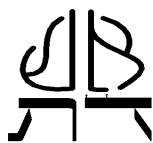


# Toras



# Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd it will be that just as G-d rejoiced over you to be good to you and to cause you to increase, so will G-d rejoice over you to devastate you and to destroy you, and you will be uprooted from the ground that you are going to, to inherit” (Devarim 28:63). Moshe warned the nation that if they did not keep the commandments properly, G-d would punish them severely- a punishment detailed at length in our Parsha, as well as in Parshas Bechukosai. However, while we can understand the need for retribution, it seems very foreign for a kind (and just) G-d to show glee over delivering it. In fact, the Talmud (Megillah 10b) says that it is not G-d that will rejoice over our suffering, but rather that G-d will cause our enemies to rejoice when they see us suffering. Even so, there must be a reason why Moshe chose to compare the "rejoicing" of being good to us to the "rejoicing" when exacting punishment. As Rav Sa'adya Gaon explains the verse, "just as G-d wanted [to be good to us], so will He want [to destroy us]." Why is G-d "rejoicing" (or causing rejoicing) over our downfall? Why does He "want" it as much as He "wants" to be good to us?

In general, there is a large imbalance between the blessings and the curses. If the blessings come for following the commandments, and the curses come for not following them, there should be an equal amount of each. Yet, there are only 11 verses (28:3-13) describing the blessings promised for "listening to G-d's voice and keeping His commandments," but 49 verses (28:16-44, 48-57, 59-68) detailing the tragedies that will befall us if we don't. Shouldn't there be an equal opportunity, and equal consequences, for each?

This question can be applied to the world we live in- the world G-d created- as well. There seems to be many more possibilities for tragedy to occur than the corollary amount of joy and happiness; more potential for misfortune than fortune. We have the ravages of war, the mistreatment of those less fortunate, the various types of physical attacks (i.e. theft, bigotry and physical cravings), oppressive regimes and abuse of power, disease, natural disasters, et al. Can we say that there is an equivalent upside?

After telling us that the reward for keeping the commandments does not come in this world (but is

reserved for the world to come), the Rambam (Laws of Repentance 9:1) explains that the blessings put forth in the Torah do not contradict this. They are not intended as reward, per se, but as a means to continue keeping the commandments. By providing all of our physical needs- in abundance- and protecting us from any danger, G-d removes any distraction that would prevent us from sustaining our spiritual growth. We won't have to worry about where our food will come from, about surrounding nations attacking us, etc. Instead, we can stay focused on our higher purpose.

If the blessings are not intended as a reward, we can understand why the "upside" does not reach any higher than "just" providing our means, in an amount that allows us to not become concerned about them. However, we still have to resolve why the "downside" is so wide reaching- with so many possible ways of experiencing them.

The Rambam (ibid) says that the curses are the exact corollary to the blessings. Where the blessings are designed to help foster continued spiritual growth, the curses are designed to prevent someone unworthy from accumulating reward in the next world. For example (and this is the Rambam's example), if someone is immersed in the pleasures of this world (whether they be halachically permitted or not), he can still do mitzvos (commandments), thereby accumulating reward in the next world. By removing the physical things that caused the materialistic addictions in the first place, and causing (or allowing) other problems that serve to prevent the corrupt individual from amassing such reward, G-d avoids having to give an (overall) undeserving individual that portion (that would have been accumulated) in the world to come.

It is possible, then, that the varied types of "distractions" (i.e. the different types of potential tragedies) are needed depending on what will actually distract each individual. But there are other possibilities as well.

The Sefornu, writing about the physical blemishes that cause spiritual impurity (Vayikra 13:47), says that G-d sends messages to His followers, so that they can know that they have been doing something wrong, and can correct it. Rav Dessler (Michtav Me'Eliyahu II, pg. 75) uses this concept to explain why G-d is more exacting with the righteous than the non-righteous, as the "punishments" sent for each little thing are a message intended to cause introspection- which will lead to fixing the problem. If there were only one

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type of message, there would be no way of deciphering from it which area needs strengthening. By creating a world with numerous latent messages, it is possible to tailor the message for the specific fault. This may be another reason why there needs to be such an abundance of potential "curses."

These messages can only be sent to those with the ability to receive them. After all, what's the point in calling if the phone is disconnected! Therefore, those individuals that are disconnected from the Creator aren't sent any specific messages. But they aren't protected from any tragedies either, even if they did nothing that warranted the suffering that the tragedy would incur. (See, for example, Rabbeinu Bachya on Bereishis 18:19.)

If there were only a limited number of things that could go wrong, this (being susceptible to anything and everything that might happen) is not nearly as scary a proposition. However, with the possibilities of what can go wrong nearly limitless, there is a much stronger incentive to reach the level of divine protection. In essence, one not attached to G-d is walking a tightrope without a net- or even a balancing bar. The extent of the possible suffering, as well as the numerous types of suffering (of which some types are scarier to some than others) is therefore designed as a mechanism to bring people back to their Creator, to motivate them to become attached (or re-attached) to G-d.

These last two possibilities (punishments serving as messages and possible tragedies being the means to bring people back to G-d) can also explain how the joy G-d feels (as it were) over providing the blessings can be compared to the joy felt when he punishes, as both are a vehicle for spurring spiritual growth. May this Ellul (and New Year) bring about the appropriate changes, corrections and adjustments to bring us closer to our Creator. © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

**MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

*by Rabbi Amnon Bazak*

**T**his week's Torah portion contains a description of the additional covenant that Moshe made with Bnei Yisrael. "These are the words of the covenant that G-d commanded Moshe to seal with Bnei Yisrael, aside from the one that He sealed with them at Chorev" [Devarim 28:69]. What is the meaning of this covenant, why was a new one necessary?

Evidently the significance of this new covenant was in order to put special emphasis on the obligation to serve G-d even in secret and hidden ways. This is already noted in the list of "curses" in the portion. With respect to two of the cursed people, the hidden aspect is explicitly mentioned:

"Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a graven image, an abomination for G-d, made quietly and kept in secret... Cursed is one who strikes his friend in secret..." [27:15,24]. Commentators have noted that secrecy is indeed what all the cursed people have in common. "One who takes over his colleague's boundaries—this is done in secret. One who fools a blind man -- in this case too the victim cannot tell others who harmed him. One who distorts a judgment involving an orphan or a stranger—since they have nobody who comes to their aid, this is also done in secret... If one lies with his father's wife, a sister, or a mother-in-law—he will in general not be suspected of this sin, and it can therefore be done in secret, as opposed to many other sins. Lying with any animal—whether male or female: an animal cannot complain like a man, and therefore lying with a man is not mentioned in the curses." [Ibn Ezra].

Taking into account retribution measure for measure, the high point of the "Tochacha"—the rebuke of the nation—also emphasizes the secret nature of the events. "The most gentle and refined woman... will look with evil at the man in her bosom, and at her son and daughter, and the infant coming from between her legs, and at the children she gives birth to, for she will eat them from lack of anything else, in secret" [Devarim 28:56-57]. The terrible prospect of eating the flesh of children in secret can be perceived as retribution for sins which were committed in secret. Further on, in Chapter 29 when Moshe makes the covenant, he notes, "The hidden things belong to our G-d, while what is revealed remains for us and our children forever" [29:28]. If Bnei Yisrael violate the terms of the covenant, the retribution will return, again measure for measure. "And they will break the covenant that I have made with them, and I will be angry with them on that day. And I will leave them and I will hide my face from them, and they will become prey, and many varied evils and troubles will befall them... And I will hide my face on that

day, because of all the evil that they did." [31:16-18; see also 32:20].

Thus, we see that on the eve of the entrance into the land, Moshe made a new covenant with Bnei Yisrael, one that put special emphasis on actions that man does in secret. Why was it necessary to emphasize this point at this time? Evidently it was especially important in view of the great change that the nation was about to experience. In the era of the desert the nation lived in temporary dwellings, where one could expect to be exposed to the community as a whole. Even one who chopped wood on Shabbat was discovered immediately by the rest of the people. However, later on, when every man would reach his own home and his heritage, he would be able to enter a private and hidden room. And then the danger of hidden sins would increase. Therefore, before Bnei Yisrael entered the land, Moshe emphasized that hidden things belong to G-d alone. And it is important for a person to maintain the fear of G-d, in private as well as in public.

#### From Having Too Much or Having Nothing

by Mrs. Ariela Yidgar Lecturer in Tanach, Michlelot Efrata and Lifshitz

The "Tochacha," the passage of rebuke, describes the conditions of the covenant between Yisrael and the Almighty: the reward promised for observing the mitzvot and the punishment for violating them. The most horrifying punishment is evidently the severe hunger which can cause parents to eat the flesh of their children: "You will eat your own seed, the flesh of your sons and daughters..." [Devarim 28:53]. There are examples of similar prophecies (see Vayikra 26:29), and one case when the prophecy came true (Eichah 2:20). However, the most horrifying aspect of this prophecy is the estranged feeling of the parents themselves. "The most gentle and refined man will look with evil at his brother and at his beloved wife, and at the rest of the sons he will leave behind, refusing to give any of them from the flesh of his sons, that he will eat... The most gentle and refined woman, who has never set foot on the ground because of her gentleness and softness, will look with evil at the man in her bosom, and at her son and daughter, and the infant coming from between her legs, and at the children she gives birth to, for she will eat them from lack of anything else in secret, all in the dire situation in which your enemy will place you, in your gates." [Devarim 28:54-57]. And even this prophecy came true in the days of Elisha (II Melachim 6:28).

At the highest level, these passages describe the harshness of the punishment. Hunger, deprivation, and suffering can bring madness and destroy a human being's ethical sense. When a person's humanity is taken away from him along with the image of G-d, it can happen that he loses all sense of values. This can even lead to destroying the first basic affinity, between parent and child, between man and his brother, and between

man and wife. Even kind and gentle fathers and mothers might fall prey to a loss of their humanity in such a situation.

On a deeper level, the passages indicate the link between sin and punishment -- measure for measure. The estrangement of a man and a woman towards their closest relatives is described by the expression that they will "look with evil." This expression appears only one other time in the Torah, "You will look with evil at your brother, the pauper" [Devarim 15:9]. Perhaps those whose eye looks in an evil way at their poor brothers in a time of plenty will eventually look in the same way at their own families in times of famine. Those who did not serve G-d with joy, who did not invite the Levite to participate in their sacrificial meals and did not give the poor people their maaser, "with a good heart, because they had too much" [28:47] are the same people who were capable of eating their own offspring alone, in secret, "having nothing" [28:48].

Experience has shown that not all people lose their humanity when they are at the depths of despair. Some people reveal that they have a remarkable spiritual strength at just those times. There have been times when it was this ability to maintain the standards of morality and friendship and to share any remaining pitiful rations of bread that preserved the dignity of man and helped such people to survive. It is specifically the exaggeratedly gentle and spoiled people, concentrating only on themselves without regard for others, who are often not able to withstand suffering and lack of resources. These people are often prone to moral and ethical failure.

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

The messages of this week's parsha are certainly mixed ones, to put it mildly. The parsha begins on an optimistic, almost cheerful note. The Jewish farmer, secure in his homeland in the Land of Israel and blessed with a bountiful harvest as a reward for his labors and toil, brings a thanksgiving offering of his first fruits to the priest in the Temple. There he records his memory of the Jewish story till his day. As he stands in the Temple with his offering in hand, he remembers the Patriarchs and the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, and God's ensuing redemption and beneficence to Israel over the centuries until that very moment. This is truly an idyllic scene, the realization of the personal and national aspirations of Jews from the time of Abraham onwards. It represents the fulfillment of all of the dreams and hopes that the prophets of Israel in later centuries predicted would yet occur. It truly is paradise on this earth.

How startling therefore is it that the long and bitter tochacha - the predictions of disaster and tragedy that would befall Israel א€" is found in the same parsha that begins with such blessing and serenity. We are all

witness to the fact that there is no hyperbole or exaggeration in the doleful words of the tochacha. We possess the film footage and pictures to prove its authenticity. The Torah makes it clear that the tochacha is not so much a punishment of Israel as it is an almost natural result of the Jewish people forsaking its tradition and reneging on its obligations undertaken in the covenant forged between God and Israel at Sinai. The tochacha occurs because God's protective hand, so to speak, is removed from us and what results is the natural flow of history, hatred and violence proceeds unchecked. I have no understanding and/or explanation for the tochacha and its ferocity, or for the Holocaust that consumed six million Jews in the past century, but I am nevertheless struck by the uncanny prediction of its details in this week's parsha, written over three millennia before the event itself occurred. God's will is inscrutable to we mortals, but it is obvious to all that that will exists and works throughout human history and events. Moshe himself will confirm this analysis for us in next week's parsha when he states that: "The hidden and not understandable belongs to God but the revealed message is clear to us and our children - to live up to the covenant of Sinai and do our duty and fulfill our obligations." So has it been throughout time and so it remains.

Jews always live in a paradoxical world. - suspended between the material blessings of the farmer's offering at the Temple and the realization of the possibility of the tochacha becoming a reality once again. It is the presence of these two possibilities that drive Jewish life and account for the angst and tension that surround us. Yet, there remains the core of unfailing optimism and utopianism of the Jews. May the coming year show that the tochacha has spent itself and that we are well on the way to again bring our loving offering of the fruits of our labor to the Temple in Jerusalem. ©2004 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**T**his week's Torah portion opens with the commandment that once we enter the land of Israel, we must bring our first fruits to the altar of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; we must accompany this gift of commitment to G-d with a song-speech which reminds us of our humble slave origins and expresses our gratitude to the Almighty, who heard our tearful calls of oppression and brought us to our ancestral homeland of freedom. These poetic words of the individual pilgrim-patron of the Temple are further immortalized by the author of the Passover haggadah, where each phrase is explicated around the seder table as the basis of the

"retelling of the story of our sojourn in and exodus from Egypt." But there is one phrase which remains difficult in context: "the Egyptians did evil unto us and afflicted us" Obviously, if they afflicted us, they did evil unto us! What is the specific meaning of "they did evil unto us" (Vayareyu)? I believe that a novel translation of this Hebrew word will greatly illuminate the existential meaning not only of Jewish persecution but also of the Israeli experience in our own generation.

Firstly, the Hebrew noun *ra*, or *rea*, can mean evil, but it can also mean friend. In the beginning, the Egyptians acted friendly towards us, they extended the hand of acceptance - in effect, an acceptance which led to our assimilation, a Laban-like kiss of death. "And the children of Israel grew fruitful, and swarmed, and multiplied and became very very mighty; the land became filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). The description superficially seems to be one of growth, of positive development. But the verb's supply a very different image: to "swarm" implies to creep all over like detestable, impure reptiles, and to "fill the land" hints at excessive visibility, a palpable Jewish presence in every corner including the discos and the gambling parlors, the bars and the red light district. The Israelites were becoming more Egyptian than the Egyptians - and such activities are the death-knell for Judaism which demands a life-style of discipline and sanctity.

G-d entered into a covenant with Abraham which guaranteed that the Jews would never disappear from the world's stage. Hence, the historical rule of Judaism - overseen by G-d - must be either you will live as a special people, set apart by your values, laws and customs, or if heaven forbid - you forget your uniqueness and run the rule of assimilation and extinction, I (G-d) will send a tyrant who will force you to be a people ghettoized, reviled and set apart. Thus the very next verse, after the picture of Jews devoid of self-established boundaries: "And there rose up a new King over Egypt, who knew not Joseph" and who persecuted and demonized the Israelites, causing them to become an anathema, an object of scorn and disgust, to the Egyptian majority (Exodus 1:8 ff). Vayere'u, the Egyptians first befriended us, causing us to assimilate, until G-d sent a tyrant to afflict us, -vaya'anunu - thereby forcing us to remain a people apart.

An alternative and no less novel form of translating *vayareyu* is, "they caused us to be evil." How so? Everyone knows the very famous adage of Lord Acton, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." I would add, And powerlessness corrupts worst of all!

More than a decade ago, when visiting Australia on a lecture tour, I saw a play called "The Edge of Night." The major plot dealt with a very accomplished daughter of a successful holocaust survivor who is married to an ineffectual Jewish "nerd" and meets a suave and sophisticated Christian wasp who "sweeps her off her feet." The sub-plot zeroed in on the real

character of the holocaust survivor, a businessman with unusual acumen whose noblesse oblige made him a generous philanthropist and a respected leader of the Jewish community of Melbourne. The son-in-law nerd, who assists his wife in his father-in-laws' company, receives an anonymous letter with an actual picture from the concentration camp proving his father-in-law to have been a Kapo - a Nazi collaborator who won favors by punishing his co-religionists.

The son-in-law, in the midst of a heated discussion with his father-in-law during a family seder, suddenly hands the survivor the letter and picture in the midst of the family gathering. The patriarch crumbles before our eyes. Before leaving the seder table, he brokenly says, "Do you think there were heroes in the Concentration Camp? There were no heroes. There were only two kinds of Jews: those who survived and those who didn't survive." And apparently when you're the underdog fighting for survival, you will attempt to survive by using any possible means! Powerlessness corrupts worst of all.

Despite the basic truth of this insight, there are many personal and confirmed testimonies which demonstrate acts of Jewish humanity and even heroism during the most difficult of times. Witness the writings of Elie Wiesel, and the Diary of Anne Frank, as well as the Fear No Evil by Natan Sharansky. But by and large, suffering is not to be idealized; it generally brings out the worst, and not the best, in human nature. "Vayareyu", the Egyptians caused us to act evilly when they afflicted us.

To a great extent, the Jewish experience in these last seven decades has seen the Jewish people rise from a non-position of powerlessness to an international position of power, at least from the military perspective. And I believe we have passed with distinction both tests, the test of powerlessness and the test of power. Yes, there have been individual violations of our own ethical code, but these have been condemned and prosecuted by the Israeli establishment. Much more to the point: we never asked to be occupiers; we only asked to be able to compromise and live in peace with our neighbors. We certainly cannot be blamed for choosing to be occupiers rather than occupiers, to be the victors rather than the vanquished, especially since we know how our enemy treated areas they controlled and people they conquered! And even in a war in self-defense as we are now waging, the IDF chooses to suffer Israeli casualties in house-to-house searches for would be assassins and weapon stockpiles rather than engage in aerial bombing in order to limit collateral damage.

Tragically the world was silent when we were the victims and the world condemns us when we attempt to defend ourselves as ethically as possible - even when we build a fence to prevent attacks by suicide bombers. But we must remain true to our Jewish souls: we dare not become powerless victims

once again, but we must continue to exercise power with the moral restraints that our Torah demands.

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**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**s the Jews prepare to enter Israel after 40 years of desert migration, Moshe (Moses) reminds them of the miracles they have seen. He then proclaims "But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear until this day." (Deuteronomy 29:3) What is the meaning of "until this day?" Can it be that prior to that moment, the Jews did not believe?

Rashi quotes the classic Midrash that on that day, Moshe gave the actual scroll of the Torah to the Levites. The rest of the Jewish people felt excluded and protested. Impressed by their love of the Torah, Moshe proclaims that it was on that day that the Jews showed how deeply they believe.

Other thoughts come to mind related to the upcoming High Holidays.

Perhaps only after living through the miracles of the Egyptian exodus and the desert wanderings, could the Jewish people finally look back and recognize the magnitude of what they had experienced. It often occurs that one can only appreciate a miraculous moment long after it happens. So too, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur teach us all to look back over the year and with the distance of time, recognize what God has done for us.

A contrary thought can be suggested. Rather than emphasizing miracles as the key to faith, it is the everyday that leads to true belief. In fact, the test of people is not how they believe when experiencing a supernatural moment, but how they commit themselves when living a normal everyday existence. Only now, after 40 years, when miracles were no longer as overt, would the Jews really show their faith in God. One can similarly argue that it is easy to make a commitment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when one is experiencing the awesome power of the spirit of the holiday. The test is one's preparedness to follow through; remaining committed even after the dust has settled.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his Meshekh Hohmah offers an alternative idea. He suggests that throughout Moshe's life, the Jews may have blurred his role, sensing that Moshe was more than an emissary of God - "believing perhaps that he was God Himself. This is a common mistake made in many other religions-"the turning of the lead prophet into a God. Only on the day that Moshe died, would the Jews unequivocally declare their absolute belief that no human can be God. This, in fact, is a central message of the Days of Awe. Hence, the morning service on Rosh Hashanah begins with the coronation of God

alone as we emphatically cry out "Ha-Melekh-"The King." Yom Kippur brings this thought to a crescendo as we conclude the service with the refrain, "Hashem hu Ha-Elokim - "The Lord is The God."

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, much like this week's portion, are a renewal of that final day in the desert, when we reflect on the miracles in our lives, find the Divine in the everyday and assert the rulership of God alone. © 2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

## **RavFrand**

In the middle of the terrible string of curses in this week's parsha, the pasuk [verse] says, "Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with gladness and with goodness of heart, out of an abundance of everything." [Devorim 28:47] The Torah is teaching that in some way, the Tochacha (punitive chastisement) resulted from a failure to joyfully perform the mitzvos.

The difficulty with this statement is obvious. The Tochacha is a horrific litany of calamities. When Rashi and the classic commentaries wrote their insights into the pasukim [verses] describing the terrible punishments set out in this parsha, it was as a prediction of what could happen in the future. Unfortunately, we know that everything spelled out in these pasukim actually transpired. The pasukim are not exaggerations. They happened as literally as they were written.

The obvious question is—did these punishments really occur merely because we did not have appropriate joy and enthusiasm for keeping G-d's mitzvos? Could it be true that despite the fact that we actually kept all the mitzvos, we were punished for our attitude alone?

Rav Simche Zissel Ziv, "the Alter of Kelm," (1824-1898) suggests that the Tochacha did not occur because people did not have the proper joy in fulfilling mitzvos. It came about because they stopped fulfilling mitzvos—period! So why does the pasuk attribute the Tochacha to a failure to fulfill mitzvos joyously? The Alter of Kelm explains this based on human nature.

People do not do things that they do not enjoy. People need an incentive to do things. Sometimes the incentive is financial. Sometimes the incentive is based on physical pleasure. Sometimes the incentive is emotional. There must be some benefit from an activity or we will not continue to do it.

A person who views the life of Torah and mitzvos as a tremendous goal and tremendous benefit, rather than as a burden, will obviously continue learning Torah and performing mitzvos. Of course, there are times in every person's life when his interest in something may wax or wane. But as long as the general feeling towards Torah and mitzvos is that "this is what it is all about," they will give him pleasure and ultimately

give him a purpose in life. When that is the case, he will continue to do them. When that is not the case, Torah and mitzvos may become rote and mundane. They then become a burden. When that happens the person may eventually stop doing them entirely. The result of ceasing to do mitzvos is the Tochacha.

I always try to make the point to my students in Yeshiva that it is crucial for a person to find his own niche in learning. As some point in life, a student must develop a pleasure (geshmak!) in his learning. When he leaves the Yeshiva—at whatever age—and is looking forward to the next 40, 50, or 60 years of life without a yeshiva supervisor (mashgiach) telling him "You need to show up to the Beis Medrash for learning," only one thing will keep him learning. He must enjoy it! He needs to feel a sense of pleasure and accomplishment. If not, he will just stop learning. When a person stops learning, the spiritual ramifications are not pretty.

Every person should strive to find pleasure in some aspect of learning. It can be more expansive study (bekius) or more analytic study (b'iyun). It can be Tanach (Bible) or Talmud; Halacha (law) or Hashkafa (philosophy). Everyone must find pleasuresomewhere in the vast universe of Torah study. He must find a place in Torahwhere he can study "b'simcha" [with joy] and thereby guarantee the continuity of his Torah study commitment.

If there is one thing we as parents must try to give over to our children, it is the esthetic beauty and pleasure of mitzvos. If we can transmit the pleasure of being an honest religious Jew, of properly observing Shabbos, of a Succah experience, of a family Seder, of doing any mitzvah, to the next generation, then we can feel confident that they will cherish those experiences for the rest of their lives. The pasuk "Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with gladness and with goodness of heart..." alludes to the alternative.

### **Candid Remarks Reveal True Sentiments**

At the end of the Parsha, Moshe summoned the Jewish people. He told them that they had witnessed all the miracles that Hashem had performed for them in Egypt and in the years since they left Egypt. Then, Moshe added the following, "Hashem did not give you a heart to know or eyes to see or ears to hear, until this day." [Devorim 29:3]

There is a very unique Rashi on the expression "until this day": "I have heard that the day on which Moshe gave the Torah scroll to the sons of Levi (as it is written 'Moshe wrote this Torah, and he gave it to the Kohanim, the sons of Levi') all Israel came before Moshe and said to him 'Moshe, our master! We, too, stood at Sinai and we accepted the Torah and it was given to us. Why do you put the sons of your tribe in charge of it, so that one day they may say to us, 'It was not given to you. It was given to us?' Moshe rejoiced over the matter. Regarding this he said to them, 'This day you have become a people to Hashem your G-d.'

That is, this day I have understood that you cleave to and desire the Omnipresent."

If we analyze this, it seems rather strange. The claim by the children of Israel that "It's not fair!" seems kind of childish. Why would this incident, of all incidents, prove to Moshe Rabbeinu that they were in fact dedicated in their service and loyalty to the Almighty?

Rav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi makes an interesting observation on this Rashi. Sometimes you can see what a person is all about by his petty arguments, by what bothers him. Even though the argument may be unjustified or even ridiculous, it is still a barometer of what really agitates him. It is very revealing if what bothered the Jewish people was "Why should the Tribe of Levi get the only copy of the Torah—they are no bigger owners of it than we are!" Granted, the argument may seem tainted with jealousy or somewhat beneath their dignity, but it clearly says "We want the Torah also!"

You can detect the truth in the small, candid, moments of life. When G-d descended on Mt. Sinai and the whole world stopped while Israel responded "We will do and we will hear" (Na'aseh v'Nishmah) -- those are the big moments of life. "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him" is a big moment. It goes without saying that everyone will join in the chorus of such great moments of history.

It is much more significant when people say, "We want the Torah, also!" in a candid and unrehearsed fashion, on a regular day, during the month of Adar. Then, Moshe Rabbeinu felt reassured that this was their true sentiment. Now he was convinced that they truly wished to cling to the Ribbono Shel Olam. "This very day, you have become a people to Hashem your G-d".

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#### **RABBI ARON TENDLER**

### **Rabbi's Notebook**

Once again our nation remembers that which has not been forgotten. Three years ago, 9-11 challenged our innocence and our protected sensibilities. As we witnessed the wanton destruction of so many lives, the shocking helplessness, numbing fear, and overwhelming emotions seared our souls and branded our hearts. The heart of humanity was not pure and its soul was not proper. Beamed into the illusionary safety of our homes and consciences was the unmitigated face of evil. It could no longer be denied. Fifty years in the turning of the cosmos, one half a century of the greatest advances in medicine, technology, industry, and the human domination of space and time had done nothing to advance the heart and soul of man. The truths of our parents and grandparents were now the truths we must teach our children and grandchildren.

It has been three years. In that time our President responded as a true leader. Young men and

women traveled half a world away to confront evil and make a difference. Some were asked to make the ultimate sacrifice. Their families deserve our deepest felt appreciation and prayers. May G-d give them the strength to bear the pain of their sacrifice. May their hearts be filled with pride in the everlasting contribution they have made in the eventual victory of goodness over evil. Their sons and daughters have not died in vain. They are the new heroes who represent the greatness of the human spirit and the indomitable goodness that is the United States of America.

There are those who still do not understand, or worse, refuse to care. They are either evil or foolish. Regarding the evil, we pray daily to witness their destruction. Regarding the foolish we pray that G-d protect us from them, and they from themselves.

Understand that central to the human condition is self-centeredness and rationalization. The evil are beyond rationalization. They have no need to rationalize because the evil are not conflicted. They are truly the ones who see good as evil and evil as good. In their tragically twisted souls they believe they are doing the ultimate good. We pray that G-d destroy such evil. We do not ask for revenge or justice. We simply ask that G-d excise such unmitigated evil from the body of humanity. It cannot be rehabilitated or retrained. It cannot be isolated and contained. It must be cut out and destroyed and like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah leave behind a scar that will forever remind us how low we can fall.

The foolish play the game and politics of self-delusion. They are the ones fully invested in rationalization and denial. They do not understand that we are given moments in life to make a difference and advance goodness and redemption. They want to believe that evil needs a reason to be evil and do evil. They look at themselves and ask, "What would bring me to the point of perpetrating such destruction on a world that I otherwise thought was good and decent? There must be a point of no return where the only possible response is destruction and mayhem." Once assumed, the foolish seek to substantiate their assumption. "Something must have happened to force an otherwise decent mother to dress her child in explosives and send him out to kill himself along with the enemy. What would it take for me to do the same?"

The falsehood is that in a world of decency and goodness there is never a point of no return. A decent mother would never pride herself in sending her child to kill the innocent and pure. However, because most of the fools live in societies where basic decency and goodness are taken for granted they assume that the same is true for all people and all societies. They cannot imagine a society founded on evil spawning generations of evil. "G-d, please protect us from the fools! They know not what they do. They think they mean well but instead of goodness and decency they are accomplices to evil.

But maybe I am wrong! Maybe they are right and I am wrong? Maybe the mother who kisses her child goodbye hoping that he will kill and maim countless children, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters readying themselves to go under the chupah (marriage canopy), is the decent one. Maybe there is a justification that I am simply incapable of understanding because I have become so calloused and insensitive to human suffering? Maybe so.

You know, I am beginning to think that I am wrong. Maybe I am the foolish one, or even worse, the evil one. Let's be scientific about it. Numbers do not lie and majority often rules. Even if I would arrogantly assume to represent all Americans and all Jews, I would represent less than 300 million people in this world. On the other hand, the tragically heroic mother kissing her soon to be dead son goodbye believes that she represents the entire Moslem world of some 1 billion plus people. If she is wrong and I am right I have to imagine that even a single voice would have been raised to challenge the absolute horror of the suicide killer. Can it be that within a religious population of over 1 billion people there has not been a single demonstration against the terrorism we know to be evil? Can 1 billion people be wrong? Is it logical to assume that 300 million know better than 1 billion?

On the other hand, if I am right and not foolish or evil than the thundering silence of the collective Moslem world is absolute empirical proof that we have much to fear. Evil truly does exist and it exists in awesomely large numbers.

Life is full of nuance, negotiation, and compromise; however, there is a difference between the pragmatism of life and the absolutes that allow for pragmatism. Pragmatism, nuance, negotiation, and compromise can only exist if they are framed in inviolable absolutes. Those absolutes must transcend time and circumstance and therefore cannot be the creation of human limitation. They must be of divine origin.

Let us talk absolutes, and more so, let us talk beyond absolutes. Some absolutes are: the sanctity of life, the rights of individuality, the importance of family, generational relationships, selflessness, belief in G-d, commitment to justice, personal integrity and social responsibility. Of course there are many other absolutes that protect us from each other and even from ourselves while at the same time motivating us to give to each other and be more than ourselves; however, rather than enumerate more absolutes I would like to explain what I mean by beyond absolutes.

Absolutes are so important that they must find expression beyond the workings of our minds, hearts, and souls. It is not enough to think, feel, believe, or even act in goodness and decency. Absolutes must be evident in the structure and symbolism of society. Edifices must be built, documents printed, and institutions developed that symbolize goodness and

decency. Some should be functional as well as symbolic while other should be purely symbolic. Some must be imposing and public while others individualized and private. Regardless, the absolutes that frame life's pragmatism must be represented in practice and symbol in every sector of individual, family, and social living as a constant statement of who we are and what we aspire to be.

This week's Parsha as well as the remainder of the Torah can be viewed through the framed lens of symbolized absolutes. Bikurim (first fruit), tithed proclamations, ceremonies of blessings and curses, admonitions, periodic national gatherings, and the writing of a personal Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) are all Mitzvos that go beyond the absolute. They are absolutes that frame life in symbolic as well as pragmatic value so that it can be lived in goodness and decency without fear of evil's harm.

To begin the discussion and to end this week's essay let me quote from Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's, "Introduction To The Study Of Symbolism." "All of us use a natural symbolism that requires no special study to understand. Yet, an analysis of this symbolism may well teach us the value inherent in the symbol as a reinforcement of the spoken word. The bodily gestures with which we accompany our words and which, indeed, we often permit to take the place of words, are simply a natural symbolism which we practice and which we certainly would not want to do without. Whether we want to say 'Yes' or 'No,' whether we want to express agreement or disagreement, approval or criticism, respect or contempt, joy or sorrow, friendship or love, we could not express even half of what we feel unless we add appropriate gestures to our verbal communication. Indeed, in some instances a bodily gesture alone might be sufficient. I am apt to forget quickly the farewells bidden in mere words. But the silent handclasp with which my friend took leave of me, which for a moment united us physically, making a bond that he would have liked to preserve forever—this gesture, will bring home to me in full measure the sadness my friend felt at parting from me, I will never forget. Symbols provide us with the ability to communicate absolute values in a manner that goes beyond words. As a final example, consider what 9-11 would have been like without the American flag. How would each of us expressed the sorrow of the tragedy, the desire to embrace each other and give strength, the fear for our nation and the extraordinary solidarity of a people standing proudly and fiercely behind their President, if we did not have the American flag? What would we have done in its stead? How much poorer we otherwise would have been. Think symbolism and think our nation's flag. How important is symbolism? How important is the flag? © 2004 by Rabbi A. Tendler and Torah.org.