

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

THE AISHDAS SOCIETY

9/11 – 5 Years Later

by Rabbi Micha Berger

Five years ago, in the months after 9/11, we were a different people. You stopped on the road to help a stranger stranded on the side, regardless of their ethnicity. We all proudly flew our flags in a show of unity. Even the dynamics and unity with our community of American observant Jews was markedly stronger.

But now? The flag got dirty and faded into a grey, sky blue and pink, and was taken down, not replaced. And if the fellow on the shoulder of the road is identifiably Jewish, and I have time, or if it's not a stretch of highway frequented by many other Orthodox Jews who might have pity on him...

What happened? Why couldn't we hold onto that feeling?

There is a pasuq in Devarim which reads "The 'Eyes' of G-d are on [the Land of Israel] from reishis hashanah ad acharis shanah-the beginning of the year until the end of a year." The Satmar Rav points out the asymmetry; first the use of "hashanah", "the year", but it closes with just "shanah", "a year".

The Yismach Moshe notes that unfortunately that is the way with most of us. Every year, when it begins, we are all excited and determined. "This is going to be THE year!" The year I finally have the patience my children deserve, the year I get to synagogue regularly, the year... But the year goes by, and by the end, it's just "a year", another span on the calendar.

In VaYoel Moshe, the Satmar Rav adds that this can be read in the words nusach Sfarad concludes Qedushah, "hein ga'alti eschem acharis kereishis -- here I will redeem you in the end [of our history] as in the beginning [i.e. in Egypt]". Hashem will redeem a people for whom "the end is like the beginning". When we can end the year with the same determination to be

better as we had when we began it, we will have merited the redemption.

And so, I find-and I assume most people do-that the list of things I resolve to do teshuvah for this year closely resembles the changes I promised myself I would make last year. And so I set out to answer the question of how can we make permanent change. (Ironically, I set out to answer this question last year and the year before, and the year before that...)

About a month ago I went on a trip to Northern Israel-brought food and supplies to Tzefat's poor and to our soldiers at and heading to the front. We also stopped by Chaifa and the Rambam Hospital. There we met Yechiel ben Zoharah (who could still use tefillos for a complete recovery). Yechiel left his bunker, unaware that they were actually situated north of Hezbollah trenches. He was shot from behind, with shrapnel destroying much of his liver, part of his right lung (which the initial bullet went through as well), and his right shoulder. He was waiting for the other wounds to heal sufficiently for him to be up to reconstructive surgery on the shoulder. And yes, he is a righty. What made him stick out in my mind was something he did when it wasn't war-time. There are people capable of a moment of bravery, being in the line of fire to save another. It is a different skill (not greater or lesser, just different) to be able to live "heroically" for long stretches of time.

Yechiel lived alone, working the land and building at a spot near the Kineret for a year. I unfortunately forgot the name of the town in the Golan, at nearly 50 families, that he build around his efforts. (And of course, he had to brag about his daughter, who since turned 1.) What we try to do most Rashei haShanah is closer to the moment of heroism. We think of teshuvah in terms of being at a new place by the end of Yom Kippur.

Rav AY Kook describes two ways of doing teshuvah (Orot haTeshuvah ch 2). The first is sudden, "coming from some kind of spiritual thunder that centers the soul. In one moment he recognizes the evil and disgustingness of sin, and turns into a new person. This sort of teshuvah comes from some influence of inner gift, by some great spiritual influence, that it's worthy to seek its roots in the deepest of mysteries.... The higher teshuvah comes from the thunder of universal good, the Divine Good which underlies all the worlds...."

**This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in loving memory of my dear parents
Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakohen
Paul Kahn
and
Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehoshua
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt
by Fernand Kahn**

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The second sort of teshuvah is gradual. "He feels that he must progress and improve his ways and his lifestyle, his desires, his thought patterns. In his travels on this path he conquers, bit by bit, the ways of righteousness, repairs his middos, improves his actions, teaches himself how to become more and more proper until he reaches the pinnacle of brightness and repair."

The first luchos, "G-d's manufacture they were, and the writing was G-d's writing" (Shemos 32:16). They were a "thunder from heaven", spirituality as a gift from the A-Imighty. As something unearned, there was no guarantee that they could be kept.

The Benei Yisrael sought to maintain this lofty experience; they had a need for further inspiration that could not await Moshe's return. They built the calf, and it all unraveled. That which was quickly gained was just as quickly lost.

For the second luchos, Moshe is told to "quarry for yourself two stone tablets like the first" (ibid 34:1). Man must take the first step. This is the gradual, incremental path. It's not a thunderous gift from Hashem, it is a call to which Hashem responds. He "will write on the luchos the ideas that were on the first luchos" (v. 2). But man must invest the effort.

The kind of rapid change we aspire for is similar to that Rav Kook compares to the first luchos. It is rapid, because it is gifted from G-d. But it is much harder to keep permanent.

The events of 9/11 changed the environment in which we live. Among all the tragedy was a gift, an environment that called upon us to grow as people. But the growth didn't come from within ourselves; as the environment slowly returned to something more like (although never again the same) it was before, so did we lose much of that personal growth.

The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students: There are two people on a ladder, one on the fourth rung, and another on the 10th, which one is higher?

The book where I saw this thought doesn't record his students' answers. I assume some recognized it as a trick question, and answered that it was the one on the fourth, some answered the 10th figuring the rebbe was leading them somewhere, and others were silent. But the rebbe's answer was

succinct, "It depends who is climbing the ladder, and who is going down."

Once I told the story, the idea is familiar. The idea of spirituality is not where you are, as that is largely a function of forces beyond your control (your upbringing, your genetics, etc...) Rather, it's the direction you're heading in, and how rapidly you're getting there. To apply a notion from Kierkegaard, it's not about being a good Jew, it's about the process of becoming one.

What does this say about teshuvah? We think of teshuvah as getting from point A to point B. But if holiness is measured by our engagement in the process, should this be our goal of where to be by Yom Kippur? I would suggest that teshuvah is not akin to motion, but to acceleration. The aim is that by the end of Yom Kippur, we are more engaged in change; our foot is on the accelerator, we gathered tools to implement change and have started using them.

We must realize that "the work is long", that the entire year will be one in which we will need to slowly, incrementally, work toward our goals. I hope to use this time through the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah to make a plan for growth for the year, to change more by how I'm changing than to expect to stop the entire momentum of my life on a dime.

Through such efforts, we can hopefully look back on this year as "the year" even as it ends. © 2006
The AishDas Society and Rabbi M. Berger

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Yom Hakkipurim is a day of ideologically conflicting motifs: on the one hand, we afflict ourselves by neither eating, drinking nor bathing but on the other hand we feel great joy in that this is the day when "G-d will forgive us for all our sins in order to purify us"; on the one hand, it is a majestic day when we invoke the High Priest of the Holy Temple in all of his regal and ritual splendor, and on the other hand we ourselves are garbed in white reminiscent of white shrouds and seem totally cut off from the physical world of earthly pleasures. From a certain perspective, we seem to be transported into another world, a world which is starkly white - in addition to white kipot and white dress of the individual congregants there is also the white cover of the Holy Ark and the white "dresses" of the Torah Scrolls - and a world which seems to almost be a taste of the other world to come, the world of souls removed from their bodily encasements.

Both our law and liturgy enforce the other worldly feeling engendered on this holy day. The great Ashkenazi devisor Rav Moshe Isserles (16th century), records in his halakhic code that before the onset of Kol Nidre evening every individual ought light a candle for him/herself as well as for those parents who have died; it is as though each of us is preparing to enter the world

of those who have departed and to spend the next 25 hours with them. Indeed, the Sefardim of Mediterranean origin only recite memorial prayers for the departed on Kol Nidre eve, unlike the Ashkenazi Jews who recite those prayers of Yizkor on Yom Kippur day as well as on Pilgrim Festivals. It is as though the curtain which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead has suddenly been removed, and all the generations are conjoining together before the presence of the Divine.

In a very fundamental way the Biblical words which we read last week seem to define the Yom Kippur experience which I have just described:

"You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers, every person of Israel, from the choppers of your wood, to the drawers of your waters as you pass before the Covenant of the Lord your G-d. And not with you alone do I make this Covenant but with those who are here with us standing today before the Lord our G-d as well as with those who are not here with us this day.

We seem to be transported into the eternal world of the historic Jewish community, a world in which we have an opportunity to grasp the hands of those who have come before us and to prepare the way for those who are to come after us. Yom Kippur does transport us into another world, but not to the world of the dead but rather to the world of eternal life. This veil of eternity does not bring with it melancholy loss but rather provides for eternal opportunity.

Let me explain. When the Talmud in Tractate Rosh Hashanah queries why we do not recite the Hallel psalms of praise on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our Sages respond, "the books of the living and the dead are open before G-d and you wish to sing songs of praise?" Note well that our Sages did not say the book of life and death but rather the book of the living and the dead. The Jewish nation at its very birth was given a Divine mission to bring the message of the G-d of justice, compassion and peace to the entire world. This mission can only be carried out during the lengthy historical process of world development; this mission can only succeed as a result of the cumulative cooperation of the march of the generations. An inspiring word at the right time from a parent or a teacher can change a child's life and result in a descendant of that child who can become a great Jewish leader; a wrong word at the wrong time can produce the opposite. Our deeds can therefore influence the Divine judgment upon the generations who came before us, hopefully to their credit but sometimes to their debit.

It is for this reason that all generations stand together before G-d on this Holy Day of Judgment and Atonement, of assessment and purification. Therefore in our confessional we cry out "We and our forbears

(avoteinu) have sinned" - and we seek forgiveness for them as well. Did we not cry out to G-d on Rosh Hashanah, "You remember the deeds of the world for ever and you gave a specific function to every creative being from the ancient times." On Yom Kippur we must recognize the interdependence of the generations, our heritage from the past and our responsibility for the future, and we are being given the opportunity to redeem ourselves as well as our past generations through our repentance.

A story postscript: Exactly ten years ago a young man with a heavy European accent appeared at my doorstep on a summer Friday afternoon and asked me to convert him to Judaism. I invited him to stay for Shabbat, and he introduced himself as the great grandson of Rabbi Israel Zolli, who had been appointed Chief Rabbi of Rome in 1939. The Nazis took over the city in September of 1943, Rabbi Zolli hid out in the Vatican, and for reasons clouded in mystery he together with his wife and daughter Miriam converted to Christianity on February 14, 1945. One of my students prepared him for conversion and he moved to a religious kibbutz in Northern Israel. Two years later he came to me with his bride to be, asked me to perform their marriage ceremony, but stipulated that it be in his great grandfather's synagogue in Rome. The matrimonial service was the most moving of my career and it took place only a few days before Yom Kippur. As I intoned the final of the seven nuptial blessings, "You shall yet be heard in the streets of Judea and the great places of Jerusalem the sounds of joy and the sounds of happiness, the sounds of a groom and the sounds of a bride", the groom shouted out:

"Great grandfather, do you hear these words? I wanted to come here to get married because I wanted to be a 'repair', a tikkun for your soul. You did not believe that these words would ever come to pass. You apparently thought that Judaism had been destroyed by the Nazi hordes. But you were wrong. I am the proof that you are wrong. I have come back, and since a great part of my returning is because of you, I have brought you back with me. Grandfather the eternal One of Israel does not speak falsehood, Grandfather the nation of Israel lives! © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Parashas Ha'azinu is primarily the song that Moshe taught the Children of Israel immediately prior to his death. G-d guaranteed that it would never be forgotten (Devarim 31:21), and that when tragedy befalls the nation, it will remind them that it was their actions that caused it. But precisely where does this song begin?

The Rambam (Hilchos Sefer Torah 8:4) tells us that the words of the song are written in a specific way

(two columns, rather than continuous lines), and that this starts from the word "ha'azinu." If you look at any Sefer Torah (or tikun that reprints its style), you can verify that the song of "Ha'azinu" starts from the very beginning of the Parasha (32:1). Rashi (Berachos 21a), however, implies that the song itself doesn't start until 32:4, as the Talmud uses 32:3 as the source for making a blessing before studying Torah: "When Moshe came to start the words of the song, he said to Israel, 'I will make a blessing first and you then answer "amen" after me-"when I call out in G-d's name" with a blessing, you should "attribute greatness to G-d" through your "amen." If this verse is the blessing before the song, then the song must not really start until the next verse! But if the song doesn't start until the fourth verse, why are the first three written in the style as if they were part of the song itself?

Rashi himself indicates that the song starts from the word "ha'azinu," as when G-d commanded Moshe (and Yehoshua) to "write down this song" (31:19), he (Rashi) tells us which "song" G-d is referring to, "[from] 'ha'azinu hashamayim' until 'vechiper admaso amo,'" i.e. the song itself starts from "ha'azinu."

Which brings up a different question: Who was the author of the song, Moshe or G-d? If G-d is telling Moshe what to write (and subsequently teach to the nation), it would seem He is the author. Rashi even says that G-d told Moshe that the nation will sing this song "which contains *My* warnings of the terrible consequences [of not following the Torah] within it." Yet when the Midrashim and commentators explain the nuances of the wording (see Rashi on 32:1), they talk about why *Moshe* chose these words and expressions, not G-d. The song itself refers to G-d in the third person, including the previously mentioned verse where (we assume) Moshe tells the nation to "attribute greatness to G-d when I call out His name," indicating that Moshe was the author. So who wrote the song of "Ha'azinu?"

We know that the Torah, including the fifth book, Sefer Devarim, was dictated word for word by G-d to Moshe. Nevertheless, most of Sefer Deverim is Moshe's words, which he spoke to the nation. After Moshe had done so, G-d instructed him to write them down to be included in the Torah. Just as conversations recorded in the other four books were said by mortals but became part of the Torah when G-d "read them into the record" (as it were), Moshe's words were given the full authority of the Torah when they were dictated back to him as part of the Torah.

A similar scenario might have occurred regarding the song of "Ha'azinu," only with the order slightly reversed. Moshe had already told the nation (30:19) that he would call "the heavens and the earth as witnesses" if they don't follow the Torah. The commentators tell us that this refers to his telling the heavens to "pay attention and I will speak, and the land

should hear my words" (32:1), the opening verse of our Parasha. So Moshe had already planned this "speech," or "song" earlier. He had written it (at least mentally), and planned on teaching it to the nation before he died. Before he did, though, G-d told him to include it in the Torah: "And now," even before having read or sung it to the nation, "write this song" that you were already planning to teach them "[into the Torah], and teach it to the Children of Israel until they say/sing it fluently, so that this song can be a witness for me against the Children of Israel" (31:19). They were Moshe's (planned) words that G-d liked so much He included them in the Torah, made sure they were well-known to the nation, and, because they referenced *His* warnings of the consequences of abandoning the Torah, would serve as a witness against them if they did.

When Moshe had "written" this speech, he had planned on giving an introduction (up to and including "attributing greatness to G-d when His name is mentioned"). However, since G-d had instructed Moshe to put all of it, including the introduction, in the Torah, the entire piece became the song, starting from the very first word of the introduction, "ha'azinu."

Every Biblical song besides this one was sung *after* what was described had already happened. "Uz Yushir" was sung *after* crossing the sea and seeing the Egyptians dead, "Ali Be'er" was sung *after* they got its water and/or saw the blood of their enemies within its waters, Devorah sang her song of praise *after* the military victory, etc. The song of "Ha'azinu," on the other hand, has been sung *during* the suffering it describes, even before the second half of the song occurs, when G-d takes vengeance on His enemies and restores Israel to its former glory. As the Aggadas Beraishis points out (59:1), the song of "Ha'azinu" will eventually become like the others, being sung after it has been completely fulfilled as well. Please, G-d, may it be this year. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Rabbi Yaacov ben Asher writes that during different times in prayer, there are different physical postures that we take. We stand when reciting the Amidah and fall on our faces when saying the prayer of Tachanun. (Tur, Orach Chayim 131)

Could it be that these positions reflect different approaches to G-d? Standing in prayer denotes our preparedness to speak forthrightly with the Almighty as we struggle and even insist that the Lord help us. It is, of course, true that during this service we bow down on four occasions. Still the Talmud insists that if someone wishes to bow more often, he is stopped. (Berachot 34a) Perhaps this teaches us that in prayer G-d desires that we bring our pleas to him with honesty and candor.

Indeed, when facing challenges in life we are instructed to gather all of our energy to right whatever

wrong we face. In this sense, the human being has qualities of dynamism and majesty. Created in the image of G-d, we have the power to act G-dlike, to give selflessly to the other, to transcend and reach what we think are our potentials and do the impossible. This may be the approach we take in the Amidah service as we stand before the Almighty.

In the next prayer, when we fall to the ground, we approach G-d very differently. In the end, no matter how capable we may be, no matter our physical and emotional stature, we are all in G-d's hands. This may be the symbolic meaning of falling on our face. It's as if we are saying to the Almighty-please embrace us, hold us and carry us through the difficulties we face.

The Tachanun comes from the story of King David when he failed to count the Jewish people with the traditional giving of a half shekel for each person. (Samuel II Chapter 24) Censuses in Torah law are taken so that we can indicate how many of us are prepared to give of ourselves to G-d - hence, the half shekel is given to the temple. When counting without that half shekel we are proclaiming that the count is taken for our own honor. The prophet Gad tells David that he will be punished with either war, famine or pestilence. David chooses pestilence as that attack is in the hands of G-d. David had learnt his lesson that it is better to be in the hands of G-d than at the mercy of human beings.

It is not easy to have this kind of trust. Trust requires a deep openness, a willingness to develop a relationship of intimacy. But such intimacy with a beloved or with G-d is difficult to achieve as one is rendered vulnerable in that one could be rejected. Not withstanding this difficulty, David learns to trust in G-d and as we fall to the ground and recall this David story we try to do the same - giving in and trusting the Lord.

In the High Holiday service we follow a similar format. Standing before G-d we strongly ask that He allow His awe to be felt by all of humankind (Ve-chen Tein Pachdechah). We then add that G-d see to it that Israel be given all of His glory (Ve-chen Tein Kavod Le-amecha). Precisely after these kind of paragraphs, do we recite the Aleinu wherein we fall literally to the floor. Human strength can take us only so far. Falling to the ground we declare, "Oh Lord, we desperately need your help".

Our service takes it one step further. We begin reciting the prayer in which we ask G-d that He teach us the right words to recite. (heh'yeh im pi'phiyot) Sometimes life can be so confusing that we do not even know the right words. Hence, we turn to G-d and we declare, the darkness is so heavy, the suffering so great, the problems so complex we are not even sure what to ask for. Oh G-d, we say, give us the words. Help us pray for what we need.

These are our feelings these days. No doubt we must, in the spirit of the Amidah, do our share to

overcome. But for me, this Yom Kippur I will fall to the ground and say to G-d, "we need you desperately, we need you to intervene, we need you to give us the words and show us the way." © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe's great song which is the parsha of this week demands that there be listening and not just hearing. The word haazinu means more than hearing; it means to pay attention and listen intently. And though Moshe is speaking to "heaven and earth" it is clear from the contents of his song that he is speaking to us. And therefore his words deserve more than a perfunctory hearing from us.

In Jewish tradition, children committed this parsha to memory at a very early age, for the song contains the entire Jewish story. It has many nuances. Just like a great symphonic composition requires intensive listening in order to appreciate, so too does this song of Moshe. We live in a world that is bombarded with incessant sound. Perhaps that is why there is very little true listening that goes on. We are too busy hearing so there is no capacity for true listening. It may very well be that this is why Jewish children committed this song to memory so that when their attention span increased with years and experience, they would be truly able to listen to the song that they once only heard and memorized.

Listening to one another is the key to a successful marriage, to raising children, to teaching and interacting with other people. It is also the key to understanding Torah and appreciating the glorious subtleties and nuances of Judaism. In short, the key to being a sophisticated Jew is the ability to listen. Judaism is not meant to be merely background noise or even soothing atmosphere inducing music.

The song of Haazinu itself details the travails that will engulf Israel in its long journey through history. It unerringly predicts the weaknesses and follies that Israel exhibits and the ensuing problems and calamities that follow such behavior. But the song ends on a note of soaring hope. G-d will not forsake the Jewish people or the Land of Israel. The enemies of Israel will all eventually be thwarted in their ambitions to destroy the eternal people. And the Jewish people itself will, as a national entity, recognize its uniqueness and uphold its end of the covenant entered into with G-d at Sinai, which was then renewed in the desert by Moshe before his death.

The prediction of troubles, no matter how accurate it may be, make this a difficult song to truly listen to. Yet it has been these very troubles and

adversity that the Jewish people have faced that have strengthened us, renewed our faith, spurred our creative genius and enabled us to have such an enormous and disproportionate influence in world affairs and civilization.

Our success in survival and creativity is directly traceable to our ability to listen to the song of Moshe. It has thus become part of us and as such we are confident that the salvation that the end of the song depicts is certain and not far off. When we hear the song read this week on Shabat in the synagogue we will certainly listen to it with our innermost soul and being. It is Moshe's great gift to us. © 2006 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI BARUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

The topics of repentance and Yom Kippur need not be all fire and brimstone. There is much about repentance that is positive, inspiring, and meaningful.

Maimonides writes: "Each and every person has merits and transgressions. Whoever has more merits than sins is called a tzaddik-a righteous person. Whoever has more sins than merits is called a rasha-a wicked person. If someone has half and half, he is called a bainoni-a person in the middle. This applies to entire countries as well. If the merits of all of a country's inhabitants are more numerous than its sins, the land is called righteous, and if it has more sins than merits, it is called wicked. This applies to the entire world as well." (Laws of Repentance 3:1)

Rambam continues: "A person who has more sins than merits will "miyad" (normally translated as "immediately," but we will discuss this point later) die as a result of his wickedness, as the verse states, "I have struck you ... because your sins were so many" (Yirmiyahu 30:14). Similarly, a country who has a majority of sins over merits will be destroyed "miyad" as it says (regarding Sodom), "The outcry against Sodom and Gemmorah is great" (Bereishit 18:20). The same is true regarding the entire world. If the whole world has more sins than merits, it is wiped out "miyad," as it states (regarding the Flood), "G-d saw that the evils of mankind had increased greatly" (Bereishit 6:5). (Laws of Repentance, 3:)2 There are a number of questions on the Rambam that we must ask:

1. Why do we need both of these paragraphs? Don't they both say the same thing? The key is whether you have more merits than sins or vice versa and this gives you the status of righteous or wicked? Why the seeming repetition?

2. The proof from Sodom appears to be a non-proof because if you continue in that verse it says: "I will descend and see if the outcry that has risen to Me has brought destruction and if not, I will know" (Bereishit 18:20). This indicates that Sodom was not wiped out immediately after it had more sins than merits. Rather, G-d was first evaluating if Sodom would be destroyed even though they had already earned the status of the wicked. What then do we make of this "proof"?

3. We encounter the same problem regarding the verse of the Flood cited by Rambam. G-d does see "that the evils of mankind had increased greatly" (Bereishit 6:5) but He doesn't bring the Flood until much later, after Noach is commanded to build the ark which took 120 years (see Rashi 6:14) to build. How is this a proof that G-d punishes right after the world becomes laden with a majority of sins when it shows the opposite?

4. There is the famous question asked by many: We know many wicked people that live long lives. If indeed the procedure is that G-d exacts punishment as soon as a person has more transgressions than merits, how could it be that these wicked people continue to live, year after year? And has there never been, since the time of the Flood or Sodom, a country (or even the whole world) that didn't have more sins than merits? Yet, we have not seen such countries become destroyed.

5. Finally, Rambam himself writes further on (Laws of Repentance, 3:3) that G-d evaluates each individual's sins and merits every Rosh Hashanah and whoever is found to be a rasha-wicked-is "sealed for death," but he does not say that a rasha dies immediately. So how could he write differently here?

Due to all our questions, we must understand Rambam as follows. There are two points being made. In 3:1, Rambam is describing a person's status and reality of relationship with G-d. You are a tzaddik if you have mostly merits, with or without justice being carried out and with or without reward and punishment. You are defined as a rasha, a wicked person, whether G-d judges you with death and destruction or not. In 3:2, Rambam describes the evaluation and judgment of those who have earned their individual descriptions in 3:1.

Judgment and the administering of justice do not happen on a constant basis. There are certain set times when G-d judges. One time of justice is after death, as Rambam describes later in Chapter 3. Another is on Rosh HaShanah. There are specific sins which bring about a judgment (see Talmud Brachot 55a with Rashi). Other times, G-d is drawn to judge and evaluate a person for reasons known only to Him. But just because a person is wicked by status does not mean he will be judged in the near future. And even if he is judged, he will die, as Rambam says, "miyad"

which unlike popular opinion, does not mean immediately, but inevitably or necessarily. The death and destruction will occur when G-d has decided the proper time. But it does not happen immediately. First, a judgment must arise and then the punishment is determined but that punishment can take a long time to occur.

Concerning the Flood and Sodom, they had been called wicked for a period of time before G-d judged them and even then it was "an outcry" or specific injustice in Sodom (as with the Flood-see end of Parshat Bereishit for the story of the immoral relations between specific men and women that occurred then) that brought about its judgment. It took some time for the "miyad" and inevitability of the justice and destruction to present itself.

This may very well be the explanation as to why we haven't seen a nation become destroyed very often. G-d chooses not to sit in judgment against them, albeit they have the status of being wicked. As far as the entire world is concerned, G-d's promise to Noah (Bereishit 8:31) related this very idea. He made an oath that no matter how wicked the world would become in terms of status, He would never again sit in judgment over the entire world.

So, there are two concepts. There is justice, reward, and punishment and there is the status of being righteous or wicked. But what difference does the status make? We will see that it makes all the difference in the world.

Rambam writes: "How great is repentance! It brings one close to G-d's Divine Presence... Yesterday, the sinner was hated by G-d, dirty, disgusting, abominable, distant, and today he is beloved, close, and a true friend of G-d's... Yesterday, he was separated from G-d... He would cry out and pray without being answered... He would perform commandments and they would be ripped up... But today, he is attached to G-d, he calls out and is answered immediately... He fulfills the commandments and they are accepted with great joy...and G-d desires his Mitzvot!" (Laws of Repentance 7:6-7)

Repentance not only saves one from punishment but it re-creates a strong bond between G-d and the one who is repentant. It transforms you from being called wicked, having your prayers ignored and your Mitzvot deflected, to being called righteous and being a friend of G-d's. And who can ponder the amount of things one can accomplish if they are G-d's friend? The amount and power of Divine assistance one receives to accomplish all of one's goals would be immeasurable.

One need not only ponder reward and punishment when struggling with the approach of Yom Kippur and repentance. A main motivating factor should be the relationship and status one has in G-d's eyes.

Does He view you as wicked or righteous? Are you beloved to Him or despised?

Nobody wants to be called wicked, especially by G-d. Repentance and the atonement of Yom Kippur restore our righteous status, as long as we do our part to repent sincerely. © 2006 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Last-Minute Preparations

While we are judged on Rosh Hashana for our conduct over the entire year, we often seek to garner last-minute merits as the year draws to a close. Are these last-minute spiritual preparations effective?

The Talmud relates a tale of a pious person who gave a dinar to a pauper on the eve of Rosh Hashana during a period of drought (B. Berachot 18b). According to one commentator, the pious man may have been Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai who was extremely poor (Maharsha, 16th-17th centuries, Poland). This may very well have been the last coin left in the house and his wife was not happy about his generosity.

Feeling uncomfortable in the face of his wife's jibes and perhaps seeking solitude at this holy juncture in the Jewish calendar, the pious man went to the cemetery to spend the night there.

While in the graveyard he heard two spirits conversing with each other: "My friend, let us roam the world and hear what is being said behind the curtain that partitions off the Divine Presence. We will hear of the misfortune that will come to the world this year."

"I cannot join you," responded the other spirit, "For I am buried in a matting of reeds." Apparently, roaming disembodied spirits appear dressed in their burial shrouds. The deceased spirit was embarrassed that her family had been too poor to purchase linen shrouds, and had been compelled to bury her in reed matting (Ritva, 13th-14th centuries, Spain).

Yet the trapped spirit did not begrudge her friend roaming and she suggested: "You go, and whatever you hear you can tell me." The spirit headed out, drifted around and returned to the cemetery: "My friend, what did you hear from behind the curtain?" asked the ensnared spirit excitedly.

"I heard that the crops of anyone who sows this winter at the time of the first rain will be destroyed by hail." Agriculture in the Land of Israel is dependent on the winter rains. Generally there are three periods of rain, the first that begins on the 17th of Heshvan, the second on the 23rd of the same month and the third on the 1st of Kislev. Crops planted at the first rainfall would have grown stiff by the second rainfall. If hail comes in the second period it may destroy the upright plants. Seeds sown at the second rainfall would not be harmed by hail for the fledgling plants are still pliable (Rashi, 11th century, France. See Exodus 9:31-32).

Hearing the prognosis, the pious man avoided sowing his grain after the first rains, waiting for the second rain. When the hail came, the crops of many were destroyed, while the pious man's grain was unaffected.

Having benefited from a night in the cemetery, the pious person returned there the following year. Once again he heard the same two spirits scheming: "My friend, let us roam the world and hear what is being said behind the curtain about the misfortune that will come to the world this year." "Did I not already tell you," replied the second spirit, "I cannot come with you for I am buried in a matting of reeds! You go and tell me what you hear."

One commentator explains that the spirit declined to roam not because of embarrassment as we suggested above, but because she was not free to wander until her body had decomposed. For this reason we bury the deceased in linen shrouds that decompose quickly thus allowing the spirit to disengage from the body. The reed matting was slowing down the process and the spirit was therefore not free to roam. Her fellow spirit returned the next year with the same proposal, anticipating that the shroud had decomposed over the year, freeing her friend. This eventuality, however, had yet to transpire (Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, 18th century, Poland-Prague).

The free spirit went on her merry way and when she returned she reported: "I heard that crops sowed around the second rains will be destroyed by a dry wind." Such a blustery airstream would only affect crops recently planted. Crops planted during the first rains would have already taken root and be able to withstand the wind (Rashi).

Once again the pious person acted upon the Divine decree to which he had been privy and he reaped the rewards. His wife however was suspicious: "Last year everyone's crops were destroyed by hail, except yours. And this year everyone's crops were destroyed by a dry wind, except yours!" The pious person shared the entire story with his wife.

Within a short time, a quarrel broke out between the pious man's wife and the mother of the deceased girl whose spirit was trapped by the reed matting. As the two traded verbal blows, the wife scorned the mother: "Come and I will show you your daughter buried dishonorably in a matting of reeds!"

When the next Rosh Hashana rolled around and the pious person settled down for his annual bivouac in the graveyard, he heard the free spirit urge the trapped spirit to roam and eavesdrop on what was being decreed behind the partition.

The trapped spirit declined, though for a different reason: "My friend, leave me be. The words that we have spoken between ourselves have already been heard by the living." And with that the lifeline of the pious person to Divine decrees was severed.

What was the initial deed that brought about the change in fortune for our poor pious man? Was it his charitable act of helping out a pauper in times of trouble? This might be why the poor spirit buried in the reed matting was the medium for helping the pious man. Perhaps it was that the pious man had silently accepted his wife's taunts, preferring to avoid conflict rather than retort? Or perhaps the pious person's deeds were merely reflective of his conduct over the entire year. We can never know with certainty, but the passage certainly seems to suggest that last-minute acts can change fortunes and that prosperity can come from unexpected quarters. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. *Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.*

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Siddur Avodat Yisrael writes that there is a chapter of Tehilim which corresponds to each parashah—this week, psalm 71. Once again, the selection appears to be related to the season; indeed, it contains a verse which is found in the selichot each day: "Do not cast me off in time of [my] old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me." (In our prayers, however, we change the singular to the plural.)

David recited this psalm as he fled from his son Avshalom. The entire chapter is the cry of a helpless man who has no hope but G-d. "In You Hashem I took refuge, let me not ever be shamed. In your righteousness rescue me and give me escape, incline Your ear to me and save me. . . Hashem, be not far from me; my G-d, hasten to my assistance." Similarly, Chazal say that no one can really repent and improve his ways without G-d's help. Also, these verses remind us of the obligation to appreciate G-d's kindness, a theme addressed in our parashah (32:6, see Ramban). The psalm ends on a joyous note: "I, too, shall thank You on the neivel [an instrument], for Your faithfulness, my G-d, I shall sing to You on the kinor, Holy One of Israel. My lips shall rejoice when I sing to You, and my soul which You have redeemed." Perhaps this selection also alludes to our confidence that G-d will forgive us on Yom Kippur and to the joyous holiday of Sukkot which follows. May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good year. © 1996 Rabbi S. Katz

