

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**OHR SOMAYACH INTERNATIONAL**

### Seasons of the Moon

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

After witnessing the trial of Adolf Eichman in 1963, Hannah Arendt coined a new concept - "the banality of evil."<sup>1</sup> Arendt hypothesized that people who carry out unspeakable crimes, like Eichmann, a top administrator in the machinery of the Nazi death camps, may not be crazy fanatics at all, but rather ordinary people who simply accept the premises of their society and participate in any ongoing enterprise with the energy of good bureaucrats.

Arendt labored to make sense of how people that seemed so overwhelmingly ordinary, banal, had been capable of such monstrous deeds. To understand this phenomenon, however, she need not have looked further than the Torah that was her neglected inheritance.

In the Book of Eicha (Lamentations), the prophet Yirmiyahu catalogues with terrible poignancy the destruction of Jerusalem. Eicha is constructed on the pattern of the alphabet: In the majority of the chapters, the first stanza begins with Aleph, the second with Bet, etc. The Talmud says<sup>2</sup>, "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Why were they stricken by the Aleph Bet? Because they transgressed the Torah that is given through the Aleph Bet.'" In other words, why did Yirmiyahu structure the horrific punishments of Eicha according to the alphabet? To which the answer is given, "...because they transgressed the Torah that is given through the Aleph Bet."

Nothing in the Torah is merely poetic. Why didn't Rabbi Yochanan just say "...because they transgressed the Torah." Why did he add those words "that is given through the Aleph Bet?" Obviously the Torah was given by means of the Aleph Bet. How else could it have been given if not through the Aleph Bet? The Torah is a book. No book can exist without the alphabet. What was Rabbi Yochanan communicating with those seven seemingly redundant words "...that is given through the Aleph Bet?"

Everyone is familiar with the train transports that carried the Jewish People to destruction in the Second World War.

To co-ordinate the transportation of millions of Jews along railroad lines and into death camps with timing so precise that the victims were able to walk right out of the boxcar and into the waiting gas chambers called for a computer.

But in 1933, no computer existed.

However, another invention did exist: the IBM punch card and card-sorting system - a precursor to the computer. IBM, primarily through its German subsidiary, Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen Gesellschaft, or Dehomag, made for Hitler 2,000 of these multi-machine sets. Thousands more were shipped throughout German-dominated Europe. Card sorting operations were established in every major concentration camp. People were moved from place to place, systematically worked or gassed to death, and their remains, their hair, their gold fillings, their spectacles and their pets, were catalogued with icy automation. The slaughter of millions, an unthinkable task, had become orderly, banal. The unspeakable had become unremarkable.

Megilat Eicha abounds with events so grotesque that they defy belief.

They seem like something out of a nightmare world: "Those who were brought up on scarlet clothing embrace garbage heaps." "Hands of merciful women have boiled their own children." "Should women eat their own offspring, the babes of their care?"

Rabbi Yochanan's question "Why were they stricken with the Aleph Bet?" means why were things that are totally outside the natural world made part of the order of the world? What did they do that caused the monstrous and the unspeakable to become part of the natural order of things? The punishments of Eicha contradict all order in this world. Why then, are those punishments arranged in the most basic order in the world - the alphabet?

In other words, the punishments of Eicha are really twofold: Not only did G-d punish the Jewish People with terrible, unbelievable punishments, but those punishments became part of the natural order of the world, part of the alphabet of creation. This in itself was an additional punishment.

The same was true in the Holocaust. That the whole monstrous process ran like a clock controlled by a fledgling computer reveals a deeper level of punishment. Something completely outside all the boundaries of the natural, something monstrous beyond human understanding, became part and parcel of the

<sup>1</sup> Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. 1963

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 104a

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natural order of things, no different than the organizing of a hotel or a factory. Why were we punished thus?

In the Sefer HaYeztira, which is ascribed to Avraham Avinu, the letters of the alphabet are referred to as "stones." Words, sentences, paragraphs - all the multitude of possible meaning conveyed through those letters - are called "houses." Some houses are small, some vast, but all are built on the building blocks of the alphabet. The number of houses that can be constructed from those blocks, those "stones", is endless. Think of all the words in every language in the world, and all the possible sentences, paragraphs and books that can be made from them!

Everything, every thought, every emotion can be expressed through those permutations - everything from the loftiest ideas and sentiments to the most debased and repulsive. For everything - there is a word. But, just as in architecture, not every building should be built; similarly, not every sentence and sentiment should be expressed.

The building that is supposed to emerge from that myriad of letters is the Torah. The Torah is the true edifice that is supposed to be constructed from those stones. In other words, the Torah is the way that G-d wants the world to be built.

There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. There are twenty-two days from the 17th of Tammuz up to and including the 9th of Av. Throughout history, these have been days of destruction in the Jewish calendar. These are the days when the stones of the buildings are taken apart, when they sit on the ground separated, unable to express the true meaning for which they were created.

When we say in our prayers, "Torah and mitzvot, You have commanded us," we mean that there are two separate aspects to Torah. There is Torah and, quite separately, there are the mitzvot. The mitzvot instruct us how to realize all our potential in this world (and there is not one word of Torah that does not contain a mitzva<sup>3</sup>). However, there is Torah that exists apart from the mitzvot. "Ascend the mountain, and I will be there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the Torah and the mitzva that I have written to instruct them<sup>4</sup>."

<sup>3</sup> Vilna Gaon

<sup>4</sup> Shemot 24:12

Torah and Mitzva are two distinct entities: There is Torah that commands, and there is Torah that reveals. The Torah that commands is the mitzvot of the Torah. The Torah that reveals is the 'book of the Creation', the blueprint of all that is. This is the aspect of the Torah that is called light, the Ohr Hatorah. For it is the light that reveals existence.

Because we have disobeyed both the mitzvot and the Torah itself, we have been punished by both of them. Not only have we transgressed the mitzvot of the Torah but we have counterfeited the blueprint of the Torah - the alphabet of existence. This is the explanation of the appearance of the "banality of evil" of those Nazi monsters. We, the guardians of the Torah, took those letters and concocted foreign ideas, concepts estranged and inimical to Torah. Thus, those very letters - the order of the world itself - turned round and punished us by subsuming the unnatural and the grotesque into the natural order of the world. © 2005 Ohr Somayach International - All rights reserved.

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd I sent messengers from Kedaimos Desert to Sichon the King of Cheshbon, [with] words of peace" (Devarim 2:26). This attempt to peacefully pass through Sichon's land on the way to conquering Canaan seems problematic. For one thing, just 2 verses earlier G-d had told Moshe that the Children of Israel would conquer Sichon and take it over. How could Moshe then send a message to Sichon trying to avoid any conflict? Additionally, the message of peace Moshe sent is inconsistent with the message prescribed by the Torah when it discusses how to approach war (20:10-11).

"When you approach a city in order to wage war against it, and you shall call to it [with words] of peace. And it shall be if their response [matches your words of] peace, and [they] open up [their gates] to you, then all the people found within it shall pay you taxes and become subservient to you." Whereas the Torah says that the option of "peace" means agreeing to come under our control rather than being wiped out, Moshe's offer of peace entailed just allowing the nation to pass through, without any damage or harm to Sichon's people or their property. Sichon would still be king, and there would be no ill effects at all. Even if Moshe felt that somehow he could offer a peaceful option to Sichon, how could he offer a different kind of peace than the Torah mandates?

The Ramban avoids the first question by explaining (2:24) that Moshe had sent the messengers with the offer of peace prior to G-d having told him that Sichon would be conquered. Even though the messengers aren't mentioned until afterwards, the Ramban understands the verse as saying that "I had already sent messengers," i.e. before being informed of

Sichon's fate. He addresses the second question (Bamidbar 21:21) by positing that because Moshe realized that they were only going to conquer 7 nations (and not all 10), he thought that they would not conquer Sichon's land yet either, only the land on the western side of the Jordan River. Therefore, his offer was not the same as the one required on the other side. There is a Midrash, brought in the Yalkut Shimoni on Chukas 21 (at the end of #764), which takes a different approach.

"Give to the wise man, and he will become even wiser' (Mishlay 9:9). This refers to Moshe. G-d said to him, 'see that I have given Sichon into your hand' (Devarim 2:24). He hadn't even waged war with him, and yet he says 'I have given' (in the past tense), for G-d took the administering angels of Sichon and Og and tied them up and threw them down before Moshe. He said to him, 'as long as these were around and were with them (i.e. with Sichon and Og), they would be victorious, [but] now they are given over to your hand; stand up and pass over [the wadi]' as it says, 'get up and pass over Nachal Zered.' Moshe said to Him, 'let us send messengers [to offer to make peace].' He (G-d) said, 'I said 'begin to conquer [Sichon]' and you want to send messengers of peace?' Moshe said, 'and I sent messengers from Kedaimos Desert.' But is there really a desert [whose name is] 'Kedaimos?' [Rather, Moshe was saying,] 'I learned this from You, who existed before (root: KDM) Your world. When You wanted to take [the Children of] Israel out of Egypt, You said, 'go, and I will send you to Pharaoh' (despite knowing that he would refuse to let them go). Another interpretation of 'Kedaimos Desert:' 'I (Moshe) learned it from the Torah which preceded (again, KDM) everything, as You revealed it to the [other] nations of the world' (i.e. offered to give it to them despite knowing that they would turn it down). (Similarly, Moshe wanted to offer to make peace with Sichon despite knowing - from G-d's previous statement - that they would refuse, would wage war, and be conquered.) G-d said to him, 'you did beautifully. From now on, every city that [the Children of] Israel want to enter, they should not enter until they first make an offer of peace,' as it says, 'when you approach a city in order to wage war against it, and you shall call to it [with words] of peace.'

According to this Midrash, Moshe sent messengers of peace even though he knew it would not avoid war, as it was still the appropriate thing to do. And when he told G-d about it before actually sending them, not only did G-d approve of the idea, but He also made it the official policy from then on. True, the policy would be a different offer of peace, but we can't accuse Moshe of breaking a policy that did not yet even exist!

Parashas Devarim is always read on Shabbos Chazon, the Shabbos right before Tisha b'Av, when we mourn the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. We read the verse that begins with "Eichah" (1:12) with the same tune as Megillas Eichah, which we will read (this year, if

Moshiach has not arrived by then) that night. But that is not the only connection between Tisha b'Av and our Parasha.

The second Temple was destroyed because of "sinas chinam," unwarranted, inappropriate and uncalled for hatred of others (Yuma 9b). Moshe taught us that even if we are about to attack our enemy, we must first make an attempt at peace - even if we are convinced it is doomed for failure. How much more so must we try to patch things up among ourselves.

That doesn't mean to pretend there aren't differences (of opinion or otherwise). Acting as if there is no animosity when there really is transgresses the biblical prohibition against "hating your (figurative) brother in your heart" (Vayikra 19:17). The Ramban tells us that the purpose of rebuking one who has wronged you (which follows in that verse) is to start a discussion about the perceived wrong, so that the two parties can come to realize where the misunderstanding (or difference of opinion) lies. Perhaps there's a valid explanation for why something was done, or perhaps the other party doesn't even realize that he did something wrong (or the extent of it). By attempting to discuss the perceived wrong, by reaching out with words of peace even if you can't imagine that they will be taken well, we may be able to diminish any hard feelings that still exist among us.

And that may set the stage for the rebuilding of the Temple, may it come speedily, in our days. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**A**t first glance, the portion of Devarim is a random recapitulation of events the Jews experienced in the desert. It seems unstructured and repetitive. Yet, a closer look reveals that there is a logical form at work.

The first major section deals with the experiences and episodes of the Jews during the first two years in the desert, up until G-d's decree that we were to wander there for 40 years.

This section describes G-d telling us immediately after our departure for Egypt that we will enter the land of Israel. (Deuteronomy 1:6-8) In preparation for that entry, Moshe (Moses) lays out a system of jurisprudence necessary for the proper functioning of the nation. (Deuteronomy 1:9-18) With Am Yisrael now ready to enter the land, (Deuteronomy 1:19-20) the people ask Moshe to send spies to Canaan to investigate how it can best be conquered. A description of the spy story follows with the recounting of G-d's decree that the Jews would wander in the desert for 40 years. (Deuteronomy 1:21-48)

The second section in Devarim (Chapters 2, 3) is a brief review of what happened to Am Yisrael in the last two years of its wanderings. Here is described our

contacts with the nations of Edom, Moab, Amon, Sichon and Bashan as we took a circuitous route into the land. What follows is Moshe's unsuccessful appeal to G-d that he be permitted to enter the land found in the beginning of next week's portion, Va-etchanan.

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman points out that these two sections open and close with similar phraseology setting them off as distinct units. The first section begins with the phrase "rav lakhem, it is enough [that you've been at Sinai]" and "pnu lekhem, turn [to the land of Israel]." (Deuteronomy 1:6-7) The second section begins with similar terminology: "rav lakhem, it is enough [that you've wandered here in the desert]," "pnu lekhem, turn [to enter the land of Israel]." (Deuteronomy 2:3)

Each section, writes Rabbi Hoffman, similarly conclude with similar words-vateyshvu and vaneyshev. (Deuteronomy 1:46, Deuteronomy 43:9)

Both of these sections are preceded by the first five sentences in Deuteronomy which summarize the forty years described in brief in the first two sections we have already discussed. The first two sentences of Deuteronomy are headlines for the earlier events as found in the first section, and the next three sentences for the final happenings as laid out in the second section.

A mere surface reading suggests that Deuteronomy is a book which haphazardly repeats our travels through the desert. Yet, when one looks deeper and more carefully, one realizes that Devarim is a book of exact and precise structure-much like the entire Torah. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG**

### **Sinas Chinam**

**“H**ow (eicha) can I alone carry your trouble, your burden, and your quarrels...torchachem masa'achem v'rivchem' (Devarim 1:12). The people of Israel were troublesome. If one of them would see his adversary winning the case, he would say 'I have witnesses to bring, I have proofs to bring, I am adding judges to you.'" (Rashi)

This passuk is read in the mournful tune of Eicha used on Tisha B'av implying that the trouble ("torchachem") is of a tragic nature. Why is invoking a halachically accepted legalism (Chosehn Mishpat 13:1, 20:1) in a court battle so terrible?

In fact, the insistence on every legal right is precisely what brought about the destruction of Yerushalayim on Tisha B'av. Yerushalayim was destroyed because they limited their din to the letter of the law of the Torah, and did not go beyond the letter of the law (Bava Metsia 30b). A more well known reason for the churban is sinas chinam, baseless hatred (Yoma 9b). Tosfos reconcile this apparent contradiction by attributing the churban to both, i.e. to two disparate causes.

Perhaps a different reconciliation can be suggested. Baseless hatred is defined as hatred for insufficient cause. One Jew has a claim or complaint against another and is unwilling to compromise or forgive in the spirit of going beyond the letter of the law; he insists on the letter of the law as he perceives it. Such an approach often leads to hatred of the other party who refuses to honor his demands. This hatred is a result of his insistence on invoking his legal rights, both real and perceived. It is called sinas chinam because the hate is halachically unjustified. Hence there were not two separate causes of the churban, rather there was one (invoking all legalisms in a court battle) which lead to another (sinas chinam). Indeed, torchachem, the troubling legalism, caused rivchem, quarrels and unjustified hatred. These are the two related factors which led to the churban. The mournful Eicha tune is therefore entirely appropriate.

"What is masa'achem, your burden? If Moshe left home early, they said perhaps he has marital problems. If he left home late, they said he is sitting and devising plans against you" (Rashi). One who disrespects Torah scholars is called an apikores (Rashi, based on Sanhderin 99b). Two questions arise. Why did the Jews disrespect Moshe? And why is this disrespect juxtaposed with the aforementioned trouble and quarrels?

In light of the above the answer is clear. Many people were upset with Moshe's decision against them in favor of their adversary. Others were offended by Moshe's rebuke or were displeased with his leadership style. Instead of forgiving Moshe for "wronging" them, in their warped perception, they chose to exercise their perceived "right" to criticize the leader, and interpreted his every move negatively. This led to sinas chinam of the worst kind, directed against Torah leaders.

Yerushalayim was destroyed because the people did not admonish one another (Shabbos 119b). Why didn't the Torah scholars admonish the people? Perhaps the answer lies in the next line of the gemara: Yerushalayim was destroyed because the people demeaned its Torah scholars. Aside from the intrinsic sin of disrespect, the attitude made it impossible for the talmedei chachamim to rebuke the people who demeaned and disregarded them.

Thus masa'achem, disrespect for Torah scholars, caused the churban, as did torchachem and rivchem. Unfortunately, all these continue to plague our litigious, disrespectful and quarrelsome society, causing broken homes, destroyed communities and undue criticism of rabbonim.

"In every generation in which the Beis Hamikdash is not rebuilt, it is as if it was destroyed in its days" (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1). Had a generation rectified the sins that caused the churban, the Bais Hamikdash would have been rebuilt immediately. Apparently, we are still guilty of those sins.

The Netziv (Meishiv Davar 1:44) dramatically expands the understanding of the *sinas chinam* which caused the churban. He says that the hate was not limited to those who "wronged" a person. Rather, it extended to those who served Hashem differently. If one would see a halachic leniency, he would brand it heresy, and distance himself from that person. He would then mistakenly justify attacking that person, even to the point of murder.

The Netziv laments that such internal hatred within the observant community existed in his time (the late nineteenth century) as well. Hating someone who "wronged" us is necessarily limited. With how many people can we fight over money or honor? But if we hate those who differ with us on matters of halacha or hashkafa, the *sinas chinam* is unlimited. Unfortunately, Orthodox individuals and communities with different halachic practices and/or ideologies are still guilty of this type of *sinas chinam*, which is preventing the *ge'ula*.

As we mark Tisha B'av in particularly troublesome and quarrelsome times, let us resolve to correct those sins. If we do so, the Bais Hamikdosh will be rebuilt immediately. © 2005 by The TorahWeb Foundation

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he book of Dvarim that we begin reading this Shabat is the most "human" of all of the five books of the Torah. The words of Moshe that came from him are his assessment of the Jewish people that he loves and has led for forty years. Many of the words that he will utter are hard words, even harsh words. The Hebrew word *dvarim* indicates strong and tough words. Moshe here is employing what in our current society is called "tough love." At the very time that he complains of the contentiousness and stubbornness of the people, he blesses them and wishes that they increase one thousand fold. I think that it is this attitude that marks all great Jewish leaders who have emulated Moshe throughout Jewish history. How to love a people and yet be objective in assessing its faults and shortcomings, without that assessment in any way diminishing one's love for that people is a formidable emotional task. Yet Moshe showed the way in this regard and it is the path followed by all later prophets and true leaders of Israel. Moshe's concern and love for Israel is so apparent that he need not seek to curry favor or popularity with the people. The people of Israel realize that Moshe is on their side and that he is not out to demonize them or aggrandize himself at their expense. Therefore he remains as the great teacher and leader of Israel through all of the ages.

Moshe's career as a leader of Israel was marked by his selflessness. The Torah characterizes him as the humblest of all human beings. Moshe has no personal agenda to advance. He is beyond the petty

corruptions that destroy a people's confidence in its leaders. I would say that this is his strongest asset in his leadership qualities. The people therefore realize that his love for Israel is unconditional. It is from this base of personal integrity and emotional stability that Moshe's words of criticism and correction resonate within the society of Israel. The rabbis of the Talmud therefore stated: "Better the words criticism from someone who loves you (Moshe) than the compliments and blandishments from someone who is your enemy (Bilaam)" In a false and deceitful world, honesty and integrity mean much more than fine speeches and false commitments. It should be noted that the words of Moshe were not meant for his generation and listeners alone. If that were the case, then they would not be included in the eternal Torah. Moshe addresses eternal faults and problems that are inherent in the Jewish people and in fact in all human society. People are by nature nudniks, burdensome and quarrelsome. By making us aware of this ongoing human failing, Moshe intends to lead us out of the wilderness that such attitudes create. We would do well to hear his words, learn his lessons and attempt to profit greatly from his teachings and personal example. There arose none like Moshe again amongst the people of Israel. © 2005 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).

#### **BRIJNET/UNITED SYNAGOGUE - LONDON (O)**

### **Daf HaShavua**

*by Rabbi Boruch Davis, Chigwell Synagogue*

**M**any writers and artists have tried to capture the paradise that was the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were in a state of total harmony, with each other, with Nature, and with G-d. But then they ate from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and found themselves banished from the Garden.

G-d cried out to Adam: "ayeka-where are you?"

G-d of course knew perfectly well where Adam was, but He was asking a spiritual question: "How did you get yourself into such a situation?"

The word *aycha* (=how), which has the same letters as the word *ayeka*, was asked of us by our three best-known prophets, Moshe, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and we quote them all today.

In the Torah reading this morning, Moshe says "aycha essa levadi... for how long can I put up with your burdens, squabbling..." This can also be taken as "reflect upon where your squabbling has led!"

We do not simply mourn our disasters; we reflect upon how they came about. According to one opinion cited by the Amek Davar, Moshe was referring to the bickering in Beha'alotecha, just at the point when the Israelites were poised to enter the Land of Israel. Their complaints and moaning prevented their entry,

was followed by the sin of the spies, and that generation was condemned to die in the desert exile.

In today's Haftarah, we read another aycha, the disturbing words of Isaiah: "aycha hayeta lezona, kirya ne'emana-how has the city which was faithful become a harlot".

Isaiah uttered these words in peace time. He warned the nation of the consequences of their "unfaithful" ways, and begged them to change course. The image of the harlot is one of betrayal.

Isaiah's opening words compare us unfavourably with the ox and donkey: "I have raised and exalted (these) children, yet they have rebelled against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey (knows) the feeding trough of its master; but Israel does not know, My people does not consider."

Rashi explains the comparisons: "the owner directs its ox in ploughing, and so it comes to know its owner, but the donkey does not know its owner until he feeds it. Israel has not behaved like the ox, despite my saving the nation from Egypt, nor even like the donkey despite the manna which she enjoyed." Sadly, the Jewish People displayed a lack of gratitude that is staggering in its breadth. Not even animals behave that way.

There is a thread which runs through from the Ayeka of G-d to Adam and Eve, to the "Aichas" of Moshe and Isaiah. Unheeded, they reached their logical conclusion in the megillah of Eicha-Lamentations, written by Jeremiah, who lived through the destruction of the First Temple. It opens with the haunting words: "Aycha yashva vadad, ha'ir rabati am.." "how does she sit alone, the city which was once full of people".

Notwithstanding these sombre messages, the Sidra, Haftarah and Megilla all conclude on positive notes: "Moshe" message to Joshua that G-d will fight on the Nation's behalf; Isaiah's message that Zion will be redeemed with justice and Jeremiah's prayer 'Hashiveynu Hashem Elecha Venashuva, Chadesh Yamenu Kekedem-Turn to us, O G-d and we shall return: renew our days, as of old.'" © 2005 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd also against me did the Lord become angry because of you saying that you also will not enter there. (The Land of Israel)" Deut 1:37.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses provides a recap of many of the laws which were given earlier as well as of the various historical incidents which the Jewish people experienced during this period of leadership. Obviously, Moses places his own interpretation both on the commandments as well as the events. What seems rather strange, however, about the way in which he retells the sin of the scouts is that

he includes his own failure to enter the Promised Land within the context of the collective punishment of the entire desert generation. He insists that G-d prevented his entrance into the land "because of you", because the rest of the Jews would be barred from entry. What is especially difficult to understand about this is that only a few chapters before, in the Book of Numbers, G-d specifically forbids Moses and Aaron from entering the Promised Land "because you didn't believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the children of Israel; therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given to them." (Numbers 20:12) Because Moses and Aaron became frustrated and angry at the people when they once again complained about the lack of water in the desert, Prophet and Priest berated them ("Listen you rebels") and Moses even struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock. If Moses and Aaron were punished because of their own wrongdoing, why does Moses blame the Israelites when he recounts his prevention from entering the Land of Israel?

I believe that when we understand the answer to this question-especially in the manner in which Don Isaac Abarbanel understands it-we will learn volumes about the true difficulty in being a leader and the enormous responsibility which leadership entails. The Abarbanel, a great Biblical commentator and political statesman of 15th century Spain, maintains that both Moses and Aaron died before entering the Promised Land because of the part which each played respectfully in the sin of the scouts and in the sin of the golden calf.

Let us begin by analyzing Aaron's role in the sin of the golden calf. The Jews had become panic stricken because Moses did not return to them from Mount Sinai when they expected him to. They felt very much alone without their leader-father in an alien and inimical desert; they gather around Aaron and cried out to him, "Get up and make for us a leader (elohim, which also means judge) who will walk before us because that personage Moses who took us out of the Land of Egypt-we don't know what happened to him." (Exodus 32:1). What the Jews are asking for is a "Moses substitute", and indeed the calf was only considered to be the seat or throne of the Egyptian G-d and not the G-d himself. (see Ramban Exodus 32:4) Hence, Aaron calls out to them- and perhaps warns them-"There will be a festival unto the Lord (Y-HVH) tomorrow" (22:5) -- as if to say, make certain that you understand that the calf is only a means to G-d and not a G-d in itself. Tragically, the Jews do not heed the warning, and do not only worship the calf by singing and dancing around it but even involve themselves in all of the immorality surrounding idolatry. (22:6 Rashi adloc) The Abarbanel maintains that Aaron ought to have understood this possible outcome, and never should have allowed them the calf in the first place. At that point he should have shared in the death penalty which was given out to the leaders of the golden calf travesty; however, since his

transgression was certainly an unpremeditated one, G-d bides His time before exacting punishment.

Moses played a not dissimilar role to that of Aaron in the incident of the scouts. In this week's Torah portion he describes how the Jews approached him saying that he send individuals as an "advance team" to scout out the land, the roads which they should take and the cities which they should come upon during the initial stages of the conquest (Deuteronomy 1:22). In this way, Moses is apparently and correctly placing the brunt of responsibility upon the people themselves: it was they who initiated the mission of the scouts and it was the scouts who came back with an evil report. However, argues the Abarbanel, Moses should have been sensitive to the dangers which could have emerged-and did emerge-from just such a reconnaissance mission. He should have either quashed the suggestion, or delayed its implementation until after the conquest, or at the very least insisted upon listening to- and censoring-the report before it came to the nation. Since he did neither, he does bear responsibility and should have been involved in the same punishment as the nation suffered. Just as in the case of Aaron, however, since Moses' sin was certainly not purposeful and was one of omission rather than commission, G-d delays his punishment as well.

Close to four decades later, when the nation "kvetches" over the lack of water and Moses and Aaron lose patience with the nation and call them rebels, G-d realizes that their period of leadership has ended; after all, the most important characteristic which a leader must have is patience and unqualified love for his people. G-d therefore informs them that they will not enter the Land of Israel and that they too will die in the desert at the moment of their impatience. But Moses understands that the real punishment is for a prior sin, the sin committed by the nation when its leaders acted too permissively by allowing them to do-both with respect to the calf and with respect to the scouts-what they should not have allowed them to do. Such is the difficult and onerous responsibility of a leader: he/she must be sensitive to negatives which may just possibly emerge from certain initiatives, and put a stop to such initiatives before it is too late. ©2005 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI ARON TENDLER**

## Rabbi's Notebook

**W**hen G-d gifted Adam with a Nefesh (human soul) he was also endowed with the power of speech. The ability to speak, the ability to use words to communicate thoughts and feelings, set him apart from every other creature on the planet.

That isn't to say that the human is the only creation with the ability to communicate. As we know, many if not all of G-d's creatures communicate in a manner distinct to each of them. However, the human is

the only creature who can create or destroy through the power of speech. Allow me to explain.

All other creations communicate in some primal but limited fashion. For example: warnings of impending danger, parental and offspring interdependency, litter, flock, school, pod, and nest dynamics. These are the studied and documented settings for the instinctual communication of species survival; however, that is all it is, it is communication not speech. On the other hand, the human can speak. He can choose to speak and communicate or chose not to speak and yet communicate. (And of course the most common and frustrating of all, the human who chooses to speak and still does not communicate). The human is capable of speech not just communication.

The Mishnah in Avos states that, "With ten statements G-d created the world." Whatever that really means, whatever the power of G-d's speech is, however the dynamics of Divine speech may work, Chazal (the Rabbis) referred to it as speech. That means that Chazal compared our speech, as limited and seemingly contained as it may be, to the speech of G-d and His power to create. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to view speech as a powerful and potentially dangerous force.

"Who is the one that desires life? Guard your tongue from speaking evil..." Following the verses's line of reasoning we must add, "And who is the one that does not desire life? The one who does not guard his tongue from speaking evil..."

Human speech creates and destroys. With words we can paint unframed pictures that are only limited by the extent of our imagination. With words we create realities of emotion. Words generate love, fear, hatred and courage. Where desire does not exist words can often generate it.

Ambition and determination, success and failure, reputation and its undoing are all the products of words. With words we wound and with words we heal. War and peace can rise and fall on the power of words.

Words allow us to express complex thoughts and feelings. With words we can make the profound simple and the simple profound. Knowledge is conveyed through words and laughter finds its truest expression in the word-talent of the humorists.

With words Avraham argued for justice and compassion. With words G-d commanded the sacrifice of Avraham's one and only, and with words the Satan stole away Sarah. Avraham mourned Sarah with words and with words he negotiated the purchase of Meoras Hamachpeilah.

Eliezar was enjoined through the power of words to seek out Rivkah, and with words Yakov bought the birthright of Eisav and the salvation of a world. With words Yakov promised G-d he would be faithful and with words G-d promised Yakov that his children would become His chosen and inherit the Land. Words were the undoing of Yakov's well-laid plans for first marrying

Rachel and besting Lavan, and it was overheard words that warned Yakov when it was time to return to his father's home.

Words describing dreams were shared with the brothers and they hated Yoseph because of them. At the same time, the words they hated implied a truth that Yakov could not ignore, "and his father guarded the words."

Conspiring brothers sealed Yoseph's fate with words while Reuven's unspoken words would have saved him. It was Yoseph's words of fear that they then chose to ignore while with words they negotiated his sale for the price of shoes.

Words were the medium of Yoseph's fall and they proved the manner of his stellar rise. Words were given to protect a king's confidence and the same words would guarantee Yoseph's final confidence to his father. Yakov blessed his children with words and thereby defined the reality of his nation.

With words Pharaoh introduced his nation to anti-Semitism and swayed them to enslave and persecute the Children of Israel. It was their words of anguish that rose up to the heavens and began their redemption.

Moshe killed the Egyptian with words and with words he confronted the seeming hatred between man and his fellow man. Words forced Moshe to flee from his people and G-d's words from a burning bush commanded him to return and save them.

With words Moshe and Aharon awoke their people to the impending redemption and with words they presented G-d's majesty and power.

At the Parting of the Sea, it was the absence of words that revealed G-d's greatness and it was Moshe and Miriam's words which immortalized the moment in divine exaltation and song.

With words G-d revealed Himself to all from atop a mountain and the tragic response to Chur's words forced Aharon to use other words in hope of delaying further disaster.

Moshe's Prophecy, the Written Torah, recorded G-d's words to His chosen children while the Oral Torah explains those very same words in a way that the Jews can understand.

Miriam's questioning words were intended to help Moshe and Tziporah but it was Moshe's few words that were then needed to heal her leprosy.

The Miraglim destroyed a generation with the timing and inflections of their words, and the lone challenging words of Kalev and Yehoshua earned them personal greatness and deliverance.

With words Korach rebelled against G-d and Moshe and for all eternity his words rise up from the depths of Gehenom (Hell) to confirm the trueness of Moshe's prophecy.

The evil Bilam attempted to destroy us with the power of his words but instead those same words were converted into an eternal source of encouragement and

strength. It was with final words that Bilam advised Balak as how to destroy the Jewish people but words alone would not have sufficed to save the nation from G-d's anger. Pinchas's zealous action proved to be more powerful than words, and with words of love G-d conferred upon him His covenant of peace.

With words the Jews complained for water and with words Moshe was to have quenched their thirst. Instead, Moshe's unspoken action would silence his words and left Yehoshua to write the final words of his prophecy.

Concern for promissory words began last week's two Parshios, because words are powerful, plentiful, and cheap. Yet, words are also the medium of our service to G-d, the manner in which we convey wisdom to our children, the expressions of our heart, the brilliance of our minds, and the only way we ever heard G-d speak.

As Moshe began to relate his final prophecy to the Bnai Yisroel he described where and when he was doing so. The place and time of Moshe's final words that begin the end of the Torah were to be inscribed in the collective memories of the nation and their descendents so that the stark majesty of the Moabite plains and mountains would forever echo with the awesome humility of G-d's most trusted servant.

"With Moshe's death, all of his physical personality will depart. Only a description, recorded in the most precise terms possible, of the place where the people heard the last of his faithful words, will be handed down to posterity so that, if some day a late descendent of the Children of Israel will come to this place, it may perhaps echo for him these words and inspire him to follow them faithfully in the midst, and for the good, of his people." (Rav S.R. Hirsch 1:1) © 2005 Rabbi A. Tendler & torah.org



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