

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the shortest and smallest prashiyot of the Torah is this week's parsha of Nitzavim. Nevertheless the parsha is one of the most important in terms of eternal messages to the people of Israel.

In it is the final oration and words of Moshe to his people after more than forty years of leadership. These words are not only meant to be heard by the actual listeners at that time but by all later generations of Jews as well.

Moshe reminds all that there is an eternal covenant between G-d and Israel. The Lord will not allow the Jewish people to wriggle out of that commitment. Many strange things will happen to the people of Israel over its many centuries of existence. There will be events that are beyond human understanding or comprehension.

G-d's mind and actions, so to speak, remain inscrutable and beyond our judgment, let alone our rationalism. Moshe warns us that "the hidden things are the matter of the Lord but what is clear and revealed to us is that we are to remain faithful to this covenant [of Sinai and of Moshe.]"

No matter how the Jewish people twist and turn to avoid their end of the covenant, they are always ensnared by its consequences and results. Moshe warns them that eventually the price for their abandonment of the covenant would be exacted from the Jewish people.

He cautions them not to be too clever regarding the matter. Times change, technology improves and there are new discoveries in G-d's world but the covenant of G-d with Israel remains as it was.

Understanding and accepting this truth is the only way to deal with Jewish history and with all of the issues of Jewish life - past, present and future.

The word "nitzavim" itself is important in conveying the above message to us in clarity and perspective. The word means not only present and accounted for but it also means erect and formidable.

Moshe fears that the Jewish people will somehow feel unworthy and not strong enough for the rigors of the covenant. He reminds them of their true strength and capabilities. Moshe knows that a lack of

self-confidence will automatically defeat the intent and goal of the covenant.

If someone says that: "I cannot do it," then that certainly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Moshe reminds the Jewish people that they are "nitzavim" - strong, capable, resilient and can stand up to all crises and problems. Moshe appeals to their self-image and inner strength.

This attitude is certainly necessary and correct in this period of time before the High Holy days. One cannot appeal to G-d so to speak on the basis of personal incompetence and weakness of will and vision. It is like requesting further cash flow from lenders into an obviously failing venture.

When we pass before our Creator, with the Days of Judgment just ahead, we should do so with bent backs and strong hearts. We can and should say "Continue to invest in me and my family and generations. We will not desert the covenant nor shall we fail You." © 2008 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion Nitzavim is replete with urgings to return to G-d. A term which jumps from the text, is one describing G-d's hope that we, the Jewish people, would hearken to His voice "li-shmoah be-kolo." (Deuteronomy 30:20) The word kol, voice, resonates with deep meaning.

The key to understanding a Biblical word is to assess its meaning the first time it appears in the Torah. Kol first presents itself in the Garden of Eden's story, where the Torah states that Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord. (Genesis 3:8) Kol is, therefore, not a surface voice, rather it is the voice of G-d. An important reminder to all of us that even as we busily prepare ourselves for the observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that we not forget that the ultimate goal of these days - is to reconnect with G-d, to feel His presence, to hear His voice.

Kol also prominently appears in the Revelation story. Once again, the Torah states that the Jews heard the voice of G-d. (Exodus 19:19) This time, however, the voice of G-d was a call to commit to Torah practice

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as revealed at Sinai. Kol here speaks to the voice of G-d as expressed through observing G-d's laws, an idea worth remembering on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur.

And, of course, kol is found again in the prophetic descriptions of the Messianic era. (Isaiah 40:3) In the liturgy we echo this prophecy with the words, kol me-vaser, the voice that announces the coming of the Messiah. Thus, kol, especially during this time of year, speaks to the challenge of not only hearing the voice of G-d and His commandments, but of harnessing the energy of these messages into repairing the world-the Messianic period - the time when G-d's voice will be heard by all.

These three different messages of kol are echoed in the mitzvah of shofar. Shofar is the call that reenacts the moment of creation. Shofar is the call that brings us back to Sinai when the Torah was given. And shofar is the call that will ring out when the Messiah comes.

It ought be noted that the blessing preceding the shofar ritual does not state "to blow the shofar (li-tkoah)" it rather reads, "to listen (li-shmoah)" to the shofar. Yet, it goes one step further. The blessing teaches us to go beyond, to listen to the inner voice of G-d, His law and the yearning for redemption. It does this by declaring that we "listen to the voice, the kol, of the shofar." If only. © 2008 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd, in order for bad things to happen to him (the sinner), G-d will separate him from all the Tribes of Israel" (Devarim 29:20). Two questions present themselves from this verse; (1) why must he be "separated" for bad things to happen, a term not normally used as a prelude for punishing someone, and (2) what does it mean that he must be separated "from all the Tribes of Israel" as opposed to being punished in his own right, regardless of what happens to everyone else.

As the Ramban and Ibn Ezra point out, the context indicates that three separate "sinners" are the

subject of these verses; individuals ("a man or a woman"), an entire "family," and a complete "Tribe" (29:17). G-d's anger will rage against "that [individual] man" (29:19), and He will wipe out such a family, thereby "erasing his (the initial sinner of the sinning family) name" (ibid). Since G-d promised that He would not completely destroy any of the 12 Tribes (see Netziv on 29:20), an entire Tribe that sins will "only" be singled out ("separated") for severe punishment, while the other Tribes, who did not sin, will be left unscathed.

The Or Hachayim suggests another (not mutually exclusive) way of understanding the verse, as all of our souls are connected, necessitating the soul of the sinner to be (on some level) "separated" from everybody else in order to punish it without adversely affecting everybody else.

Yet another, albeit similar, approach is put forth by the Abarbanel. The sinner was counting on his being part of the nation as a whole, being "lost in the crowd" of G-d fearing Jews. Since G-d will bless the nation, and he is part of that nation, he thought he would benefit from that blessing despite his idolatrous ways. G-d will therefore "separate" him from "all the other Tribes," and while they will indeed receive His blessing, the sinner will be severely punished. As the Succas Dovid indicates, the "covenant" (29:11) the nation is now entering includes "arvus," with every member of the nation responsible for and connected to every other member of the nation (see Rashi on 29:28). This sinner thought his being "connected" to everybody else would protect him from being punished for his sins, but instead G-d "separates" him from everyone else, whereby they no longer shield him, and he gets what he deserves.

That's all well and good as far as explaining the meaning of the verses. However, it still seems odd that every Jew being connected to, and responsible for, every other Jew will cause individuals that didn't sin themselves to be punished for the sins of others, while the good deeds of others don't protect the sinner. Isn't G-d's attribute of being "good" many times greater than His attribute of (doing things that seem) "bad" (see Rashi on Shemos 34:7)? Why isn't the sinner correct that being part of the nation will protect him? Why does being part of the nation only cause others in the nation to share in the punishment? Shouldn't it be a two-way street, or, if it is (predominantly) one way, shouldn't G-d's benevolence cause it to be more of a protection than a cause for blame?

Before trying to address the basic issue, it should be pointed out that it is not really a one-way street, as being part of a "tzibur" (group or community) enables each member of the tzibur to be judged with "midas harachamim" (G-d's attribute of mercy) rather than by "midas hadin" (strict justice). Individuals who are not part of the greater whole are judged "al pi din," which is why it is important to be part of a "tzibur,"

especially around the High Holidays, which are "Days of Judgment" (see Michtav Me'Eliyahu vol. I, pg. 124). Nevertheless, I thought it would be helpful to try to pinpoint why "arvus" means sharing the blame and being punished for it rather than sharing the credit and being protected because of it.

For one thing, good deeds and bad deeds aren't a trade-off. We get punished for every bad deed and rewarded for every good deed; they don't cancel each other out (although they are weighed against each other to determine status, i.e. whether as a whole the "unit," whether an individual or a group, is considered "righteous" or "wicked," see Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 3:1). Therefore, each member of the group does, to an extent, share the blame for any sins committed by anyone in the group as well as the credit for any good deeds done by any member. Getting (partial) credit for the good deeds of others won't negate the bad deeds done (although it might allow the sinner who is part of the group to be judged on a more favorable basis, i.e. with "rachamim" rather than "din"). We do all impact each other, so share in both the good and the bad, without one canceling out the other. The question then becomes why the sinner in our verse is "separated" for bad rather than being punished along with everyone else. It is likely that the rest of the group is held partly to blame for his sins, just not to the extent that the sinner himself is. The point of the verse is precisely that-he will be punished to a much larger extent than they will be. It is also true that just as anyone in the group that could have, in some way (directly or indirectly), prevented the individual from sinning-and didn't- shares in the punishment, all who have positively contributed to another's good deeds will be rewarded. The issue at hand is why the individual sinner isn't protected from the bad, singled out instead for punishment, if he is part of the group that is punished for the bad deeds of another individual. Why does one bad apple spoil the entire bushel rather than all the good apples in the bushel compensating for the one bad apple?

The term "arvus" has two connotations, things "mixed" together (such as day and night "mixing" at dusk, when it becomes "erev") and guaranteeing something (such as when an "areiv" guarantees a potential lender that the one who wants to borrow money will pay it back, backing it up with a commitment to cover the loan if he doesn't). Both apply to the expression "kol Yisroel areivem zeh luzeh," as all of Israel are guarantors for each other and we are all connected to each other, being part of the greater whole. Nevertheless, the aspect of being responsible for each other is what is under discussion here, as it is not the direct damage done to the rest of the "body" by one part of it sinning that we are dealing with, but to what extent one member of the nation is given credit for others doing good and blamed for the others doing

something wrong. At the covenant between G-d and the nation when "arvus" took effect, in order for us to be G-d's treasured nation we had to promise to do whatever we can to ensure that the nation as a whole, and each member in it, kept the Torah. If someone strays, aside from that individual suffering the consequences, all those that could have somehow helped prevent the straying are also held accountable. However, unless the sinner had in some way positively affected those that keep G-d's commandments, there would be no reason for him to share in their reward. Therefore, even if G-d bestows goodness on the "tzibur," this sinner will be separated from them in a way that he will not be able to benefit from it.

From another perspective, the members of the community of G-d fearers are still part of the group (by following His commandments), and therefore still responsible for others as well. On the other hand, the sinner (especially an idol worshipper) has separated himself from the group, and cannot benefit from those things that come as a result of being part of the group. They are therefore punished when another member of the group falters, while he cannot be protected by their good deeds. The bottom line is that it is of vital importance to be part of the larger community, even though it comes with a large amount of responsibility. And those who choose to separate themselves from the community cannot expect to share in the benefits that come with being part of it. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Are we Jews superstitious, lured by magic spells and incantations, prone to evoking the power of the symbolic word? Nonsense, one would answer. Superstition goes against the very essence of our religion. And yet there are those who might point an accusing finger to the pageantry involved on the night of Rosh Hashana: the meal begins in a sea of colorful fruits and vegetables that delight the taste buds, but in reality we are eating special foods whose names, taste and/or texture conjure positive prayers for a good year. The most popular is the apple dipped in honey, which occasions our wish for a good and sweet New Year; pomegranates, when we pray for a year of merits as numerous as the pomegranates seeds; etc. And there are even some more modern, even humorous, examples, like dates for the unmarried around the tables, and a mixture of raisins and celery for a "raise in da selery." All of this leads our great sages to declare "that on Rosh HaShanah, symbols take on a practical reality," "simana milta hee." Certainly this sounds a bit superstitious.

The Talmud (B.T. Kritut 5b) gives three examples which only seem to aggravate the superstitious element: (1) "Rav Ami says, one who wishes to know whether he will live out the year ought

bring a candle into a house which is completely sealed off from any wind, and light that candle between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. If the light doesn't go out, we will know that he will live out the year."

(2) "And one who wishes to know if the business venture he wishes to get involved in will succeed or not, let him raise a hen. If she grows big and fat, we know that his venture will succeed."

(3) "And for one about to go on a journey who wishes to know if he will come back safely, let him enter a darkened house and remain there. If he sees that his shadow has a shadow, we know that he shall return home safely. But if he doesn't see the shadow, it's no proof that he won't return home safely; perhaps his disappointment and fear in not seeing a shadow of the shadow was responsible for a depression which led to his bad luck."

Now if you think therefore that Rosh Hashanah is a legitimate time to allow superstitions to run rampant on the basis of the texts I have just cited, please remember that Rosh HaShanah is also the first day of the Ten Days of Repentance, when every Jew must attempt to be a religiously punctilious as possible. And superstition is halakhically forbidden! Maimonides rules, in his Laws of Idolatry 12,4 (taken from B.T. Sanhedrin 65,66).

"It is forbidden to engage in sooth-saying as do the idolaters, as the Bible commands, 'Do not be involved in sooth-saying.' How so? If someone says, since the bread has fallen from my mouth or the walking stick has fallen from my hands, I shall not go to the place I had intended to get to today, because if I did, my business would fall away from me as well... And similarly (it is forbidden for) someone to make "signs" (simanim) for himself, that if such and such happens to him, he will do this and that..."

Along these lines, there is even a difference of opinion as to whether or not Abraham's servant Eliezer acted correctly when he established a "sign" for the choosing of a proper wife for Isaac: "the woman who offers me and my camels to drink the water from the well will be a suitable wife for Isaac." Maimonides is actually critical of such a sign, but the Raavad (ad loc) is vehement that Eliezer committed no transgression, and the Kesef Mishneh (ad loc), Rav Yosef Karo, who declares that a righteous individual like Eliezer could not possibly have sinned in such a crucial decision like choosing a wife for our second patriarch, explains the difference: The Bible forbids soothsaying, or "signs," when the sign of a fallen piece of bread is not logically connected to the success of a business venture in a certain place; in the case of Eliezer, however, he understood that the most important quality for the wife of Isaac son of Abraham was kind generosity, not only to a human stranger but even to an animal! Hence his action was not a superstitious "sign"; it was rather an intelligent test.

With this distinction in mind, we can understand the message of the Rosh Hashanah signs. Our Sages are teaching us the "power of positive thinking," the importance of believing in oneself and in one's message in an optimistic way. If one lights a candle in a room hermetically sealed off from any wind, the candle will not go out! And what the Sages want is that everyone believes at the onset of the year that he/she will live to see the year's end. If you believe it, chances are you will.

And if one brings up and nurtures a hen with proper care and plentiful food, of course the hen will grow to be big and fat; and if you tend to your business venture with the same care and sensitivity, chances are that you will succeed in the business venture as well.

The third example quoted in the Talmudic selection we just discussed is strong evidence that my interpretation is accurate. In the example of the shadow it is certainly logical that - in a darkened house - the individual will see a shadow to his shadow as night is falling. And the Talmud even adds that even if he doesn't, it is no proof of the failure of his business venture. Even if he should fail, then it was the result of his own fear and frustration in not seeing his shadow's shadow, the fear and frustration which came psychologically because he believed he would fail. It is that lack of self-confidence that we call bad luck!

This is the strength and force behind the "signs" on the evening of Rosh HaShanah. If we but believe in ourselves and our mission, if we feel that G-d is on our side and we shall overcome, we will overcome; we will gain many more merits - as numerous as pomegranate seeds - and will vanquish our enemies. If you believe that you're a prince, you'll grow up to be a king!

Shabbat Shalom, and have a good and successful New Year! © 2008 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BORUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

Joey was having a rough time. His fourteen-year-old mind was beginning to challenge much of what he had always taken for granted. He didn't understand why his parents had never let him eat a cheeseburger at McDonald's when all of his buddies from Rockdale Public High school went there after school all the time. He just wanted to be with the rest of his friends.

"Mom, why can't you just let me go get a Big Mac with all the guys," Joey demanded.

"Listen, Joey, I'm no expert or scholar, but it has something to do with when we were all at Mount Sinai, heard G-d speak to us, and accepted His Torah and Laws," Joey's Mom said.

"Come on, Mom! You weren't there. I wasn't there. That's just an incredibly lame reason, if you ask me!" Joey declared.

What does that famous Midrash about all of us being at Sinai and accepting the Torah really mean? The Midrash appears in this week's portion and offers us an opportunity to delve into the matter.

The theme of Parshat Nitzavim is the special covenant G-d made with the Jewish people. "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers... for you to enter into a covenant with Hashem, your G-d... in order to establish you today as a people to Him and He will be a Lord to you... and He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. NOT WITH YOU ALONE do I forge this covenant and oath but with whoever is here, standing with us today, before Hashem, your G-d, AND WITH WHOEVER IS NOT HERE WITH US TODAY." (Excerpts from Devarim 29:9-14)

Rashi comments: " 'Whoever is not here' means also to include the generations that will exist in the future." Rashi's comments are based on Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3: "The souls of all Jews were present at the making of the covenant even before their physical bodies were created. This is why the verse says 'with us today' and not 'standing' with us today."

Even if we accept that all of our souls were brought to Sinai and that in some way our souls accepted G-d's Torah as binding upon us, how could that acceptance and oath be valid? We certainly have no recollection of ever being present at Sinai and making an oath. Besides, an oath must be accepted by both a body and a soul together in order to be valid.

This is made clear in the Talmud Sanhedrin 91b. There it states that the relationship of body and soul can be compared to a relationship between a blind man and a lame man who are partners in crime. An orchard owner hired them to watch his orchard but forbade them from eating any fruit. Shortly thereafter, the watchmen couldn't resist. The blind man put the lame man on his shoulders and together they were able to take some fruit. The owner returned furious that they had taken his fruit.

The blind man said, "It couldn't have been me. I can't see!"

The lame man said, "It couldn't have been me. I can't walk!"

Whereupon the smart orchard owner placed the lame man on the blind man's shoulders and punished them together.

A soul cannot sin alone. A body cannot be kind alone. Reward and punishment can only apply to an entity that is the entire person, the body and soul together. Only the body and soul together has free will and is an image of G-d. And therefore, only a body and a soul together can accept oaths, especially as grandiose as the entire Torah.

So, how are we to understand the Midrash and the Rashi who claim that all of the generations were at

Sinai and accepted the Torah? Here we become aware of a fundamental concept of Jewish living. The Midrash does not mean that we are bound to the Torah because we personally made an oath to G-d at Sinai. While it may be true that our souls were there in some mystical way, our souls could not have accepted anything that would be binding. Rather, the Midrash means that our generation was at Sinai by dint of the entire original generation of Jews being at Sinai and accepting the Torah. The Jewish nation is one continuous entity that exists throughout history. Each generation may be comprised of new individual people but the continuous entity remains.

If you were to scientifically break down any living organism into individual cells, you would discover that after a period of years, there is not one cell left with which the organism was born. Yet, do we look at an older cow, with its brand new and different group of cells from when it was a calf, as a different cow than it was many years ago? Of course not. It is the same cow even though its cells have been regenerated.

The same is true of the Jewish nation. Individual generations of Jews die, just as cells of an organism do, but they are replaced with new generations. The Jewish nation, like the organism, remains intact. The Jewish nation of today's times is the same nation that existed at Sinai. Therefore, it is as if our generation was present at Sinai as well. The question of our personal acceptance of G-d's laws is only a question if we view ourselves as individuals. But we are not individuals. Each of us is a cell in the grand organism that is the Jewish people.

We must not relate to G-d as individuals. Rather, we come to G-d as part of Klal Yisrael, the Jewish nation. Rambam writes: (Laws of Repentance 3:11) "Whoever separates himself from the community, even though he does not commit transgressions, but merely divides himself from the congregation of Israel, does not perform the commandments with them, doesn't feel their pain, doesn't fast when they face tragedies, but lives his life in his own individual way as if he were not part of the nation, loses his portion in the World to Come."

Living our individual lives while always having the nation in mind is not a simple task, but it is the very lifeblood of being a Jew. There is no such thing as observing the Torah's laws while ignoring the predicaments and concerns of the nation. This is also why we should see any personal tragedy as part of the national tragedies of the Jewish people. As a result, mourners are always comforted with the statement, "May G-d comfort you AMONG THE OTHER MOURNERS OF (THE DESTRUCTION OF) ZION AND JERUSALEM."

Many rabbis have pointed out throughout the present crisis in Israel, it is a Mitzvah to read about the tragedies and even to concentrate upon the names and

details of the victims' lives. If my nation is suffering, so must I. I should not be able to rest and relax until everyone in my nation is able to do so.

The same is true regarding the joyous times and celebrations of the Jewish nation. I must be involved in the glee and express my happiness and gratitude that my nation is experiencing during joyful times.

May G-d enable us only to share in national joy, and not have to feel national grief and suffering.
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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

The portion of Nitzavim begins with a sharp rebuke of the nation, but the structure of the passage is difficult to understand. First Moshe warns Bnei Yisrael about the sins of a tiny minority within the nation: "Perhaps you have among you a man, a woman, a family, or a tribe whose heart turns away from your G-d, in order to worship the G-ds of those nations. Perhaps you have among you a root that will grow into poison and wormwood." [Devarim 29:17]. The punishment for such a minority will be to separate them completely from the rest of the nation. "And all the curses written in this book will happen to him, and G-d will erase his name from under the heavens. And G-d will specifically do him evil, from among all the tribes of Yisrael, like all the curses of the covenant written in this Torah scroll." [29:19-20].

However, after this Moshe immediately moves to another description which implies that the entire nation of Yisrael will sin. The nation is therefore given a dual punishment. On one hand, the passage refers to the land of Yisrael: "And the last generation will say- your sons who rise up after you and the stranger who comes from a distant land- after they see the plagues of that land and its sickness which G-d has inflicted there: Sulfur and salt have burned the earth, nothing can be planted or can grow, and no vegetation will rise up from it, like the destruction of Sedom and Amorah..." [29:21-22]. On the other hand, the people themselves are also punished: "And G-d threw them off their land, in anger, indignation, and with great fury, and He sent them to another land, as on this day." [29:27]. How can the two sections of this chapter be reconciled? Why does Moshe begin with a small minority of the people and then without taking note of the change move over to a description of the sins of the nation as a whole?

Evidently the answer to this question lies in the key phrase, "Perhaps you have among you a root that will grow into poison and wormwood." Moshe wants to indicate that if a small negative minority which appears will be ignored by the rest of the nation, the evil people will indeed be punished by G-d, but the nation as a whole bears the responsibility for what happened. In

the end, this small minority has the power to influence the entire nation, leading to destruction of the land and to exile. For this reason, Moshe skips over the intermediate stages and moves on from the individual sins to those of the nation as a whole. In this way he expresses the main concept, and how the consequences follow from the initial evil, even if the process can take a very long time.

Based on this analysis, we can better understand the verse which ends this chapter and Moshe's sermon as a whole: "The secret aspects belong to G-d, and the revealed elements belong to us and our children forever, to perform all the commands of this Torah." [29:28]. The purpose of this verse is to emphasize that the nation is not responsible for what happens in secret, but on the other hand they have a duty to take care of whatever evil is in the open and revealed, order that they will be able to prevent the spread of a negative influence. "I will not punish you for secrets, since they are in the hands of your G-d, who will punish the individuals. But we and our children are responsible for eradicating the revealed evil from our midst. And if we do not judge these people the entire nation will be punished." [Rashi].

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The sedra of Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, when our thoughts are directed toward teshuvah-the great mitzvah of the ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and culminate on Yom Kippur. Where, though, in the Torah itself do we find the mitzvah of teshuvah? On this, two of the greatest sages of the Middle Ages, Maimonides and Nachmanides, differed fundamentally.

Here is Maimonides' account:

"With regard to all the precepts of the Torah, positive and negative, if person transgressed any one of them, either wilfully or in error, and repents and turns away from his sin, he is under a duty to confess before G-d, blessed be he, as it is said, 'When a man or a woman shall commit any sin that men commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty, then they shall confess their sin which they have done' (Numbers 5: 6-7). This means confess in words, and this confession is a positive command. How does one confess? The penitent says, 'I beseech you, O Lord, I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed before you and have done such and such, and I repent and am ashamed of my deeds, and I will never do this again.' This constitutes the essence of confession. The fuller and more detailed the confession one makes, the more praiseworthy he is."

According to Maimonides, teshuvah has its origin in the Temple and its sacrifices, specifically those brought for transgressions (sin offering, guilt-offering etc.). Part of the rite for such offerings was a verbal

confession-vidui-on the part of the wrongdoer. The conditions for the sincerity of such confessions were an acknowledgement that one did wrong; remorse or shame; and a determination not to repeat the offence in future. These are the fundamental elements of teshuvah.

There are obvious questions. If teshuvah is linked to the sacrificial order, what happened to it once the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end? What of teshuvah outside Israel and outside the confines of the Temple? Maimonides answers these questions in his Sefer Hamitzvot (positive command 73) by reference to the Mekhilta. The Mekhilta uses various textual warrants to show that confession is in fact a separate command in its own right, and applies with or without a sacrifice, in and outside the land of Israel. Verbal confession, vidui, is the outer act, teshuvah its internal correlate.

Nachmanides locates teshuvah in a completely different source, namely in today's sedra. Moses, having set out the terms of the covenant and its attendant blessings and curses, then says this:

"When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your G-d disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your G-d and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your G-d will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your G-d will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers... You will again obey the Lord and follow all His commands I am giving you today. Then the Lord your G-d will make will you prosperous in all work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and crops of your land. The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as He delighted in your fathers, if you obey the Lord your G-d and keep His commands and decrees that are written in this book of the law and turn to the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul."

The next verse continues, "For this command which I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." Which command? Nachmanides says: the command of teshuvah. Why so?

The most striking feature of passage above is that it is a set of variations on the Hebrew verb lashuv, the root of the noun teshuvah. This is almost entirely lost in English translation. All the underlined phrases-"take to heart", "restore your fortunes", "again" and

"turn"-are, in the Hebrew text, forms of this verb. The Torah often repeats a word several times to emphasise its significance as a key-word: sometimes three or five times, but usually seven, as in the present instance (taking "restore your fortunes," ve-shav et shevutekha, as one composite phrase). Thus Nachmanides is quite right to see the subject of the passage as teshuvah. What, though, is teshuvah in this context?

In the Torah sin is something more than a transaction in the soul, or even an act of wrongdoing narrowly conceived. It is an act in the wrong place. It disturbs the moral order of the world. The words for sinchet and averah- both have this significance. Chet comes from the same verb as "to miss a target." Averah, like the English word "transgression," means "to cross a boundary, to enter forbidden territory, to be in a place one should not be." Only when we understand this does it become clear why the deepest punishment for sin in the Torah is exile. Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden. Cain was condemned to be an eternal wanderer. We say in our prayers, "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land." Because a sin is an act in the wrong place, its consequence is that the one who performs it finds himself in the wrong place-in exile, meaning, not at home. Sin alienates; it distances us from G-d, and the result is that we are distanced from where we ought to be, where we belong. We become aliens, strangers.

Hence the double meaning of teshuvah, most clearly expressed in our sedra, but found throughout the entire prophetic literature. It has both a physical and spiritual dimension, and the two are inseparable as if bonded by superglue: it means the physical return to the land and the spiritual return to G-d. Teshuvah is a double homecoming.

We can now see how deeply different are the approaches of Maimonides and Nachmanides. For Maimonides sin-and-repentance are part of the world of the priest (torat cohanim). They belong initially to the Temple and its service. When an individual or group sinned in biblical times, they brought a sacrifice and, as a token of their contrition, confessed their wrong. The supreme example of this was the service of the High Priest on Yom Kippur, when he made atonement "for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel" (Lev. 16).

For Nachmanides, sin-and-repentance are part of the broader sweep of Jewish history. They belong to the world, not of the priest but of the prophet (torat nevi'im), the figure who heard the voice of G-d in history, warned the people that public wrongdoing would lead to defeat and exile and who, when the exile eventually occurred, summoned the people back to their vocation as a prelude to their return to the land. Every individual act of teshuvah recapitulates, in some way, this larger pattern of return. Teshuvah in this sense is less atonement than homecoming-a subtle

difference, but a difference none the less. It has nothing to do with the Temple and everything to do with a sense of the divine call ("Where are you?") within the events that happen to us, whether individually as personal fate or collectively as Jewish history.

The primary feeling of sin in priestly consciousness is guilt; in prophetic consciousness it is a sense of alienation ("alienation" became a key word in both Marxism and existentialism: for the former as a symptom of the capitalist system in the industrial age, for the latter as the mark of "inauthentic" existence; Judaism, more ethically, links it with bad conscience, the knowledge that we have not acted as we should). For the priest, teshuvah is integrally linked with the idea of sacrifice and leads to atonement (kapparah). For the prophet, it is associated with behavioural change (teshuvah as "returning" to the right way) and leads to healing, mercy, forgiveness and restoration. For the priest, atonement relates primarily to individuals, whereas for the prophet (as in the words of Moses above) the reference is often to the people as a whole. It is individuals who sin and repent; it is the nation that undergoes exile and return.

How does Maimonides interpret the passage in this week's sedra that Nachmanides takes as the source for the mitzvah of teshuvah? He reads it, simply, not as a command but as a prophecy and promise:

"All the prophets charged the people concerning teshuvah. Only through teshuvah will Israel be redeemed, and the Torah has already given the assurance that Israel will, at the end of its exile, finally repent and then be immediately redeemed, as it is said, 'When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your G-d disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your G-d and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your G-d will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you...'"

This difference of interpretation goes back to the Geonic period, three centuries earlier, when R. Hefetz read the passage as did Nachmanides, and R. Shmuel Gaon like Maimonides (Otzar haGeonim, Sanhedrin, 514).

There is no doubt whatsoever that Maimonides and Nachmanides were both right. Priest and prophet were not in conflict: they were two voices in a single conversation, two perspectives on a complex reality. When the Second Temple was destroyed and both the priesthood and prophecy came to an end as functioning institutions, both traditions merged into the institution of teshuvah as we have it today.

On the one hand Yom Kippur retains strong links with the service of the High Priest in Temple times. We read the details of that service during Musaf;

we perform vidui, confession, in various ways; we make a point of giving tzedakah (financial sacrifice substituting for animal sacrifice). On the other, during the morning we read one of the greatest of all prophetic calls to repentance (Isaiah 57-58), with its insistence that fasting is nothing- a mere ritual-without ethical conduct:

"Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: / To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, / To set the oppressed free and break every yoke? / Is it not to share your food with the hungry / and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?"

We read another great example of a prophetic call to teshuvah, that of Jonah, just before Neilah. Neilah itself ends with the words, repeated seven times, "The Lord He is G-d"-the climax of one of the great prophetic confrontations, between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, when the people publicly abandoned idolatry and proclaimed the kingship of G-d. It is wondrous how these two strands, priestly and prophetic, have been woven together so seamlessly in our liturgy.

So teshuvah is two things: a religious-metaphysical experience of sin and atonement (Maimonides), and an ethical-historical drama of exile and return (Nachmanides). For nearly two thousand years, the former predominated while the latter was no more than a distant memory and a pious hope. The Temple was gone, and so too were the prophets. But whereas there was a substitute for the Temple (the synagogue as mikdash me'at, "a temple-in-microcosm") there was no real substitute for Israel as a nation-among-nations in the arena of history.

In the course of the twentieth century, that changed. Jews returned. The state of Israel was reborn. The promise of the prophets, millennia ago, came true. Yet the word teshuvah-in the sense meant by Moses in this week's sedra, and by Nachmanides in his construal of the command-has not yet been fully realised. There has been a physical homecoming to the land, but not yet a spiritual homecoming to the faith. Among a section of the population, yes; among the people as a whole, no. That challenge rests with us, our contemporaries and our children. The words of the prophets, never less than inspiring, have acquired a new salience. How it will happen, we do not know, but that it will happen, we do know, for we have G-d's promise: that the faith of Israel will be reborn just as its land and state have been. May we live to see it, and work to be part of it. © 2007 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

