

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI ARI KAHN

MiOray HaAish

Parshat V'Etchanan contains some of the most important teachings of Judaism. Here we find the Ten Commandments taught for the second time. Here we find the Sh'ma, "Hear O Israel," the quintessential declaration of monotheism. These ideas, together with lengthy instructions from Moses, make for a Torah portion which stands out as for its concentration of spiritual teachings and content. It begins with Moses recounting for the people the dialogue which he had with G-d: 'And I pleaded with G-d at that time saying, "...Please allow me to go over and see the good land which is beyond the Jordan, the goodly mountain region, the Lebanon..." (Deut. 3:23-25)

Moses had asked G-d to rescind the decree and to allow him to cross the River Jordan with the people. G-d rejects this request, as Moses relates: 'But G-d was angry with me for your sakes, and would not hear me, and G-d said to me, "Enough for you! Speak no more to me on this matter."' (Deut. 3:26)

Moses was told that he should not even attempt to continue his prayers, for the matter was sealed. Rather, Moses should take solace in G-d's offer for him to see the land from afar: 'Go on top of the peak and lift up your eyes, westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold with your eyes, for you will not cross this Jordan.' (Deut. 3:27)

Moses had his prayer rejected. And it was not one prayer, but many. The Sages teach that Moses had offered 515 different prayers, but one and all were rejected.

This concept of Moses having his prayers rejected is not an easy one for us to understand. How can it be that Moses, the father of all prophets, could not get his prayers answered? Furthermore, if Moses cannot be allowed to repent and have his decree altered, then what does the future bode for those who have not reached, nor can they even imagine, his level.

There are various approaches to this issue in Talmudic, and Midrashic literature. The Talmud understands that Moses' prayers did have an effect: Rabbi Eliezer taught: "Prayer is greater than good deeds, for there was never a man who had better deeds than Moses our Master, nonetheless, Moses was only answered as a result of his prayer, for it says,

'Enough for you! Speak no more to me on this matter' and right afterward it says 'Go on top of the peak...' (Talmud Brachot 32b)

The Talmud clearly understands that Moses' prayer were effective, albeit not as effective as Moses would have desired. The implication is clear, had Moses not prayed then he would not have climbed the peak and seen the land. Moses did have his prayers answered, but it was not exactly the answer which Moses had sought. But why could Moses not achieve complete rehabilitation for his mistakes?

Another approach is that prayers can only be effective until the final judgment has been decreed; at that point prayers cannot cancel the decree. This is based on a passage of the Talmud (Rosh Hashana 18a) which explains why at times prayers "work," and why at times they do not seem to. The Sefer Chasidim (section 612, citing Rav Saadya Gaon) explains that Moses' prayers were rejected, because his judgment had been finalized. This idea dovetails with a number of teachings of the Sages, which indicate that once this judgment was final nothing more can be said by Moses. (See Avot d'Rebbi Natan addition 2 to chapter 4.) It seems then that there is point where repentance is no longer effective.

Rabbi Reuven Margoliot in his notes to the Sefer Chasidim, cites a teaching from the Zohar which states that this is true in terms of this world, but as far as the next world goes, repentance can change one's status (Zohar Mishpatim 107a). If this is the case, then why would G-d have told Moses that he need not pray? Rashi in his comments to the Torah addresses the point in the Torah narrative when G-d says Rav Lach! "Enough for you!" Rashi translates rav lach literally-rav "a lot," lach, "awaits you"-and then goes on to explain: [This means] "there is a lot of good awaiting you," therefore Moses need not pray anymore for his share in the other world.

The Sifri offers a completely different approach. According to the Sifri, Moses did not heed G-d's request and continued to pray: [Moses] did not adhere to G-d, and did not desist from asking mercy from the Holy One blessed be He. Other people should certainly never [give up and not pray]... Even if a sharp blade is on a person's neck, they should not cease to ask for mercy. (Sifri D'varim piska 29)

Again, according to this approach our previous questions resurface: Why did Moses' prayers go

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
WORLD WIDE WEB AT [HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG](http://AISHDAS.ORG).
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unanswered, and furthermore, why would G-d discourage Moses from further prayer?

In order to answer these questions, we must re-evaluate what prayer is and what are its spiritual dynamics. When a person is ill, he turns to G-d in prayer. If the prayer is accepted by G-d, then the person recovers. Superficially, it seems as if G-d changed His mind, as if G-d can be "sweet talked" into backing down from a previously stated position, so to speak. It also seems as if G-d awaits in heaven for our words of supplication, and, if they do not arrive, He wreaks His vengeance on us.

Furthermore, we are aware that G-d is an infinite Being who is by definition unchanging; if this is the case, then how can G-d "change his mind"?

The answer is subtle, yet simple. G-d does not change. Man does.

The man who fell ill was relatively alienated from G-d. The man who prays is a man who is close to G-d—he is not the same man who fell ill. He has forged a new relationship with G-d, but G-d remains unchanged. Man often believes that the reason that he prays is that he is ill; what he does not understand is that the reason he is ill is because he has not prayed, or searched for a complete relationship with G-d. Now that he has prayed he no longer needs to be ill.

Let us consider Moses. Was his angst due to some type of spiritual deficiency? The answer is of course not! Moses reached the most exalted status which man can ever dream of. He was not spiritually lacking, his prayers were no longer necessary. This idea is conveyed in the Zohar: Rav Chiya said: "G-d said to Moses 'It is enough that you have been united with the Shechina—you can advance no further.'" (Zohar D'varim 260b)

Moses was unlike other people, there was nothing lacking in Moses' spiritual makeup, therefore nothing needed to be healed. Moses did not need to pray. Even Moses' share in the world to come was assured, as we saw in Rashi above. If we take this idea one step further, then we will gain great insight into the rest of this Torah portion.

From the Sforno we get the following teaching: [Moses said:] "But G-d was angry with me for your sakes: For I desired to keep you there (in Israel), so that you would never be exiled. But He (G-d) had

already lifted up His arm to disperse you among the nations." (Sforno 3:26)

According to the Sforno, the object of Moses' prayer was not his own spiritual well-being, it was the future of the community—Moses was motivated by a profound concern for his people. This leads us to an astounding conclusion: Moses' remaining in exile was not due to a lack in him. It was caused by the relatively low spiritual level of his people. We have seen on other occasions that had Moses entered into the Land of Israel, the Temple never would have been destroyed, and Moses would have been the Messiah. The only problem was that the people were unworthy.

The Sforno insists that this decree had already been made: "He (G-d) had already lifted up His arm to disperse you among the nations." The obvious question which then emerges is: When did this decree come into existence? One possibility is that it happened during the Golden Calf debacle. The Talmud teaches: Had the tablets not been broken, no nation nor language would have controlled them. (Eruvin 54a)

The cause for the shattering of the tablets was, of course, the Golden Calf. Once the tablets were shattered the spiritual ability of the nation was handicapped. Things had changed; the people had become distanced from G-d, from the Shechina.

Now we can understand why the Ten Commandments are taught again in this week's Torah portion. Moses wishes to turn back the clock, and take the nation to the spiritual strata, which they enjoyed while standing at Sinai, prior to the Golden Calf. We can also understand why the Sh'ma is taught in the same Torah portion. What better way to connect to G-d than via this ultimate statement of acceptance of G-d?

In order for Moses to have a chance to enter Israel, he did not need to fix anything in his relationship with G-d, his prayers were not necessary. For Moses to enter the land, and more importantly for the people to stay in the land, the people needed to change, to grow closer to the Shechina. Therefore, Moses is told by G-d to cease his prayers, and instead Moses is told to take up what he does best: teach. Moses gives a phenomenal "lecture" in the hope that this will lead his students, his followers, back to G-d. Moses attempts to fix that which was severed.

In the end, Moses' efforts fell short, but the "lecture" which he left us remains. The people of Israel simply have to read this week's Torah portion in order to get an idea on how to reunite with G-d, and to become one with the Shechina. Just like our teacher, Moses. © 2008 Rabbi A. Kahn & aish.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You are a holy nation to the Lord your G-d... a treasured nation from amongst all the nations.... It was not because you were more

numerous than all the nations... that G-d chose you since you are the smallest of all nations. It is rather because G-d loves you and because of His keeping of the oath which He swore to your ancestors..." (Deut. 7:6-8)

What is the real meaning of the "election" of Israel? It cannot be because we are better than all other nations; to dispel that notion one need only to turn again to the prophetic sections we've been reading these past three Sabbaths from Jeremiah and Isaiah, railing and thundering against the Israelites because of their immorality and hypocrisy.

Nor is it because the nation of Israel was a paragon of virtue in the early days of its formation. On the contrary, during the early chapters of Deuteronomy Moses actually recounts the backsliding of our people from the wanton worship of the Golden Calf just forty days after the Revelation at Sinai, to all of the petty complaints and serious rebellions against Moses (and G-d!) throughout the Book of Numbers. G-d could not possibly have been under any illusions about the superior moral quality of this family - nation that He had "chosen."

Were we then elected because we were "the least among nations," the fewest in number and the weakest in power, as the above quoted text would suggest? Is that a reason for being chosen? What is the source of this "love" for us of which our Bible speaks? Can it be that the Creator of the Universe fell prey to a totally arbitrary and irrational love which is the Achilles' heel, the tragic undoing of so many of His mortal creatures, when love is merely an expression of emotion to the total exclusion of logic?

Furthermore, why refer to this particular Sabbath as Shabbat Nahamu, the Sabbath of comfort? Historically, the Israelites continued to fast in memory of the destruction of the First Temple throughout the period of the rebuilt Second Temple and renewed Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. We know this from a variety of sources, including Zechariah 7,8, from Josephus, 2nd Commonwealth historian, as well as from the legalist-philosopher Maimonides (Interpretations of the Mishnah, Rosh HaShanah 18). After all, even our miraculous survival and subsequent rebuilding cannot begin to remove the pain of the righteous adults and innocent children who lost their lives in the period of destruction, or erase the force of the agonizing question, Eicha?! Can our generation's remarkable return to our promised homeland provide any kind of reasonable response to the piercing question mark which arises from the smoke-stacks of Auschwitz and Buchenwald? So, from whence comes our comfort?

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, in his masterful work Faith after the Holocaust, cites a bold and startling passage of the Talmud (B.T. Yoma 69b) which sheds light on this issue:

"Said R. Yehoshua ben Levi [a survivor of the Second Temple devastation]: Why was our Judicial synod called the "Men of the Great Assembly"? Because they restored the [Divine] crown to its pristine glory. Moses came and countered, 'the great, powerful and awesome G-d' (Deut. 10) Jeremiah came and declared, 'The Gentiles have undermined the infrastructure of His Temple; where is His awesomeness?' And he [Jeremiah] deleted [the word] awesome [from G-d's praises in the Amidah]. Daniel came and cried out, 'The Gentiles are subjugating His children; where is His power?' And he [Daniel] deleted [the word] powerful [from G-d's praises in the Amidah]. They [the Men of the Great Assembly, who formulated our prayers] came and restored, saying, 'The very opposite is the truth! Herein lies the power behind G-d's power: that He conquers His instinct [to set evil off at the pass before it wreaks its damage] and has patience for the wicked [to wait for them to repent and repair the world]. And herein lies His awesomeness: were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy One Blessed be He, how could one [paltry] nation withstand and survive the [powerful] nations roundabout."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's message is indubitably clear. G-d has created an imperfect world of freedom of choice, a seemingly absurd and lawless world in which individuals will do even that which the Almighty would not want them to do (the Kabbalistic notion of tzimtzum, the willful "contraction" of the goodness and justice of the Creator of the Universe, as it were, in order to leave room for a world of free choice). As the prophet Isaiah (45:7) declares, "Creator of light and Maker of darkness, Doer of peace and Maker of evil (sic), I am the Lord, the Doer of all these things." G-d has confidence - and even guarantees - that eventually the wicked will repent, that human beings will eventually succeed in repairing and perfecting this world in the Kingship of the Divine, that there will eventually be a messianic period of world peace and well-being (Isaiah 2, Micah 4, Zechariah 7-9). Hence G-d allows the world to proceed in accordance "with its customary way," without preventing stolen seed from taking root in the ground, or withering the hand uplifted to smite an innocent human. Hence, "there is not reward for commandments in this world;" only in the other, eternal world of souls and spirituality will there be proper rewards for deeds well done (B.T. Kidushin 39).

Israel plays a pivotal role in this drama. We are G-d's "holy nation and priest-teachers" to the world (S'forno, ad loc), the descendants of Abraham who chose G-d before G-d chose him (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Laws of Idolatry 1, 1-3), guaranteed by G-d of eternal progeny who would eventually live in the Land of Israel and teach ethical monotheism to the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3)

Those who opposed ethical monotheism, relying on might rather than right, brute violent power rather than love and morality, have all too often ruled the world - from Pharaoh the totalitarian despot of Egypt, to Nazi Hitler to radical Wahabi Islam. The very survival of Israel, our miraculous ability to remain alive despite Egyptian enslavement and holocaust conflagration with horrific exiles and persecutions in between, - regardless of the fact that we are the most paltry in number and the weakest in power of all nations of the world (indeed, for almost 2000 years we were completely stateless and army-less), - makes us G-d's witnesses, *adat HaShem*, testifying that G-d is indeed a G-d of love and morality, a G-d of right over might, a G-d of morality over brute force.

This is G-d's power, this is G-d's awesomeness, and this is the source of our great comfort: G-d chose you since you are the smallest (weakest) of all nations, because G-d loves you" - not because you are perfect but because you are morally better than your enemies, and because your very survival testifies to the existence and eventual triumph of a G-d of Justice, morality and peace. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha begins the seven week period of consolation and condolence that bridges the time space between Tisha b'Av and Rosh Hashana. In order to properly prepare for the oncoming year and its challenges one must first be comforted by the vision of better times ahead and the belief in one's ability to somehow overcome those omnipresent challenges. Healing occurs when one believes that there is yet a future ahead.

All medical doctors agree that hope and optimism on the part of the patient are great aids in the process of recovering from illness or injury. If we would not have time and vision to recover from the sadness before the advent of the High Holy Days then those most meaningful days of our year would clearly be diminished measurably in our minds and hearts.

Throughout the book of Dvarim, Moshe's pain at not being allowed to enter the Land of Israel is manifestably present. But Moshe is strengthened and even somewhat consoled by his vision of his student and loyal disciple, Yehoshua, succeeding him in the leadership of Israel, and in his firm conviction that the people of Israel will successfully conquer and settle the Land of Israel.

Comfort and consolation come in varying forms. What comforts one individual may not be effective for another individual. But again, all agree that such consolation is a necessary ingredient in the restoration and rehabilitation of those who were so depressed and saddened. There is no substitute for

consolation and healing. Otherwise it is impossible to continue in life.

The parsha also deals with the Ten Commandments of Sinai. I have often thought that the repetition of this subject, which seemed to be adequately covered once in the Book of Shemot, teaches us an important lesson, which again may serve to be a source of consolation to us.

The "first" Ten Commandments was given at the beginning of the Jewish sojourn in the desert of Sinai. There was no Golden calf, no complaints about the manna, no spies, no Korach, no plagues of snakes - nothing had yet occurred to diminish the light and aura of Sinai. Well, in such a perfect society there is no reason not to recognize the values and laws of the Ten Commandments as being valid and even necessary in practice.

But now Moshe stands forty years later, after all of the disappointments and rebellions, the backsliding and the pettiness, the death of an entire generation, and reassures us in the "second" Ten Commandments that all of those values and rules have not changed at all. The lesson of the immutability of Torah and Halacha is thereby engraved upon the Jewish heart and mind.

Many things have happened to the Jewish people since Moshe's speech before his death. Many have mistakenly thought that all of the changes in technology, economies, world orders, etc. have made the Ten Commandments, Torah and Halacha somehow less relevant.

Moshe stands and speaks to us to remind us that the basic anchor of Jewish life and in fact of all world civilization lies in those words of Sinai. Everything has changed but human beings have not changed. And neither then has G-d's instructions for us. © 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

This week's portion - according to many commentators, including Rashi - makes it clear that G-d's words to the Jewish people were not all recorded in the ones found in the Torah. We are told in this parsha, "and you shall slaughter as I've commanded you" (Deuteronomy 12:21). One would expect the details of how to slaughter to be spelled out - after all G-d says "as I've commanded you." Yet, nowhere in the Torah are the specifics of how to ritually slaughter mentioned. It follows then that the details, as our text indicates, were spelled out by G-d, although they're not found anywhere in the Torah text.

This is not the only place where this phenomenon occurs. The Torah, for example, states "observe the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:12). Yet, the specifics of how to observe the Shabbat are not found in the Torah.

All this points to a divine aspect of the Torah that was given alongside the written text, this is known as the Torah she-be'al peh, the Oral Law. Additionally, not only were many of G-d's words transmitted orally, but also the words of our sages were designated to be passed through the oral tradition.

This begs a fundamental question: Why was there a need to have an oral transmission - why wasn't it all written down? Several answers come to mind.

Ironically, transmission of ideas through the generations is more exact through the oral legacy. Once written, especially in ancient times when very few copies existed, it was easy for one scribe to tinker with texts and change them, whether purposefully or not. For this reason, many forms of contemporary law, are not written down.

Another possibility: Had everything been written down, it would have sent the message that rabbinic law is closed and that the process of interpretation had come to a halt. The oral transmission sent the message that rabbis in each generation, basing themselves on the earlier text and principles of developing the law, could continue to evaluate and contribute to an understanding in their own particular times.

One last thought. Had everything been written down, a rebbe, a teacher of Torah would have been unnecessary-after all, it's all in the book. The oral transmission made a rebbe, a living person who could teach and lead by example, indispensable. Ultimately, such personalities are necessary for Torah to be sustained.

In time, however, the Jewish community was no longer capable of remembering the oral dictates, and hence, we were left with no choice but to commit the oral law to writing. The challenge, even as we study the oral law from a written text, is to recognize why it was, at first, not put to paper-to remember the precision of the law, that it is ongoing, and it requires a rebbe, a living role model, to teach it. Through both avenues; through the oral and the written, the Torah of G-d remains dynamic and alive.

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RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

One of the highlights of Parshat Va'etchanan is the repetition of the Ten Commandments. In vivid detail, Moses recalls the scene as the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moses also describes this monumental event later in the Torah, saying, "G-d came from Sinai, having shone on them from Seir, having appeared from Mount Paran..." (Deut. 33:2). According to Rashi (Avodah Zara 2b), Seir is a location associated with Esav, whereas Mount Paran is associated with Yishmael.

We know that G-d first offered the Torah to the other nations of the world before He gave it to the Jewish people. Each nation wanted to know the contents of the Torah before accepting it. When the nation of Esav discovered that the Torah contained the commandment "You shall not murder," they refused to accept it. Similarly, the nation of Yishmael did not want to accept the Torah once they heard the commandment, "You shall not steal."

It seems odd that the nations refused to accept the Torah based on these basic restrictions. The seven Noachide laws-that every nation must uphold as universal law-include the prohibitions against murder and theft. What made the acceptance of Torah any different? Why would the nations refuse to do something so easy-that in fact they were already doing?

The commentator Ohr Gedalyahu suggests an explanation based on the purpose of mitzvot. According to his view, the Ten Commandments are intended to sanctify us to such a degree that the mitzvot become part of our basic nature. In other words, through performing the mitzvot, we become so attached to G-d, and so aware of Him in our thought, speech, and action, that our very essence changes.

We see a support to this in the Mechilta (Parshat Yitro, citing Rebbe Akiva), which states that the Jewish people answered "hein" (yes) when they were informed of the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments. Instead of responding, "No, we won't murder," they replied, "YES, we won't murder." What is the significance of a positive response to a "thou shalt not" command?

According to the Ohr Gedalyahu, this positive response hints to a transformation that the Jewish people underwent when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. When they heard the command, "You shall not murder," they became filled with such love for each other that it was impossible for them to even entertain the idea of harming another person. In other words, this "thou shalt not" command brought them to a level of connection with G-d that their very essence changed.

Based on this idea, we can understand why the nations of the world refused to accept the Torah. Previously, the nations with a proclivity toward murder had refrained because it was against the Noachide Laws. The Torah was altogether different. It was not a reiteration of universal law, but rather an expectation of positive change. The nations refused to accept this offer. Sometimes it is easier to hold on to our pockets of darkness and negative baggage than to attempt to make positive changes in our lives. The Jewish people were the only ones who were willing to transform themselves in order to fulfill the Torah.

This idea will help us gain an insight into another highlight of the parsha: the Shema. Our intention when reciting "Shema Yisrael" should be that we are willing to give up our life for G-d if the situation requires (Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 417). Where do we find a hint to this idea in the words of the Shema?

According to the Slonimer Rebbe, the word "echad" (one) carries the same implication as the verse "Ein od mil'vado"-There is nothing besides Him (Deut. 4:35). Nothing exists outside of G-d. Therefore, by working on ourselves to grow ever closer to Him, it is as though we have already given up our life. Our whole life is totally given over to G-d.

This also helps us understand why, in Parshat Shoftim, the officers of the Jewish army begin their pre-battle talk to the soldiers by telling them, "Shema Yisrael! You are going out to war against your enemies" (Deut 20:3). According to the Talmud (Sotah 42a), the officers' phrasing implies that, even if the soldiers have only the merit of saying the Shema, that is reason enough for G-d to protect them. This makes sense according to the reasoning of the Slonimer Rebbe. If a soldier says Shema properly, and connects to G-d with his whole life, of course he will be victorious, because he will have aligned himself as much as possible with the unlimited power of G-d: the only force that exists.

We therefore learn from both the Shema and the Ten Commandments the importance of having a close connection to G-d. But how do we achieve this attachment? Connection to G-d grows out of loving Him. We see this on a practical level-since, when we love someone, we want to be with that person every possible minute. The Torah even commands us to love G-d (Deut. 6:5). Yet how can we be commanded to feel an emotion?

The Slonimer Rebbe suggests that, rather than being commanded to love G-d, we are commanded to do things that bring us to love G-d. One of these is to study Torah (Deut. 6:6). Once we start studying Torah and doing mitzvot, it is much more natural for us to begin feeling love for G-d.

May we soon see the day when, in the merit of this connection to the Divine, our true enemies will disappear, and we will enjoy an era of everlasting peace. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

In the description of the momentous events at Mount Sinai, Moshe rebukes Bnei Yisrael. "I stood between G-d and you at that time to tell you the word of G-d, for you were afraid of the fire and you did not ascend the mountain" [Devarim 5:5]. This seems to imply that ideally the people should not have feared the fire but rather would have climbed the mountain and heard the words of G-d directly. However, this contradicts what we know about the events from the description in the portion of Yitro, where the people were explicitly forbidden even to touch the mountain. "Make a boundary around the mountain, all around, saying: Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its edge. Anybody who touches the mountain will die." [Shemot 19:12]. Even after Moshe had already climbed the mountain, the Almighty told him to go down and warn the people again. "They shall not dare to ascend to G-d, lest He harm them" [19:24]. How can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

Ibn Ezra writes: "You were afraid of the fire? and you also did not ascend the mountain." In the unique way that Ibn Ezra writes, he is implying that the people were afraid of the fire even though they did not ascend the mountain. But it is hard to accept this as the simple meaning of the verse. The Ramban, on the other hand, explains that Moshe complained that the people even stayed away from the area that they were allowed to enter (this corresponds to his approach, that the verse which appears after the giving of the Ten Commandments in Yitro? "And the entire nation could see the sounds and the flames, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain full of smoke, and the people saw this and moved away" [Shemot 20:15]? took place before the giving of the Torah). But this is also difficult to accept, since the simple reading of the verse in this week's portion implies that Moshe's complaint was not that the people moved away but rather that they did not climb the mountain.

In view of this, perhaps Moshe's rebuke can be understood differently. He purposely ignores the fact that G-d commanded the people to stay off the mountain and presents the events from a different angle. Moshe claims that the people did not want to go up the mountain, and that he was therefore required to stand between them and the Almighty. The ideal situation would have been if the people had indeed shown a strong desire to get as close as possible to G-d, but they did not reach this spiritual level and instead were afraid of the fire. Thus, even if they had been permitted to go up the mountain they would not have done so, and that is why they did not have the privilege of a direct contact with the Almighty.

In the end, both approaches correspond to the words in the Torah, and there were two reasons why the people did not climb the mountain. In Yitro, this is presented as a good act, since the people heard the voice of G-d and showed their fear. But in his talk in this week's portion Moshe points out the bad side of this event: Bnei Yisrael were not able to go up the mountain because they did not develop a sufficiently strong love of the Almighty.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The overwhelming majority of Sefer Devarim is Moshe's final words—an exact quote of what he said to the Children of Israel before passing away. If we were to put quotation marks around them, they would start at 1:6 (where the preceding verse concludes "Moshe began to explain this Torah, saying") and end after Chapter 26 (with Chapter 27 beginning the blessings and curses, which were told over in the usual way—Moshe teaching the elders who taught the nation—and not Moshe speaking directly to the entire nation, see Rashi 1:1). That is, with one exception. In our Parsha, Moshe's words are "interrupted," to tell us, in narrative form, of Moshe separating three cities as Cities of Refuge (4:41-49). Moshe's closing thoughts continue, in the same way as before this interruption, with Chapter 5.

Why did Moshe interrupt his "sermon" to do this? What was so significant about choosing three cities from the eastern side of the Jordan River that it warranted this pause? And why was it specifically at this point in Moshe's words that it was done?

One of the characteristics of these three Cities of Refuge is that they had no practical use until years later. The Talmud tells us (Makos 9b) that until the three cities on the western side of the Jordan River were chosen, those on the eastern side did not take effect. The Kli Yakar says that this is precisely why Moshe chose to separate the three eastern cities now. He compares it to an older man planting an esrog tree. He knows that by the time the tree bears fruit he will no longer be around, yet still plants it so that his children can fulfill the Mitzvah with it. It is this dedication, of preparing for the future without being directly part of it, which Moshe wanted to demonstrate. He knows that he will not be there to choose the western Cities of Refuge, yet does so for the eastern ones.

The last verse prior to Moshe's actions starts, "And you shall keep His statutes and commandments, which I (Moshe) am commanding you today in order that He be good to you and to your sons after you." The words "after you" seem extraneous, as obviously your children came into being "after you." The point Moshe is trying to make, the Kli Yakar explains, is that even if the benefit of a Mitzvah will not come until only your son can gain from it, do not hesitate to do it. We find

that Dovid Hamelech (King David) gathered much of the raw materials for the Temple that his son, Shelomo (Solomon) would build (Divray Hayamim I 22:14), even though Dovid knew it would not be built until his son had already ascended his throne. Perhaps the reason the paragraph starts mixing past and future tenses—"Then Moshe will separate" (4:41) -- is to underscore that Moshe's actions were only done keeping the future in mind.

The Kli Yakar's approach also helps explain the verses that come after the three cities are mentioned, before Moshe's quote resumes. "And this is the Torah that Moshe set before the Children of Israel" (4:44) can now be understood to emphasize the fact that Moshe's entire discourse given at Arvos Moav was preparation for the nation as they are about to enter the Land of Israel, even though he would not cross the Jordan River with them. The verses continue, "these are the testimonies, statutes and laws that Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel when they went out of Egypt" (4:45) and, referring to the land captured from Sichone and Oge "when Moshe and the Children of Israel smote them when they came out of Egypt" (4:46) -- even though the exodus had taken place almost 40 years prior—in order to reiterate that if not for the previous generation having left Egypt, none of this would be relevant. We once again see this theme of preparing for the future, and recognizing that the present was set up by generations past.

As we try to be consoled this Shabbos Nachamu, we ask G-d to give us the wisdom to help prepare our future and the future of the next generation, so that they never need to be comforted. © 2002 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah introduces a special series of haftorah readings related to our final redemption.

In this opening one the prophet Yeshaya delivers the Jewish people warm words of comfort from Hashem. After over one thousand years of exile the time will finally arrive for the Jewish nation to return to Hashem and His Promised Land. But, as Chazal explain (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, 445) the painful scars of exile, persecution, and rejection will remain fresh in their minds and it will be difficult to approach Hashem and rebuild a relationship. In addition, they will remember vividly all their acts of defiance and will be embarrassed to return to Hashem. Hashem therefore turns to His nation and expresses to them warm words of comfort and console.

Hashem instructs the prophet Yeshaya, "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call her because her long term has been served and her sin has been forgiven." (40:2) After all of this time, the Jewish people will find it difficult to accept that Hashem is truly interested in

them. Although, the time for redemption has arrived they have not thoroughly cleansed themselves from all of their wrongdoings. They question how they could entertain establishing a perfect relationship with Hashem without having even perfected their ways. Hashem responds, "Her sins have been forgiven because she suffered an abundant and full measure for them." (ibid.) The Malbim (ad loc.) explains this to mean that the harsh severity of their sufferings will compensate for their incomplete steps of repentance. The Jewish people deserve their redemption after enduring and outliving the most horrifying and tragic experiences with steadfast faith in Hashem. During their painful exile they consistently demonstrated unwavering commitment to Hashem and an inseparable attachment to Him.

Our Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, Beraishis 162) share with us an additional dimension about Yeshaya's words of comfort. They quote a passage in Shir Hashirim referring to the era of the final redemption and the profound statement the Jewish people will make then. They plead to Hashem, "If only, You could be like a brother to me." (Shir Hashirim 8:1) Chazal see this brotherly relationship as a reference to the indescribable compassion that Yosef Hatzadik showed his brothers. After the atrocious behavior the tribes displayed towards Yosef they could never forgive themselves for those misguided actions. They therefore delivered a message to Yosef beseeching Him to forgive them without harboring any ill feelings towards them. In response to their plea, the Torah states "And Yosef comforted them and spoke to their hearts." (Breishis 50:21) Chazal explain that mere words of comfort and assurance were not sufficient to allay their fears. Yosef therefore saw it appropriate to appeal to their hearts and redirect their thinking. He convinced his brothers how meaningful they were to him and how their safety and prominence served as key factors in his attaining and maintaining his position of glory.

The Jewish people express their wish that Hashem act in this same manner with them. They find it impossible to forgive themselves for all the wrong they have done to Hashem. However, as Yosef appealed to his brothers' hearts and redirected their thinking, Hashem can certainly do the same. They plead with Hashem to remove any trace of ill feelings for all their years of unfairness to Him. Chazal conclude that as Yosef allayed his brothers' fears Hashem will do the same for His people. Therefore, when instructing Yeshaya to comfort the Jewish people, Hashem states, "Comfort them and speak to their hearts." Yeshaya, as Yosef, is charged with a mission of conveying to the Jewish people how significant each and every one of them is to Hashem.

Yeshaya faithfully says to the Jews, "Hashem will lead you like a shepherd tends his flock, gathers them in his arm, carries them in his bosom and gently

leads young ones." (40: 11) Yeshaya informs them that Hashem does care about every Jewish soul as a shepherd cares for each of his sheep. Although the Jewish people had previously strayed and suffered so much for their wrongdoing Hashem still cares about them in indescribable measures. Yeshaya beckons the Jews not to be hesitant or embarrassed to return. Hashem cares so much for each one of them that He will personally escort them back to Him.

Yeshaya continues, " Who measured the depths of the water by his fists, the span of the heavens by his hand, the width of the land by the measure of three fingers or the weight of mountains and hills on a scale? Behold the nations are but a remaining drop in a bucket, the rust of a scale." (40:12,15) Although in our eyes, the entire world and its inhabitants are of enormous proportions, in the eyes of Hashem they are but tiny miniscule dots. They all serve a general purpose but the concern and focus of Hashem is not specifically upon them. Yeshaya concludes, "Lift your eyes heavenward and see who created these, He who brings out the myriads by number and to each He calls by name. (40: 26) The prophet is referring to the millions of stars found in the heaven. Each of them serves a specific purpose and is identified by name at all times. Each star is significant and every one occupies a prominent position in the master plan of Hashem.

In view of all the above we can suggest the following interpretation to the final words of the haftarah. Dovid Hamelech in Sefer Tehillim (Psalm 147) makes a similar reference to the stars in the heavens. He says, "Hashem is the builder of Yerushalayim; He will gather in the dispersed of Israel. He counts the stars by number, to all He calls by name. (147: 2,4) The Ibn Ezra interprets Dovid Hamelech's profound verses in the following manner. The Jewish people have been scattered all over the world which should be indicative of their insignificance. To this Dovid Hamelech responds and reminds us that the stars are also scattered over the vast span of the horizon. However, Hashem knows every one of them and identifies him by name and purpose. In this same vein Hashem knows every Jewish person and identifies with him by his individual name and purpose. Following this thought we can appreciate Yeshaya's words in this same manner. At the time of redemption Hashem will display His appreciation for each and every Jewish soul and personally escort him back to Eretz Yisroel. Every Jewish person counts because he occupies an important role in the scheme of the glory of Hashem. To Hashem every Jewish soul is greatly significant because his personal role adds a unique and distinct dimension to the majesty of Hashem. May we merit soon the realization of these comforting words with the coming of Mashiach and the ingathering of the exiles.

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