeshayahu 29:13), there nevertheless remains some validity to the act itself even when the proper inner intent is lacking. The mitzvah may be performed on a much lower level, almost mechanically, as though the act itself were without life, yet it can still retain at least the outward form, the shadow, of a mitzvah. This accords with the halachic principle of *mitzvos einan tzrichos kavanah*, that mitzvos do not necessarily require intent.

There is an even lower category, that of *mitasek*, when an act occurs without full awareness or deliberate intention. Chazal could speak of giving credit to one who bows during Modim even though he did not fully realize what he was doing. An act performed at such a level may still retain some residue and value as a mitzvah. Thus, according to the view that mitzvos do not require kavanah, even one who blows a shofar merely for the sake of making music may nevertheless fulfill the mitzvah.

But there are other mitzvos that do not belong to the realm of physical action at all. Their fulfillment cannot even be inferred from outward conduct. These are mitzvos whose entire existence lies within the inner recesses of the soul, the *chovos halevavos*, the duties of the heart.

Such mitzvos cannot be fulfilled through external actions alone. When the inner experience is absent, when nothing emerges from the depths of the soul, not even the faintest echo of the mitzvah remains. There must be an inner awakening, a genuine movement within the heart.

Teshuva is one of these mitzvos.

Rav Yisrael Salanter illustrated the nature of such mitzvos through the example of bittul chametz. A person may clean, kasher, scour, scrub, and wash with extraordinary diligence, as meticulously as the most careful household before Pesach. Yet if he fails to nullify the chametz in his heart and mind, all that exertion cannot accomplish the bittul that the halacha requires, and the prohibition of bal yimatzei remains.

So too with Yom Kippur. A person may observe all five afflictions and follow every custom of the day, yet if he has not turned his heart toward regret for the past and genuine resolution for the future, he has not fulfilled the law of teshuva. The halacha is clear: the essence of the day brings atonement only to those who repent.

We must therefore learn how to fulfill this obligation at least in its minimum measure. If we simply follow the familiar external pattern of this great and holy day, we may undergo all its afflictions and yet fail to attain its essential purpose.

I once heard from the Chofetz Chaim who asked: Why do people say that teshuva is so difficult? Regret what you have done in the past, accept upon yourself not to repeat it in the future, say vidui, and you have done teshuva. For a holy man such as the Chofetz Chaim, teshuva could indeed be stated so simply. But we ordinary people must admit that we need to study teshuva and labor to discover its path.

The Essence of Teshuva

Throughout the year we are obligated to observe all the mitzvos of the Torah, and certainly during the days of Elul. Rav Yisrael Salanter was known to say that the entire year should resemble Elul, but Elul must never be allowed to resemble the rest of the year.

As Yom Kippur approaches, however, merely accumulating additional merits is not enough. The essence of these days is teshuva itself, and we are absolutely obligated to do teshuva.

Rav Yitzchak Blazer writes similarly in *Ohr Yisrael*: during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, simply increasing one's merits does not suffice. Everything depends specifically upon teshuva. This is consistent with the Rambam's ruling that the judgment of the beinonim remains suspended until Yom Kippur, and if they do teshuva, they are sealed for life. The Rambam does not say that they are sealed for life merely by accumulating additional good deeds. The decisive factor is teshuva.

What, then, is the practical framework of teshuva?

It would appear that in order to fulfill the obligation of the day, every Jew should choose at least one particular halacha or mitzvah in which to make a genuine change. One who can undertake more is certainly praiseworthy. It may be a Torah mitzvah, a rabbinic obligation, or even an established proper practice.

He should regret his failures in that particular matter and wholeheartedly resolve not to return to the same folly. By recognizing what was wrong,

abandoning that improper path, and committing himself to something better, he fulfills the law of teshuva.

A person who truly resolves to correct his conduct even in one area has entered the world of teshuva.

After a person stumbles and sins, whether in a great matter or a small one, he would be lost from both worlds were it not for the foundation of teshuva.

There would be no remedy for the sinner who has distanced himself from his Creator except to return to Him.

Chazal express this in striking terms: נפש החוטאת מה תהא עליה ענתה חכמה תמות - *What shall become of the soul that sins? Wisdom answered, let it die* (Yalkut Shimoni 702).

At first glance, we might therefore assume that the entire purpose of teshuva is to repair the damage caused by sin. But that is only partly true.

Chazal teach that teshuva was one of the seven things created before the creation of the world, ואלו הן: תורה, ותשובה, ובעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם, וכסא הכבוד, ובית המקדש, ושמו של משיח (Pesachim 54a; Nedarim 39b). Regarding some of the other things on that list, such as the Torah, this is readily understandable. Hakadosh Baruch Hu looked into the Torah and created the world.

But why should teshuva itself be described as a creation? Is it not simply one mitzvah among all the other mitzvos? Moreover, if the Torah itself, which already includes the mitzvah of teshuva, preceded the world, why was teshuva singled out and counted separately?

The Path Created Before the World

The answer is that what was created before the world was not merely the mitzvah of teshuva, but the *derech hateshuva*, the path of teshuva.

We are accustomed to thinking of teshuva simply as the remedy for sin. A person sins, and teshuva repairs what has gone wrong. As we have seen, however, this understanding is only partial.

There are many paths through which a person may come close to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and closeness to Him is the ultimate purpose of man, the choicest of all creation. There is the path of the intellect, the path of the heart, and other paths in avodas Hashem.

But among them there is a particular path that leads a person toward his ultimate, hoped-for, and longed-for destination. That is *derech hateshuva*, the path of return.

From the moment of his birth, by his very physical nature, man tends to move away from his source and from his true place in the world. He must therefore return to his purpose and return to his root.

Teshuva is consequently not merely a remedy that becomes necessary after a person sins, as though a person who had never sinned would have no need for teshuva. Even apart from particular sins, man needs teshuva.

This is *derech hateshuva*, the path of return, and it is this that Chazal counted among the seven things created before the world. It stands alongside the Torah itself, for the Torah too is ultimately a path upon which a person travels toward his proper place and his source.

I learned this explanation from our great master, the genius of mussar of the Mir Yeshiva. See the essay *Toras HaTeshuva in Daas Torah* by the Mashgiach, Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt"l, Devarim, vol. 2, pp. 168–173.

Rav Yerucham explained, in this spirit, the structure of Rabbeinu Yonah's *Shaarei Teshuva*. One might wonder why Rabbeinu Yonah discusses throughout the sefer so many of the taryag mitzvos. He includes such seemingly unrelated matters as shaatnez, tzitzis, yibum, and many others. What do all these have to do with the gates of teshuva?

The answer is that there is a law of teshuva even before a person sins, entirely apart from the need to repair any particular aveirah.

This is the path of teshuva.

By his physical nature, man gradually turns his back upon Hakadosh Baruch Hu and upon the observance of His mitzvos. Through teshuva, he turns around once again and faces Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

That is the meaning of the very word *teshuva*: return.

Teshuva is the path by which a person returns to his root. Through that return he comes to observe the mitzvos and guard himself against all the prohibitions of the Torah. Teshuva is therefore not merely the medicine that cures the sickness of sin. It is itself a paved road that leads a person toward fulfilling the will of Hashem and protects him from sin in the first place.

In this sense, teshuva resembles Torah itself. This is why Chazal teach that both preceded the creation of the world.

During the days of teshuva, when Hashem is especially near and accessible to us, all of our avodah must therefore be directed along this path.

Torah study, spiritual elevation, refinement of the soul, purification of thought, and the fulfillment of mitzvos can throughout the year be approached through many different paths: the path of wisdom, the path of upright character, the path of truth, and others. But during these days, the days of teshuva and judgment, we are called upon to pursue them specifically through *derech hateshuva*.

This is also the meaning of the plea established in Shemoneh Esrei, והחזירנו בתשובה - *return us through teshuva*.

Our goal is not to remain standing with our backs toward the Sanctuary. We seek to turn around and once again stand face to face with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, in the manner of פנים בפנים דיבר - *face to face He spoke* (Devarim 5:4).

We therefore pray and plead with Hashem to return us to the path of teshuva, the clearest, shortest, and most direct road toward serving Him.

from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>

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Rabbi YY Jacobson

Forget the Rabbi The Cantor, the Lion & the Fox The Last Wish

On Rosh Hashanah night, the Kazaks captured the rabbi, the cantor, and the president of the synagogue, and granted them a final wish before they would be put to death. The Rabbi: All year round I prepare for my Rosh Hashanah sermon. You can't kill me before you let me present this sermon and get it out of my system. "OK," proclaimed the Kazaks. "We well allow you to give the sermon." They turned to the cantor. "How about you? What is your final wish?" "For 364 days a year, I prepare for my cantorial presentation on the High Holidays. For this year I composed many new brilliant and extraordinary compositions. You have to let me sing them before you kill me." "Granted," said the Kazaks. "And you," they said, turning to the president, "what is your final wish?" "Kill me first," he said.

Sermons and Melodies

It's been a longstanding tradition among Jewish communities the world over to employ cantors for the High Holiday services, often accompanied by choirs, to entertain, engage, and inspire the multitudes of crowds flocking to synagogues during the three days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In many a congregation, the cantor embodies the primary focus of the High Holiday experience. As in a concert or opera, the cantor's choice of melodies, his cantorial skills, and manipulation of sounds and pitches constitute the zenith of the services. Especially if the musical presentation is coupled with a rabbi who knows how to tell a good joke or bring a tear to the eye, it is a hands-down success story. "Spit not in the well from which you drink," suggests the Talmud. I should be the last one to find fault with this phenomenon, since I, too, serve as a pontificator. Yet a moving thought from the great master the Baal Shem Tov concerning this "cantor" and "rabbi" phenomenon may be worthwhile for all synagogues and all of us to reflect upon.

An Angry Lion

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement and one of the most revolutionary thinkers and healers in the history of the world (1698-1760), once shared the following allegorical story (based on a story in the Midrash). Once upon a time, says the Baal Shem Tov, the lion grew furious with all of the other jungle animals. Since the lion is "the king of animal life," and is most powerful and dominant, his ire evoked deep fright in the

hearts of the other animals. "What should we do?" murmured all the animals at an emergency meeting. "If the lion lets out his anger, we are all done." "No worries," came the voice of the fox, known as the wildest of animals. "In the reservoirs of my brain are stored 300 stories, anecdotes, and vignettes. When I present them to the lion, his mood will be transformed." A wave of joy rushed through all the animals as they embarked on a march toward the lion's home in the jungle, where the fox would placate him and restore the friendly relationship between the lion and his subjects.

The Fox Forgets

During the journey through the jungle pathways, the fox suddenly turns to one of his animal friends and says, "You know, I forgot 100 of my entertaining stories." Rumors of the fox's lapse of memory spread immediately. Many animals were overtaken by profound trepidation, but soon came the calming voice of Mr. Bear. "No worries," he said. "Two hundred vignettes of a brilliant fox are more than enough to get that arrogant lion rolling in laughter and delight. "They will suffice to do the job," agreed Mr. Wolf. A little while later, as the extraordinarily large entourage of animals was nearing the lion, Mr. Fox suddenly turned to another colleague. "I have forgotten another 100 of my anecdotes," lamented the fox. "They simply slipped my mind." The animals' fear became stronger, but soon enough came the reassuring voice of Mr. Deer. "No worries," he proclaimed, "One hundred fox stories will suffice to capture the imagination of our simple king." "Yes, 100 jokes will assuage the lion," agreed Mr. Tiger. A few moments later, all of the hundreds of thousands of animals were at the lion's den. The lion rose to his full might and glory, casting a fierce gaze at all of his subjects, sending a shiver through their veins.

The Moment of Encounter - As the moment of truth arrived, all of the animals looked up with beseeching eyes to their bright representative the fox, to approach the lion and accomplish the great mission of reconciliation. At that very moment, the fox turned to the animals and said, "I am sorry, but I forgot my last 100 stories. I have nothing left to say to the king." The animals went into hysteria. "You are a vicious liar," cried they cried. "You deceived us completely. What are we to do now?" "My job," responded the fox calmly, "was to persuade you to take the journey from your own nests to the lion's den. I have accomplished my mission. You are here. Now, let each and every single one of you discover his own voice and rehabilitate his own personal relationship with the king."

Lacking a Personal Relationship

This story, concluded the Baal Shem Tov, illustrates a common problem in institutionalized religion. We come to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, or any other time of the year, and we rely on the "foxes" -- the cantors and the rabbis -- to serve as our representative to the King of Kings. "The rabbi's sermon today was unbelievable," we often proclaim after services. "He is awesome." Or, "That cantor? His vibrato just melted my soul." These clergy all too often become the "foxes" who know how to get the job done for us. Yet, sooner or later, we come to realize that the foxes, with all due respect, don't really have what it takes to address the king on behalf of you and me. Each of us must discover his or her own inner voice and inner passion and spirit, and speak to G-d with a distinct and unique. Cantors and rabbis during the High Holidays (and the rest of the year) ought to view themselves as the Baal Shem Tov's foxes: Their function is to persuade and inspire people to leave their self-contained domains and embark on a journey toward something far deeper and more real. But each and every one of us must ultimately enter the space of G-d alone.

So this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, don't rely on any foxes. Speak to G-d directly. With your own words, with your own soul. Heart to heart, from your truest place to His truest place.

Shanah Tovah!

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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:

<u>CHAPTERS</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
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 be driven from the land by their enemies (see 28:64-68) and remain in Exile until they perform proper teshuva (repentance / see Devarim 30:1-10).

[Interestingly, God's original death sentence for eating from the Tree was translated into Adam's **exile** from the Garden (3:23) when he actually partook of the Tree's fruit. Considering that Gan Eden reflects an ideal spiritual environment, exile may be accurately equated with death. Whereas the biblical purpose of **life** is to develop a connection with God, biblical **death** refers to life without any such connection, an exile into an environment characterized by God's absence.]

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

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

Nonetheless, the presence of the keruvim who guard the 'way to the Tree of Life' does not necessarily indicate the permanent closure of this path. To the contrary, it becomes man's duty to **strive** to return. The keruvim do not restrict entry; rather they protect the Garden from the intrusion of those undeserving of return. But once man proves himself worthy, the **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 no 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 occurrences is not an easy theory to accept.

b) Although the noun “shuva”, meaning “calm” does show up in Tanakh, we have no instance of this root used as a verb to mean anything but “return”. S’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.

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