

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

What made our generation the very special generation - after almost 2,000 years of exile - to have merited the return to our national homeland, the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel? Why are we the privileged ones who are able to give thanks to the Almighty each Sabbath for His having granted us "the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption?"

Linked to this question is another one: the attempt at understanding what appears to be a strange Ashkenazi custom of the bride making seven circuits around the groom at the very opening of the traditional marriage ceremony. There are those who explain that in so doing she is expressing the new reality that from henceforth on he - the groom - is to be the center of her existence. But isn't she also the center of his existence? Indeed, I once had a bride who insisted that the groom follow her circuits around him with circuits around her! But that is not the custom.

Once we examine the Biblical chapter which is the true source for the nuptial canopy circuits, the entire symbolism will come clear, and so will the special merit of our generation. The prophet Jeremiah, the soothsayer of doom who foresees the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, is also the seer of Jewish re-birth, return and redemption. Chapter 31 of the book of Jeremiah opens, "Thus says G-d, the nation which has survived the sword has found grace in the desert... you will yet build and be rebuilt, virgin Israel, plant vineyards in the mountains of Shomron... Rachel has wept for her children. So says the Lord: stop your voice from weeping, your eyes from tears; the children shall return to their borders (of Israel)." And it is within this very chapter of ringing redemption that the prophet declares, "How long will you escape My embrace, oh wayward daughter, because the Lord has created something new in the land: a female shall do circuits around a male" (Jeremiah 31:21). In truth, I would translate the phrase, "a female shall 'run rings' around a male."

In order to understand the true force of this phrase, we must remember that as a result of the primordial sin of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Eve was punished with the words, "He (Adam, male) shall rule over you (female)" (Gen. 3:16).

This inequality of male dominating female, however, is far from an ideal situation; it is the result of transgression, it is punishment for sin. However, at the time of repair, redemption, and re-creation, harmony will be effectuated by first going to the other extreme: the female will run rings around the male!

I would like to take this analogy one level deeper. According to the sacred Zohar (the mystical interpretation of the Bible) as well as Maimonides, rational legalist and philosopher, the greatest and most exalted love in the cosmos is the love of G-d for Israel; the Song of Songs, on one level the passion of the shepherd lever for his shepherdess beloved, is more profoundly the love of G-d for Israel (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 10). The prophet Hoseah sees Israel as the betrothed of G-d, and the words we recite as we entwine the phylactery straps around our finger each morning - our wedding ring presented by G-d - bear testimony to this truth (Hoshea 2:21). Similarly, the groom under the nuptial canopy is analogous to G-d, the bride to nation Israel, and the nuptial union to the rapprochement, the great unity, which portends Messianic redemption. Hence the magnificent conclusion to the marriage ceremony, in its final blessing, "soon shall there be heard in the cities of Judea and the broad places of Jerusalem, the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the sound of groom and the sound of bride."

When Israel was in its infancy, and G-d presented us with the initial paradigm for redemption, G-d was dominant and Israel played a much more passive role: G-d brought about the plague and G-d split the Reed Sea. But when the ultimate redemption will eventually come about with a world at peace and unity, a more mature Israel will have to assume the more central, and at least initially dominant, role. "(First) return unto Me, and then I shall return to you." Hence in our marriage ceremonies, it is the bride who runs circuits around the groom, Israel who must make the initial moves!

In last's week's Biblical portion of Ki Tavo (Deut. 28), we read of the curses, the exile, the trials and tribulations of Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple. (The exile to Babylon after the loss of the First Temple is foreshadowed in the Book of Leviticus 26, according to the Ramban, in which the return to Israel is prophesied immediately and within the very same chapter of the destruction). This second tragic exile

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
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merely concludes, "These are the words of the covenant..." (Deut 28:69) without any reprieve, devoid of any glimmer of hope. It is only two chapters later, in our Biblical reading of Nitzavim, that the Bible promises, guarantees that, "after all these things, the blessings and the curses, have come upon you, that you shall return to your heart from amongst all the gentiles where G-d has scattered you, and you shall return to the Lord your G-d and listen to His voice..." (Deut 30: 1-10). Here, too, we are promised redemption, but only after we return - to Israel and to G-d and His Torah. And this double returning must be initiated by us, by the Jewish nation, by G-d's bride. We will have to make the first moves (as the Bible says, you shall return from amongst the nations, you shall return to G-d - t'shuvah.)

Why is our generation blessed? In the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries we, Israel, took our destiny into our own hands and established the movement of our return to Zion and all the initiatives that such a return demanded. And the Twentieth Century likewise saw an unprecedented type of "return" or teshuvah, where individuals made a whole turnabout in character and performance, where children of Sabbath-desecrators became rabbis and Torah educators. Our generation, despite the intermarriage and assimilation, has also miraculously seen the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises of Nitzavim. But if we wish to achieve the goal of our journey and at last realize our destiny, we must keep the momentum on both counts moving! © 2007 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Talmud in Gittin discusses an apparent innovation of the great Hillel, about a century before the destruction of the Second Temple. The shemitta year carries with it not only the obligation of having the ground of the Land of Israel rest but also the requirement of shemittat ksfim - allowing all personal loans and debts to be automatically cancelled.

The Torah is very explicit about this requirement stating that one should not hold back from lending money to the needy in the sixth year, fearing that it will not be repaid before the shemitta year when

the debt will automatically be cancelled. Hillel, aware that in his time lenders were in fact withholding loans as the shemitta year approached, constructed a legal mechanism - the pruzbul - to transfer the private loan into a loan made by the courts, which was not legally subject to the laws of the cancellation of debts on the shemitta year.

This legalism in assigning the loan of the borrower to the court and removing it from the purview of shemittat ksfim had the desired effect and the flow of money and loans between lenders and borrowers remained unaffected by the impending shemitta year.

However, at first glance, one must be puzzled by the institution of pruzbul. What empowered Hillel to construct such a legalism? On the surface it clearly contradicts the very reasoning of the Torah in establishing shemittat ksfim? This is a great topic of discussion in the Talmud and throughout all later rabbinic responsa and writings.

In the Talmud there are two opinions voiced on this matter. One is that during the entire period of the Second Temple the laws of shemitta, as outlined in the Torah, were no longer applicable. All of the laws of shemitta then were only of rabbinic effect - a remembrance to the shemitta ordinances of the Torah - and the rabbis did not ordain shemittat ksfim at all.

Thus Hillel's achievement was to create a positive remembrance of the Torah's ordinance of shemittat ksfim by instituting the pruzbul so that the public would always recall that when the Torah ordinances would once again be applicable in the future, the concept of shemittat ksfim would be present.

Tosfot comments that during the entire period of the Second Temple the Torah concept of shemitta was not applicable because a majority of the Jewish people lived outside of the Land of Israel. There was no yovel - no Jubilee year - and therefore no shemitta either. According to Tosfot's opinion one can state that the Torah shemitta was never observed properly in the Land of Israel by the Jewish nation. The First Temple Jews were exiled because of non-observance of shemitta and the Second Temple Jews only had a rabbinically ordained remembrance of shemitta in their time.

The second opinion is that Hillel's ordinance was not a new thing but merely publicized an already existing "loophole" in Torah law which allowed private debt to be converted into the debt to courts. Hillel's act was merely one of publicizing this loophole in order to allow the free flow of credit to continue even in the year before the shemitta. Thus, even when the Torah shemitta is reestablished the use of the pruzbul will continue since the legal "loophole" will still be present.

Over the ages there has been much discussion over the pruzbul and its necessity. For a long period of time, Jews living in the Diaspora never used a pruzbul.

The logic was that shemitta in our time after the destruction of the First Temple was only a rabbinic remembrance and the rabbis never instituted it to be followed outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel.

Just as there is no shemitta of land outside of the Land of Israel there is no shemittat ksfim either. However, there were great rabbis who dissented from this view and stated that shemittat ksfim still prevailed outside the Land of Israel and therefore a pruzbul was necessary to prevent the automatic cancellation of the loan. Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (Rosh) when he became the rabbi in Toledo, Spain at the beginning of the fourteenth century attempted to introduce the pruzbul in his community. But he himself ruefully wrote of his inability to have the Jews of Toledo follow his ruling in this matter.

Over the generations, the institution of pruzbul has taken hold even in Diaspora communities. Many rabbis saw it as a matter of sanctity and remembrance even if not of necessity and therefore encouraged its general use. It became one of the methods of keeping the Land of Israel fresh in the minds of Jews living in a dark and far exile. Hillel's foresight had many positive results. © 2007 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Shortly before Moshe's passing, G-d informs him that the nation will sin (Devarim 31:16), causing G-d to get angry with them and punish them, including G-d "hiding His face from them" (31:17). The nation responds by saying that "it is because G-d is not with me that all these bad things have found me" (ibid), to which G-d says, "and I will hide my face even more on that day because of all the evil they have done, for they have turned to other deities" (31:18). This sequence has puzzled the commentators, with their primary question being why G-d would still be angry, and seemingly more angry (as indicated by the double wording of G-d "hiding His face" the second time) after the nation realizes that G-d's abandoning them is the cause of their problems.

Another question (on the flip side) can be asked as well: Why, if they are still sinning (as evidenced by G-d's ever-increasing "hidden face"), is the past tense used ("evil they have done" rather than "evil they are doing" and having "turned" to idol-worship)? Although the Ramban isn't specifically addressing this question, his approach to the first question provides an answer to this one as well.

"The explanation of [the nation] 'saying on that day [that] it is because G-d is not with me' is not that it is a complete admission, [as opposed to] 'and they will

admit their sins' (Vayikra 26:40, which is a full admission); it is [only] a thought of regret, regretting their treacherous acts [towards G-d] and recognizing that they are guilty [of sinning]. And the explanation of [G-d] 'hiding His face' a second time is that since Israel thought in their heart (i.e. realized) that they sinned to G-d and that it is because their 'G-d is not with them that these bad things happened to them,' it would have been appropriate, based on G-d's abundant kindness, that he would help them and save them, for they have already rejected idol worship (which they had previously done). Therefore (to explain why G-d didn't help them and save them after their admission and realization) it says that it is because of 'all the tremendous evil they did,' trusting in idols, that He will hide His face from them again, [although] not like the first [time He] hid [His] face, when He hid his face of mercy and 'many troublesome evils found them.' Instead [this hiding of G-d's face refers to] the face of the redemption being hidden from them until they add onto the previously mentioned regret with a full admission and a complete repentance."

In other words, the "partial admission," i.e. their recognition that their troubles are the result of having sinned and G-d leaving them, is enough to "stop the clock" (so to speak), whereby the suffering that they endured as a punishment for their sins no longer occurs, but a full redemption, whereby they are "helped and saved," does not begin until they complete the process of repentance.

This concept is evident in a Beraisa quoted by the Talmud (Kiddushin 20a and Arachin 30b), where a person who does not observe Shemita (the Sabbatical year) and sells produce grown during Shemita is punished by having to sell his belongings (because he will need the money). If he doesn't learn his lesson, he will then have to sell his fields, and eventually, if he continues to sin, he will be forced to sell his house. Rashi explains that "learning his lesson" refers to "realizing that he has sinned" and that this punishment was the result, and "thinking about repenting." He doesn't need to do a full teshuva (repentance) in order to prevent the next level of punishment, only to recognize that what he did was wrong and regret it.

By applying this to our verses, the Ramban is explaining the flow to be (1) sinning, (2) being punished for sinning, (3) realizing that what we did was wrong and that the punishment came because of it, and then (4) experiencing a different type of "G-d hiding His face," i.e. not being fully absolved for the sins, and therefore not being "helped and saved" (which I understand to refer to being ruled by others in a foreign land).

Although this would explain why the sinning is described in the past tense (as it has stopped), and why there is still "hester panim" (a hidden face), we are still left wondering why the second stage of "hester

panim" is worse. Why is the double-wording ("haster astir") used after the partial admission, indicating that things are worse, when they are really better?

The suffering experienced as a punishment for sins are meant specifically to get us to realize that we have sinned and spur us to change our ways. The common perception of this situation is one of "hester panim," where G-d hides His face from us (as it were), either because "seeing" our suffering would cause G-d to stop it from occurring (so He pretends not to see it), or because by looking the other way He allows bad things to happen to us. However, there is another possibility.

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. Can sending a message specifically for our benefit really be considered "hester panim?" We see that the Ramban considers not enjoying G-d's beneficence (not being "helped and saved") to be a form of "hester panim." This aspect of "hester panim" existed while the nation was sinning as well. However, that can be said to be the only aspect of "hester panim" being experienced then, as the suffering is not really G-d hiding from us, but tapping us on the shoulder and asking us to reconsider our actions. It is precisely after G-d has our attention, and we realized that G-d punished us for our sins, that the punishments were put on hold, as G-d then waits for us to complete (or, perhaps, actually begin) the teshuva process. At this point, we are no longer being tapped on the shoulder, and can be said to be experiencing a double-dose of "hester panim;" we aren't experiencing G-d's good and we aren't being sent messages anymore. Although it is true that it is better not to suffer, at the same time, until we complete our teshuva and experience a full redemption we are in a period of G-d hiding His face on two fronts. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah marks the climax of a seven week series of reflection on Jewish redemption. In this final presentation, Hashem announces His personal return to the Jewish people. Now that every other dimension of redemption is in place, the time has finally arrived for Hashem to rest His Divine Presence amongst His people. Eretz Yisroel has been revived, Yerushalayim has been rebuilt, the exiles have returned en masse, but the ultimate objective has yet to be seen. In response to this, the prophet Yeshaya quotes the Jewish people saying, "I will be gladdened by Hashem, My soul will rejoice over My G-d." (61,10) Chazal in Yalkut Shimoni (505) view the Jewish people's response to be specifically related to the return of Hashem to Yerushalayim. The Jewish people respond

to all the magnificent prophecies of their glorious future and proclaim that their true source of happiness is but one, the return of Hashem to His beloved people. They sorely long for the privilege of sensing the presence of Hashem amongst them and feeling the closeness and love He has for His people. They resolve that they will be gladdened and happy only through His return to them.

The prophet continues and describes the proportions of this return and the extent of Hashem's cherished relationship. "No longer will you be referred to as forsaken because about you it shall be proclaimed, 'My desire is in you'." (62, 4) Hashem pledges to fully identify with His people and to display His true desire in them. His relationship with them will be so encompassing and evident that a newly gained identity will be conveyed upon the Jewish people, "Hashem's desirable one". But a worry crosses the minds of the Jewish nation concerning the nature of their forthcoming relationship. After all, weren't they previously associated with Hashem in similar proportions before being rejected by Him? If so, they reason that although Hashem will truly return to them it will only feel to them like a remarriage. Their long awaited association will have a nostalgic air to it and won't bring them the true happiness they seek.

The prophet responds and reveals to them the indescribable proportions of their new relationship. Yeshaya says, "Hashem will rejoice over you like a groom over His bride." (62, 5) The Radak explains that Hashem's return to the Jewish people will possess all the freshness and novelty of a groom to his bride. Their relationship represents the epitome of happiness and appreciation as they begin forging their eternal bond with love and respect. In this same manner Hashem's newly founded relationship with His people will possess similar qualities. It will be so complete and perfect that it won't leave room for reflections upon their past. The happiness and fulfillment that they will experience will be so encompassing that it will feel like a fresh start, a relationship never experienced before. The Radak adds an indescribable dimension to this relationship and explains that this sense of newness will actually continue forever. Instead of becoming stale and stagnant their relationship with Hashem will always be one of growth and development and will constantly bring them to greater heights. Each newly gained level of closeness will be so precious and dear to them that it will be regarded as a completely new relationship replete with all of its sensation and appreciation.

But the most impressive factor of all is that the above description is not only our feelings towards Hashem but is, in truth, Hashem's feelings towards us. The prophet says that Hashem Himself will forever rejoice over us with the sensation of a groom over His newly acquired bride. From this we discover that Hashem's feelings towards His people are literally

boundless. Even after all the straying we have done, Hashem still desires to unite with us in the proportions described above. He desires to erase the past and establish a perfectly new relationship, so perfect and new that it will continuously produce the heightened emotions of a bride and groom for eternity.

These emotions are, in truth the hidden message behind the tefillin which we don each day. As we wrap the tefillin strap around our finger we recite special passages expressing our betrothal to Hashem. This experience represents our placing the wedding ring of Hashem on our finger, portraying our perfect relationship with Him. But our Chazal (see Brochos 6a) inform us that Hashem also wears tefillin. In proof of this, they cite a passage in this week's haftorah which states, "Hashem swears by His right hand and by the strength of His arm." (62, 8) Chazal explain that the words, "the strength of His arm" refer to the tefillin worn on the left arm. The Maharsha expounds upon this concept and explains that Hashem actually binds Himself to the Jewish people. Hashem's tefillin, like ours, represent devotion and commitment, His commitment to His beloved people. Hashem cherishes His relationship with us and as an expression of His commitment to us, He also wears a betrothal band. Eventually our boundless love for Hashem will find its expression together with Hashem's boundless love for us and together we will enjoy this indescribable relationship forever and forever. © 2007 Rabbi D. Siegel & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In the portion of Va-yelekh, Moshe (Moses) declares that G-d has not permitted him to enter the land of Israel. (Deuteronomy 31:2)

There are specific reasons which explain why Moshe was denied this right. The classical approach is that Moshe sinned when he hit rather than talked to the rock. (Numbers 20:7-13) The Midrash points out that Moshe may have been denied entry for killing the Egyptian who had attacked a Jewish slave. (Exodus 2:11-12) Moshe, according to the Midrash, could have used less force to stop the Egyptian. But is there a more general message that can be learned from the decision to ban Moshe from setting foot into the land he longs to see?

The classic work on Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, stresses the spiritual growth from Noah to Avraham (Abraham) to Moshe and beyond. (Vayerah 218-220) While Noah remained silent when told by G-d that the world would be destroyed, Avraham engaged G-d in debate when hearing that the city of Sodom would be devastated. Moshe takes it to another level. Not only does he intercede when G-d tells him that the Jews would be "consumed" for building the Golden Calf, but throws his personal lot in with his people: If

you do not forgive the people's sin, he says to G-d, "erase my name from the book You have written." (Exodus 32:32)

The message is clear. Avraham did what Noah could not do. Moshe reaches an even higher level than Avraham. But it can be suggested that even Moshe could not realize all of his dreams. He doesn't enter the land; this is left for his disciple Joshua and future generations.

"It is not for you to complete the task," says Rabbi Tarphon, "but neither are you free to refrain from it." (Ethics 2:21) We are all part of Jewish history, and the most crucial aspect of that history is that we are all part of a process.

Perhaps for this reason the Torah uses the expression, "and you will return until (ad) the Lord your G-d." (Deuteronomy 30:2) The word "ad" implies that as high as one reaches spiritually, as close as one comes to G-d, one never arrives, the goal is never completed, indeed, there are always more steps to be taken.

A delightful tale makes this very point. A rebbe once turned to his disciples and asked, "There is a ladder with 50 rungs. One Chassid is on the 25th rung, another on the 10th. Who is higher?" "Has our rebbe gone mad?" the students asked each other. "Of course, the one on the 25th." "No, my children," answered the rebbe. "It depends on which way you're going."

Just a few days before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur whose central theme is growth and transformation, this message deserves consideration. It teaches that the most important element of teshuvah (repentance) is moving in the right direction-reaching higher, higher and higher still. © 2007 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 BORUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

Sadly, Moshe prepares to leave the stage in this week's Parsha, Vayelech. He declares that he will not be leading the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, his lifetime wish and goal. He calls Yehoshua to take over for him after he is gone and he strengthens Yehoshua with inspiring words (Devarim 31:7-8).

There was no sense of bitterness displayed by Moshe, despite the fact that he must have been envious of Yehoshua's role. Had Moshe not sinned in Parshat Chukat with the rock, he, not Yehoshua, would be fulfilling his dream of entering Israel as leader of the Jewish people. In fact, Moshe gave his leadership to Yehoshua with a 'good eye,' with even more enthusiasm than he had been commanded to give (see Rashi Bamidbar 27:23).

Moshe teaches us much in the area of not engaging in damaging rivalries and competitions, as did

the 2002 Major League All-Star Game. Allow me to explain.

I never understood soccer (football, for you Europeans). How could you end a game in a tie? Isn't the whole point of sports to crush your opponent and win? How could the players and fans tolerate when their team tied? The game loses its meaning!

I was always very proud that baseball, the American national pastime, could never end in a tie. In fact, it's the only sport that could theoretically continue forever, extra inning after extra inning, with no time limit. Winning is all that counts, no matter how long it takes.

I was always proud of baseball-that is until the Summer of 2002. Dominating the Summer 2002 news headlines, as if it were as significant as the war on terrorism, was this anomaly: "Major League Baseball All-Star Game Ends Tied: NL 7, AL 7, 11 innings, Final"

"By the time the All-Star game ended, the sport had another record-but one it wants to forget. Fans booed and threw bottles when the game was declared a 7-7 tie after 11 innings Tuesday night because both teams ran out of pitchers."

"I want to take this opportunity to apologize to the fans," commissioner Bud Selig said. "This is a very regrettable situation."

"This is terrible," fan Tim Dugan of Chicago said. "We've been ripped off."

The sellout crowd of 41,871 at Miller Park loudly chanted "Let them play!" and "Refund!" A few fans in right field tossed bottles to protest the decision, which came after Selig conferred with both managers." (By Ben Walker, AP Baseball Writer, July 10, 2002)

How did the teams run out of pitchers?

The policy of the managers recently has been to make sure that every player (30 on each team) is used during the 9-inning contest. If a game is tied and extra innings are needed, the teams quickly run out of pitchers who cannot throw for too many innings. No one wants to risk injuries to the players or 'overwork' them especially in an All-Star game that doesn't count in the standings.

"They made the right decision. It's only a friendly game," Milwaukee shortstop Jose Hernandez said. "The fans weren't expecting that ending, but they've got to understand. I know they want to see a great game, but there were no more guys in the bullpen."

It's only a friendly game-wise words from Mr. Hernandez. But that's really the way every game or sport should be viewed.

When we truly think about it, competition is not so healthy for one's character. If I can only succeed by putting you down, doesn't that make me wish for you to fail, more than drive me to succeed?

I've often wondered about professional sports leagues. Every team begins the season thinking and

hoping that they will win the championship. Yet, everyone knows that only one team will be smiling at the end of the season. Every other team will basically look back at the season as having been a failure. Why? Because we have created a society which preaches that if you are not the best, then you are not worth much.

No one really believes the old sports saying, "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game."

The other oft-quoted saying is everyone's real philosophy, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

So, the All-Star game managers want to allow every player in the game. They don't necessarily play only the absolutely best players. What could be wrong with that? They should do this more often. It would certainly increase the quality of society's character.

We live in an environment that motivates through competition. Even our schools have student-comparison charts on the bulletin board and Bees to determine who knows the material best. The focus has shifted from 'who knows things well' to 'who knows things best.'

The Torah has a term for this that is not very complimentary, 'mitkabad bekalon chaveiro,' gaining respect through another's disgrace. Such conduct, done continuously throughout one's life, causes one to lose his share in the World to Come (Rambam, Laws of Repentance 3:14).

If all I have to do to be successful is to beat you, it's a whole lot easier to cause you to do worse than me, rather than to get myself to do better than you. The result: students will not push themselves to truly reach their personal maximum if all they have to do to flourish is defeat someone else.

And what happens to the weaker students who know that they cannot actually win the competition? What is their drive to do their best? Does it really make sense to reward the brightest students more for easily winning than the slower ones who are doing their best?

Watch kids when they play sports. Do they play for exercise and for the development of their skills, or do they play in order to win? Have you seen the way otherwise pure, good-natured kids, will transform into screaming tigers on the baseball field?

"He was safe!" "No way, he was out!" When the kids choose up sides, do they try to even out the teams so they will have a good competition, or do they seek to get the best players in order to win the contest? Are they not guilty of 'malbin pnai chavairo b'rabim'-humiliating their friend in public (which also makes one lose his share in the World to Come, Rambam, Laws of Repentance 3:14) when they avoid picking the 'loser' players? How does the last kid picked feel when nobody wants him?

Yes, we should be competitive, but only with ourselves. If I ran the mile in 8 minutes last week, let me try to run it in 7 minutes today. If I got a 90 on the last test, let me attempt to get a 95 this time. Winning does not have to mean defeating someone else. It can be accomplished by struggling against ourselves, trying to improve upon our personal past performance.

The All-Star game of baseball ended in a tie. But I'm still proud of baseball. The league took a break from the 'value' of competition because they wanted to let everyone get in the game and have a good, friendly time. In doing so, they reminded me that competition and winning are not what is important. Treating all people with respect should be the overriding value. Not succeeding at someone else's expense is what is significant.

Sometimes sports CAN teach you good character. © 2007 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

Several times in the book of Devarim, Moshe warns the nation of Yisrael about the future problems that they might have after they enter the holy land. In the examples before the Torah portion of Vayeilech, the Torah explicitly writes that the Almighty will bring the misfortunes on the nation. In Va'etchanan, it is written, "And G-d will disperse you among the nations" [Devarim 4:27]. In the second paragraph of the Shema, "And G-d will become angry with you and He will hold the heaven back to prevent the rain" [11:17]. This appears in even greater detail in the Tochacha, the rebuke of the nation, "G-d will send a curse among you... G-d will infect you with a plague... G-d will smite you with disease... G-d will strike you before your enemies..." [28:20-25] -- and more, throughout the chapter. The same appears in the portion of Nitzavim, "And G-d expelled them from their land, in anger and in a great fury..." [29:27].

But now, in the Torah portion of Vayeilech, the situation changes, and the predicted misfortunes of Bnei Yisrael come about in a different way. "And I will become angry with them on that day, and I will abandon them, and I will hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evil misfortunes will befall them on that day, and they will say: Have not all of these bad things happened to me because my G-d is not in my midst? And I will hide my face on that day, because of all the evil that they have done, for they turned towards other G-ds." [31:17-18]. This passage does not describe misfortunes that are brought about directly by the Almighty but rather a situation when the face of G-d is hidden, such that Yisrael is abandoned to its fate in the world. And the consequence is that they will encounter many problems and troubles. What is the meaning of this change?

At first glance, it might appear that hiding of the Divine face is not as serious as a direct punishment, since the Almighty at least does not cause direct harm to the nation. However, the opposite is true. In a case of direct punishment, the Almighty still maintains contact with the nation, and the situation can be compared to a case when a father punishes his child in order to bring him back to the proper path. A hidden Divine face, on the other hand, is an expression of a severed contact. It is almost as if the Almighty no longer cares what happens to the nation of Yisrael. But if this is so, why does this week's Torah portion describe such an extreme situation?

Evidently this is connected to the main theme of the chapter, the epic poem. The purpose of the poem is given explicitly: "And it will happen, when these many misfortunes happen to you, that this poem will make a declaration as a witness, for it will never be forgotten by their descendents" [31:21]. Even in the most difficult times, when it seems that all contact between the nation of Yisrael and the Almighty has been severed, the epic poem will serve as a witness that this is not true. Its main purpose is for the most extreme times, when the actions of the nation are so serious that they lead to the Divine face being hidden, and to what seems to be a complete break in the contact between the Almighty and His people. The objective of the poem is to emphasize that even if such a situation occurs it is only temporary. In the end, the link between the Almighty and the nation will never be completely broken, and the time will come when "G-d will judge His nation, and He will have mercy on His servants" [32:36].

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Sfas Emes

As we have come to expect, the Sfas Emes begins his ma'amar with a comment from his grandfather, the Chidushei HaRim. (Parenthetically, the Sfas Emes's attachment to the thoughts of his grandfather is noteworthy. Why so? Because the Sfas Emes's chidushim on Shas are often startlingly radical and innovative. But in hashkofo (metaphysics), he always goes back to his roots. This is an example of what people have in mind when they speak of the key role of the mesora (tradition) in Yiddishkeit.)

In Parshas Nitzavim, we are told (Devarim, 30:12): "Lo bashamayim hi..." ("The Torah is not high up in the heavens"), and therefore presumably inaccessible. Rather (Devarim, 30:14), "karov hadavar eilecha me'od" ("the Torah is easily within our grasp").

But the Sfas Emes (echoing the Chidushei HaRim) adds a powerful qualifying condition: This easy access to the Torah applies only to a person who is so attached emotionally to the Torah that if in fact, it was necessary to go up to the heavens to gain access to the Torah, he would indeed endeavor to do so!

A beautiful thought, you may say, but how does it apply to the "real world"? The Sfas Emes explains that, for a person who so yearns for the Torah that, if necessary, he would try to do the impossible, the Torah is in fact "very near." How so? Because access to the Torah depends on one's yegia (input of time, effort and strain). Hence, if a person truly longs for the Torah and makes the commensurate effort to attain it, the Torah will not be distant. And, as the person comes closer, he will perceive the Torah as having been easily accessible from the start.

Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. For a person who is unwilling to put in the yegia, the Torah will always seem-and be! -- distant and inaccessible.

Vayeilech 5639

The pasuk (Devarim, 31:21) tells us, "When all the bad things-the punishments that I have promised-befall them (the Jewish people), the Torah will be my witness, that it (my relationship with Klal Yisroel) will not be forgotten..."

The Torah had said earlier (Devarim, 31:18): "Ve'Anochi hasteir ahstir pahnai..." (ArtScroll: "But I will surely have concealed My face..."). The word "surely" in its rendering is ArtScroll's effort to translate the pasuk's doubling of the words that speak of HaShem's hiding Himself from us (i.e., "hasteir ahstir").

The Ba'al Shem Tov offered a different approach for understanding the doubling of the words that speak of HaShem's hiding Himself from us. Said the Ba'al Shem Tov: "I will hide from them the fact that I am hiding Myself from them..."). To understand what the Ba'al Shem Tov is teaching us, consider the following example: In the course of playing hide and seek with his children, the father hides himself. The children will not be afraid, for they know this is part of the game. But if the father hides from his children and they are not playing a game, and they therefore do not know that he is merely hiding- all that they know is that their father is no more... in such a case, the children will be terrified by their father's disappearance!

Sadly enough, this "hasteir asteir" (double hiding) is the punishment that HaShem said He would mete out, and that in fact He is in fact giving us now: Hiding the fact that we are facing a situation of hesteir pahnim (the hidden countenance of HaShem). And we are like the children who do not know that their father is merely hiding. All they know is that they can see no father.

At this point, the Sfas Emes quotes the Tzadik of Parshischa as saying that in a non-pshat sense the phrase (in pasuk 21) "... ki lo sishachach mipi zaro" (ArtScroll: "that it shall not be forgotten...") can be read as a mitzvas lo ta'aseh, a negative commandment. That is, the Torah is forbidding us from ever believing that HaShem has abandoned us. (Note: this is nearly the opposite of Rashi's comment on this pasuk.)]

Continues the Sfas Emes, how are we to avoid the perception that seems so self-evidently true-that (chas veshalom, Heaven forbid!) HaShem has abandoned us? Or, even worse, the perception that (chas veshalom!) there is no HaShem!

To this the Sfas Emes answers: This is in fact what pasuk 21 is telling us- that the Torah will safeguard us from transgressing on the (non-pshat) prohibition of "lo sishashach." For learning Torah can provide light to illuminate the darkness and enable us to see (real) reality. Thus, we can recognize episodes of our history for what they are: hesteir pahnim. © 2007 Dr. N.C. Leff & torah.org

RABBI ZVI MILLER

The Salant Foundation

On the day of his death, Moshe Rabenu performed an invaluable service for the People of Israel. He gathered the entire nation and said to them (Devarim 29:9), "And today all you stand in front of HaShem." That is, Moshe brought them into an eternal covenant with HaShem.

The nature of the covenant called for our holy nation to devote ourselves to serving HaShem, and in turn, HaShem would be a G-d to us, i.e., He would provide for all of our needs, protect us, grant us holiness and countless blessings, wisdom, and honor.

It is human nature to become introspective on the day of death. Yet, Moshe, altruistically, considered the welfare of his people. He brought them into a covenant with HaShem, insuring their eternal bond with Him.

There is no greater indication of person's essence than his conduct on the day of his death. For instance, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter spent the final moments of his life assuring his attendant that there is nothing to fear about being alone in a room with a corpse. His care for others superseded his own personal concerns.

Moshe's actions on his final day on earth revealed that his love of his people was supreme. His shining example illuminates man's ability to rise above the steepest challenge. His commitment to his people powered his dignified and noble conduct.

Instead of concentrating on his personal affairs, he focused his efforts on a greater cause, i.e., forging an everlasting bond between HaShem and his people.

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