

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The book of Vayikra ends with one of the most terrifying passages in literature. It describes what will happen to the Israelites if, having made their covenant with G-d, they break its terms:

"If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over... I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins... As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them." (Leviticus 26: 28-36)

To this day we read the passage-traditionally known as the Tochachah, "the admonition"-sotto voce, so fearful is it and so difficult to internalize and imagine. It is all the more fearful given what we know of later Jewish history. Tragically, more than once, it came true. The Jewish people has had more than its share of sufferings and persecutions. Its commitment to the terms of the covenant-to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"-was and still is anything but safe, an easy option, a low-risk strategy. Of the people He claimed as His own, G-d is demanding. When Israel do His will, they are lifted to great heights. When they do not, they are plunged into great depths. The way of holiness is supremely challenging.

Yet at the very climax of this long list of curses, there comes a passage surpassing in its assurance: "... but when the time finally comes that their stubborn spirit is humbled, I will forgive their sin. I will remember my covenant with Jacob, as well as my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land... Thus, even when they are in their enemy's land, I will not reject them or spurn them, bringing them to an end and breaking My covenant with them, because I am the Lord their G-d." (Leviticus 26: 41-44)

The people of the eternal G-d will itself be eternal. There is, in the Mosaic books, no greater

promise than this. It is repeated in the prophetic literature by the man often thought of as the most pessimistic of the prophets, Jeremiah. Jeremiah spent much of his career as a prophet warning the people of impending disaster. It was an unpopular message, and he was imprisoned and nearly killed for it. Yet he too, in the midst of his gloom, told the people that they would never be destroyed: "This is what the Lord says, / He who appoints the sun to shine by day, / who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, / who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar- / the Lord Almighty is His name: / 'Only if these decrees vanish from My sight,' declares the Lord, / 'will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before Me.'" (Jeremiah 31: 35-36)

In the Cairo Museum stands a giant slab of black granite known as the Merneptah stele. Originally installed by Pharaoh Amenhotep III in his temple in western Thebes, it was removed by a later ruler of Egypt, Merneptah, who reigned in the thirteenth century BCE. Inscribed with hieroglyphics, it contains a record of Merneptah's military victories. Its interest might have been confined to students of ancient civilizations, were it not for one fact: the stele contains the first reference outside the Bible to the people of Israel. The inscription lists the various powers crushed by Merneptah and his army. It concludes: "All lands together, they are pacified; / Everyone who was restless, he has been bound / By the king of Upper and Lower Egypt..."

Among those who were restless were a small people otherwise not mentioned in the early Egyptian texts. Merneptah or his chroniclers believed that they were now a mere footnote to history. They had not simply been defeated. They had been obliterated. This is what the stele says: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not."

The first reference to Israel outside the Bible is an obituary notice. Ironically, so is the second. This is contained in a basalt slab dating from the 9th century BCE which today stands in the Louvre. Known as the Mesha stele, it records the triumphs of Mesha, king of Moab. The king thanks his deity Chemosh for handing victory to the Moabites in their wars, our lights in the war is, and speaks thus: "As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab for many years, for Chemosh was angry with his land. And his son followed him, and he also said, 'I will humble Moab.' In my time he spoke thus, but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel has perished for ever."

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The great mathematician and later Christian theologian Blaise Pascal wrote this: "It is certain that in certain parts of the world we can see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world, and this is called the Jewish people... This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time... For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as their historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold... My encounter with his people amazes me."

Many attempts have been made, over the course of the centuries, to prove the existence of G-d. Theologians have argued on the basis of philosophy, and in some cases the natural sciences (the "argument from design"). Yet the Torah speaks of a different kind of proof altogether: the history of Israel.

There is pain in this history. At times it was written in tears. Yet it remains astonishing. The curses of the Tokhachah came true-but so did the consolation. No nation was attacked so often. None attracted so much irrational hostility. Empire after empire pronounced their destruction. Yet they have vanished into oblivion while the people Israel still lives, small, vulnerable, sometimes fractious and rebellious, yet still there, defying all the natural laws that govern the history of nations. There is a mystery here, as Pascal so clearly saw. Yet its basic formulation is clear, and despite all the odds it came true: the people of the eternal G-d became the people of eternity. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year and declare freedom in the land for all of its inhabitants; Jubilee shall it be for you..." (Lev. 25:10)

With these words, the Bible establishes its vision for the Land of Israel, the Jewish State. Each fiftieth year, the culmination of seven Sabbatical years,

all debts are rescinded, every slave granted freedom, each individual living securely in his/her homestead; economic and political independence for all. But is this picture limited to Israel alone? Is it not possible that this idyllic and idealistic objective apply not only to Israel but also to every nation in the world?

I would submit that a careful study of the Bible would lead to the inescapable conclusion that Israel is seen as a metaphor and symbol of the entire world at large. The Bible opens on a grand majestic and universal sweep: "In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth" (Gen.1:1). The human being is then created in the image (or shadow) of the Divine (ibid 27), endowing him/her with the inalienable right to freedom from external human mastery and the existential ability to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. Tragically, first Adam and then Noah failed to link responsibility to their freedom (ahrayut to herut), and each fell prey to the seduction of unworthy fruit and wine.

Mankind then divides into Shem, Ham and Japhet, the three sons of Noah, from whom develop the proverbial seventy nations of the globe (Genesis 10). These nations join together in the creation of a materialistic and uniform society, dedicated to the formation of a city whose tower would extend to the heavens for the sake of their own collective aggrandizement. Since they did not communicate with each other, on a personal humanistic manner, since one did not truly hear the words of his neighbor, G-d scattered them throughout the face of the globe (Gen. 11: 1-9)."

Chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis places the spotlight upon one particular descendant of Shem, Abram (exalted father) who becomes Abraham (father of a multitude of nations, paterfamilias of the world (Gen 17:4,5)". From Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (paralleling Shem, Hem and Yafet) emerged the 70 descendants (paralleling the seventy nations) who comprised Israel who descend into Egypt, the fiery furnace which will forge a new nation and a new world. Abraham, is, after all, charged by G-d to bring a blessing to the world (ibid 12:3) and transmit to his descendants the ultimate and eternal Divine values of compassion and justice (Gen 18:19). These ideals, rather than egocentric edifices of Babylonian Ziggurats and Egyptian pyramids, must be the building blocks for a lasting society.

Hence Jacob-Israel, grandson of Abraham, dreams of a ladder rooted on earth whose top reaches up to the heavens (Gen. 28:12). (Note well that here the ladder is not a tower which is in - and therefore takes over - the heavens, but is rather a link between the earth and the heavens, between humanity and the Divine, and so it simply reaches up to the heavens, where G-d is standing (as it were) in the dream).

Our classical interpreters insist that Mt. Moriah (the place of our Holy Temple) extended into Bet El for the purposes of the dream, the ladder symbolizing the

Holy Temple which will bridge heaven and earth and become a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7; Rashi on Gen. 28:17). And G-d promises Jacob within the dream that "your seed shall be as the dust of the earth (shall eventually comprise all of humanity, which was initially formed from the dust of the earth), and you shall extend westward and eastward, northward and southward, so that all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and your seed" (Gen 28:14).

However, we too, shall fall into a trap not unlike the materialistic egocentrism of the initial nations of the world; we shall sin, especially in the realm of interpersonal relationships, and the Lord will scatter us among all the nations from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth...." (Deut 28:64). We will suffer the fate of being captives who do not even understand the language of their captors; we shall be aliens and exiles just as the peoples of the world are aliens and exiles, because no one can ever feel at home if he/she does not listen to the thoughts and hear the pain of those who live nearby. If you love your neighbor, your neighbor is like you and you are like him/her; if you are apathetic and alien to the feelings of your neighbor, then your neighbor becomes other and alien to you and you become other and alien to him/her.

But here there is one basic difference; the Bible promises that we will return to G-d and His laws of compassion and justice, and that we will also return to our homeland. Once we gain the capacity to listen to G-d's voice we shall also begin to hear every human voice; and then "even if you are scattered to the ends of the heaven, from there will the Lord gather you and from there will the Lord take you up, and bring you to the land which your ancestors have inherited, and you shall inherit it" (Deut 30:4,5).

And then, when the nations will come to learn about compassion and justice from our Holy Temple (Isaiah 2, Micah 4), G-d "will change the clear language of the nations to all call upon the name of the Lord and to serve Him, shoulder to shoulder (Zephaniah 3:9). Once listening to G-d obediently will become the substitute for aggrandizing ourselves selfishly, we will begin to listen to each other as well and so transform the universe into our home of love and sensitivity.

Hence, Israel is the reflection and mirror of the world, the metaphor and repair (tikkun) for the world; thus the vision of peace and security expressed by the Jubilee applies not only to Israel but to the entire world. And so it must be, because in a global village, each of us human is responsible for every other human. We dare not ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee!
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RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah portion Bechukosai begins with, "If you shall walk in My statutes and observe My

commandments and do them..." (Leviticus 26:3).

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, former Rosh Hayeshiva of Telz, commented: "Our Rabbis teach us: 'If you shall walk in My statutes' refers to 'laboring in the Torah.' This concept of toiling in Torah is inherent in the study of Torah. 'Laboring in the Torah' means the complete engrossment of the student in Torah to the exclusion of all else. It signifies the ability to find in Torah study all the joy and pleasure which one could wish for. It means finding in Torah the joys and benefits 'of bread and meat, of wine and oil, of fields and vineyards, of milk and honey, of precious stones and pearls.'"

"Laboring in the Torah" does not mean life impoverished by complete removal from human joys and pleasures, but rather the sublime contentment of the most intimate contact with the Source of all joy and pleasure. *based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“If you live according to my laws, and you keep my commandments and you do them, I will give your rains in their appropriate time, and the land will give its produce" (Vayikra 26:3-4). Sounds like a pretty straightforward formula; if we keep the Torah, G-d will provide all of our needs. Not just the basic minimum, but we will be "satiated" (26:5); we will have so much food that the next harvest will be upon us before we finish dealing with the previous one (26:5); we will have plenty left from previous years when the new crops are ready for consumption (26:10); and we will live securely (26:5).

The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 9:1) understands this to be not so much a reward for keeping the Torah (which is primarily reserved for the world to come), but a means of allowing us to continue to keep the Torah and get even closer to G-d. If we don't have to worry about our material needs, we can focus more on our spiritual ones. Recent headlines have led me to another possible way of understanding this "formula," an additional facet that works in conjunction with the one described above.

This is not the forum to discuss the issue of steroid use in professional sports. The argument can certainly be made that if it were not illegal, it should not be considered cheating. Is it any different from taking any medication or supplement that allows us to function more optimally? Should a "Jeopardy" winner be disqualified for taking memory-enhancing pills? Only if using them was prohibited. If the other contestants didn't take them, it's the same as if they didn't study as much as they could have. (Even if the "enhancers" do more for one contestant than for another, why should the way their body processes these supplements be more of a factor than their "natural" memory, or their

other "natural" talents?) The Yankees may have an advantage because they have more money to spend, but as long as they play (and spend) within the rules, it cannot be considered cheating.

Similarly, using tax loopholes isn't cheating (although presenting misinformation to take advantage of them certainly would be). Financing a loan may be risky, but it's only "cheating" if the size of the risk is misrepresented when selling the loan to a third party. That third party has the responsibility to make sure it is not being misled, and cannot mislead its shareholders about the amount of risk they are undertaking. Those that do cross the line risk the consequences of being caught cheating, besides the risk they undertook when first making the loan. Getting back to steroids, there is a trade-off between the short-term benefits of taking them and the risk of any long-term adverse effects, but that can be said about almost everything. The possible side effects of any medication taken for a health issue are usually outweighed by the health benefits the medication provides. The bottom line is that if it's not illegal, the issue is not one of cheating, but of deciding whether the trade-off is worth it. Or is it?

Am I cheating by staying up late to get more done if it means being less alert when I get behind the wheel the next morning? Being addicted to caffeine and having to get off of it before a fast day might be a trade-off, but if others can be affected by my choice, is that right? Am I cheating my family when I put in extra hours at work (or in the Bais Midrash) by depriving them of spending more time with their father, or is it just another trade-off because they will benefit from what I can accomplish during those extra hours away (which can benefit them as well, a benefit I would be cheating them out of if I didn't put in those extra hours)? Is there an aspect of cheating in every trade-off?

Whether or not there is, there certainly is a trade-off involved in every decision we make, and sometimes that trade-off involves our level of Torah observance. It could be as minor as having less peace of mind going into Shabbos because we got home so close sundown, or as major as was the norm just a generation or two ago, when the choice was either working on Saturdays or losing your job. Is there any doubt that climbing the corporate ladder becomes much more difficult if you can only give the company 24/6 instead of 24/7? Or if you set aside time every day to learn Torah, turning your cell phone and Blackberry off because these hours are the real "keva" and work is only "arai" (no matter how many more hours are dedicated to the latter). Even being limited in the types of restaurants where once can have a business meeting can have an adverse effect on one's livelihood. The choices we make determine whether we are "cheating" our spiritual growth or "cheating" our professional growth.

The Netziv (Devarim 4:19-20 and Shir Hashirim 1:5) says that the rampant idol-worship that occurred

during the First Temple was parnasa-driven, done for the sake of their livelihood. They mistakenly believed that G-d gave some autonomy to the celestial bodies, and worshipping them was the "natural" means through which their crops would be successful. Rather than just following G-d's commandments and being worthy of His beneficence, they were afraid that they would fall short and therefore have a bad year financially, so took (what they thought was) the more "natural" route to success. And because it was so important to have the crops planted when the rainy season came, but would be devastating if they were planted too long beforehand, they used the black magic tricks of the pagan Canaanite culture to figure out exactly when the rains would start to fall (rather than relying on following the Torah and trusting that the rains would fall "in their appropriate time"). Along the same lines, the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:37) understands the prohibitions against "urluh" (the fruits produced during a tree's first three years) and "kilayim" (grafting two plants or trees together) to be a means of countering the pagan practices done to help trees produce fruits faster and plants to grow stronger. The Torah may guarantee that there won't be any less food if we observe "shemita" (the Sabbatical year), and we may understand how over the long haul the land will be more productive if it lies fallow every seven years, but it is still difficult for a farmer to just leave his precious crops alone for a whole year. And of course there is the loss of all that potential revenue because we are prohibited from charging any interest when we lend money.

Keeping the Torah may, at times, seem to be an impediment to making a living, so we are told that if we do follow G-d's laws, we will still be successful. My grandfather had to find a new job every week when he didn't show up for work on Saturday, but because he eventually decided to open his own business (with his brother and brother's brother-in-law) instead, I'm pretty sure he made a lot more money than he would have had he worked for someone else seven days a week (or six if he was off Sundays). There was no way for him to know that it would work out so well, but he knew that working on Shabbos wasn't an option. I never considered taking the offer (over 15 years ago) to produce New York Mets games, as it meant traveling with the team and working every game, but I find it ironic that for the past few years I have been the Executive Producer of those same radio broadcasts, a position that requires mostly prep work (and therefore no Shabbos issues, even if they still credit me after every Friday night and Saturday game).

Life is full of challenges, including the need to support the family while living within the framework of Torah observance. By telling us that if we follow the Torah G-d will provide for us, the Torah is also telling us that we don't need to choose between "cheating" our spiritual well being or "cheating" our financial success. It all comes from G-d, and He is more

likely to help us if we are on His team, working for Him.
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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

Redemption is a very important and significant concept for us. It is mentioned many times in the Torah, most often in this week's Torah portion—more than thirty times. What is the essence of redemption? Is it "earthly" redemption which consists of living on the land in a state of political independence? Or could it be a "spiritual" redemption of return to our authentic culture and language? Let us also not forget a "Divine" redemption—the spiritual revelation that will be renewed at the end of days, shining on the world with a light that has never been known before.

In this week's portion there is no mention of either spiritual or cultural redemption. All the instances of redemption in the portion refer to only one thing—possession of the land, the change that takes place when the land is restored to its original owners: "Let the land be redeemed" [Vayikra 25:24]. Does this really mean that the land is the main factor in the redemption of Yisrael?

At first glance, we might postulate that this is simply an allegory. Thus we might say that the main redemption is the dramatic revolution that will take place when G-d pours His spirit over all of humanity, and that this is similar to the feeling that a man has when he returns to his own land after being exiled from it. But this approach should be rejected for two reasons. First, this interpretation refuses to accept the words of the Torah in their full depth. In addition, it ignores the fact that the concept of redemption in this week's portion refers not to the person who is redeemed but to the land itself—"Let the land be redeemed." The land is privileged to maintain its original and natural link and "not to be sold permanently" [25:23] -- into virtual slavery, to a stranger.

This implies that the main feature of redemption is indeed the land itself. Why should this be so? One answer is given in the famous words of Rabbi A.Y. Kook: "Eretz Yisrael is not an external thing, an external possession of the nation... It is an independent entity with a living connection to the nation." The land is for the nation as a physical body is for the soul. Just as it is impossible to take Reuven's soul and put it into Shimon's body, so there is no way that the Jewish nation can exist without its own land. Every tribe and every person must be brought to its proper heritage and fate, just as every organ of a living body must be in its proper place and perform its appointed task.

The land has one advantage over the nation. The land is a single entity, while the nation is revealed to this world as a multitude of individuals, and only an

inner vision can reveal their inner structure as a single entity. And that is why we say, "You are one, Your name is one, and who can compare to Your nation Yisrael, a single nation on the land" [Mincha prayer for Shabbat]. The sages note that it is only within the land that the nation is considered a single unit. This is the mystical meaning of the redemption. It can be concluded that redemption's most important element is not the return of the people to the land but rather the redemption of the land which takes place when its people return to it and the unity which reunites all the people who had seemed to be separate individuals.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One of this week's parshiot clearly states that good people are rewarded while evil people are punished. In the words of the Torah: "If you keep my commandments...then I will give your rains in their season...but if you will not listen to Me...I will bring terror over you." (Leviticus Chapter 26)

Throughout the ages, this principle has raised difficulty. After all, there are countless examples of good people who suffer and evil people who flourish. This is the famous philosophical question of Tzaddik Vera Lo, the righteous who suffer. Doesn't this reality run contrary to what the Torah states in our portion?

Another problem with the concept of reward and punishment is the directive "not to serve the Master for a reward, but to serve Him with no reward in mind." (Ethics 1:3) This seems to contradict our portion which suggests that good deeds are performed for reward.

One way to approach these questions is to imagine that good people are always rewarded and evil people are automatically punished. In such a world, freedom of choice would be non-existent. If for every ten dollars one gives to charity one would receive twenty dollars—everyone would give charity. Similarly, if every time one speaks slander one's tongue would cleave to the pallet—no one would speak wrongfully.

Indeed, in a world of precise reward and punishment, humankind would be bereft of freedom of choice. Since freedom of choice is central to the human condition, it follows, that in a world of exact reward and punishment, our very humanity, would be jeopardized.

But how can one explain this week's portion which clearly speaks of reward for good deeds and punishment for misdeeds?

Rav Ahron Soloveitchik of blessed memory suggests that the answer may lie in understanding that there are two types of reward and punishment. There is reward and punishment on an individual level and then there is reward and punishment on a collective level.

On the individual level, as the Talmud states, there is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world— that comes in the world hereafter. (Kiddushin 39b) A promise of reward in the hereafter will not compel

individuals to act properly. Human choice would remain intact.

In this world, however, reward and punishment does operate on a collective level. When one does something positive, the larger community benefits. Similarly, when one does something negative, the community suffers.

Note that in this week's portion when discussing reward and punishment, the text is in the plural. Similarly, in the second portion of the Shema recited morning and night, reward and punishment is in the plural. In fact, when reward is written in the singular it refers to an individual's portion in the world to come. An example is "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long." (Exodus 20:1)

We have come full circle. The good can suffer in this world as there is no exact reward and punishment for individuals. However, when doing the right thing, we do so not necessarily for ourselves, but for the benefit of the community.

In a world that emphasizes the primacy of the self, our portion tells us that fully controlling the destiny of the self is not possible. However, the portion tells us that as a "we," we have tremendous power. We have the ability to wreak destruction on the world, but we also have the power to infuse it with peace and goodness. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

These two parshiyot together form the final bookend of the book of Vayikra. This conclusion of Vayikra is a rather somber one, what with the dominant theme being the prediction of Jewish dereliction from Torah values and practices and the resultant exile from their land and sovereignty. Yet in these parshiyot there are also promises of prosperity and well being and successful general Jewish life.

The Torah generally conforms to such a pattern of great blessings and stern warnings. It really allows the Jews very little middle ground in which to maneuver the private and national lives of Israel. Our entire history is one of great vacillation between exalted and miraculous moments and dire events and forebodings.

This certainly is true regarding the story of the Jewish people and the Jewish State over the past century. Our tears are always mixed with joy and our joy is always laden with a heavy dose of accompanying tears. The Torah's message to us is that life constantly presents different emotions and scenarios that are rarely if ever completely positive or completely negative.

Perhaps this is one of the meanings of the words of the rabbis of the Talmud that everything that Heaven does has good within it. Even if the general event may be deemed to be a negative one, there

always lies a kernel of good buried within it. So, therefore, our parshiyot reflect this duality of blessing and accomplishment as well as of defeat and hardship.

This duality of view regarding our national life also applies to our dealings with others on a daily basis. To try and see the good lurking within another person whenever possible - and I will admit that there are situations that make it look impossible to do so - has always been a premier Jewish trait. The rabbis in Avot taught us that every person has his moment so to speak. Seizing and exploiting that moment is the main accomplishment in life.

But that requires a sense of realism. We cannot fool ourselves to think that everything is always correct and well with ourselves and our society, nor can we always be so pessimistic and down on the situation that we find ourselves in that we preclude honest attempts to improve it. The balance of hope and warning that these concluding parshiyot of Vayikra exude is an important lesson and guidepost for our daily lives.

This lesson lies embedded in another teaching of the rabbis in Avot: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the entire task at hand but then again neither are you free to discard it entirely." Reality dictates to us that we face our world and its dangers squarely and honestly. But we should not abandon hope and effort to improve our lot.

We believe that positive effort and wise decisions, coupled with faith and tradition allow us to survive and prosper. Therefore at the conclusion of the public reading of these mixed messages at the end of the book of Vayikra we rise and strengthen ourselves "Chazak chazak v'nitchzeik." © 2009 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

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

No One to Hide From

This week we read the Tochaha, a series of unimaginable curses that, with prescient clarity, foretold the horrors that were destined to befall our people in its wanderings in exile.

Listen to the tales of the inquisition, the cruelty of the crusades, and the horrors of the Holocaust. They reflect the Torah's stern admonitions of a wayward nation cast asunder from the land of its inheritance. It tells of the destruction of cities and the starvation their citizens. And one of those curses is about running from our enemies. "And you shall run the flight of one who flees from a sword, yet no one is pursuing you" (Leviticus 26:36). Simply explained, the Torah is telling us of the inherent fear that we shall have from the suffering that we have endured. We shall run at the slightest thought, even when there is no one in pursuit. Recently I saw a question: Is it not better to run from a

figment of imagination than having to flee an actual pursuer? All in all, the imagination can not brandish a weapon!

As I listened to a survivor tell the tale of his survival and its aftermath, I wanted to offer a homiletic interpretation.

Al Feurstein is a retired businessman who volunteers in our yeshiva's financial office. But more than that, he is a Holocaust survivor who recently told the story of his ordeals of concentration camps and death marches that wracked his 16-year-old body but were unable to conquer his faith and conviction.

After enduring years of unspeakable horrors, the war ended and Al arrived in the United States. With the help of relatives, he resettled in Laurelton, New York. A few weeks after his arrival, he was invited to speak at his cousin's synagogue.

As he recounted his personal story and detailing the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their willing civilian executioners, mouths fell open in literal disbelief. News had reached the US of mass murders and barbarism, but never had these congregants heard in full detail how men born to human mothers performed such horrific crimes.

What happened after his talk back then was most depressing, compounding the terror of his experience a hundredfold. A few prominent members of the congregation approached him. "Al, my dear boy," they coddled him. "You couldn't have seen and experienced those tales you told! We are sure you are shell-shocked from the terrible hardships you endured. After all, it could not have been all that bad."

The worst curse may actually be when no one believes that the other calamities happened. Perhaps that is also included in the curse "no one shall pursue you."

A great Rosh Yeshiva was complaining bitterly about not feeling well. Some colleagues did not take him seriously at first, and humored him by saying that the pains were more in his mind than in his body. Before those pains were actually diagnosed as the disease that eventually claimed his life, he lamented: "The Talmud in Bava Basra (15a) debates the historical timeframe of the story of Iyov (Job). Some say he lived during the time of Moshe, while others maintain he lived during the period of the Judges, and yet others even claim that he lived during the period of Purim. However, there is one opinion that Job never existed at all and the entire episode is only a parable."

Painfully, the Rosh Yeshiva sardonically commented, "that opinion was Iyov's worst tzarah (distress). Imagine, after all the pain and suffering Iyov endured, there is an opinion that he did not even exist!"

Perhaps this week, the Torah alludes to another form of curse. "When there is pain and suffering, when there is persecution and oppression, yet the world ignores the cries of those suffering - as if " no one is pursuing," that is a terrible curse, too. Perhaps that

curse is as unfortunate as when the aggressors are clearly recognized for whom they are. Often our greatest enemies are not recognized as such. We are told that they are our partners and our fears are nothing but paranoia. Even our past experiences are being discredited by deniers, scoffers and skeptics.

We cannot control the ears and eyes of our detractors, but we can do our utmost to tell the story and make sure that they live on. And we can do our best to hear, too, the pain and suffering of those who cry to us, to make sure we understand the pursuers behind the pain. © 2004 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah teaches us a profound lesson in trust and faith in Hashem. The prophet

Yirmiyahu introduces the haftarah by proclaiming, "Hashem is my strength, my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble." Yirmiyahu proceeds and admonishes the Jewish people for pursuing foreign avenues and engaging in strange practices for security. He warns them that they are subject to forfeiting their wealth and possessions because of their public involvement in idolatry.

He then delivers a crushing blow in the name of Hashem and says, "And you will forsake your land which you are to blame for mistreating the inheritance I gave you and you will be enslaved to your enemies in a foreign land." (17:4) This is the dreadful prophecy about their pending exile from their precious homeland, Eretz Yisroel. Yet, Yirmiyahu devotes his attention to one specific detail as the cause of their exile. He immediately follows with serious reprimand about trust and says, "Cursed is the person who trusts in man...and turns his heart away from Hashem... Blessed is the person who trusts in Hashem." The juxtaposition of these words suggests that the Jewish exile was caused by lack of trust. Apparently, the previous criticism of mistreating the land related to this fault. Rashi develops this and explains that the admonition referred to their failure to properly observe Shmita laws. Yirmiyahu chastised them for mistreating their inheritance by refusing to return it to its true owner during Shmita.

This explanation requires serious reflection. Although the mitzvah of Shmita is undoubtedly significant, it seems to be treated with extreme severity. The prophet equates lack of Shmita observance with total lack of faith in Hashem. This suggests that one who does not properly adhere to Shmita laws has no trust and faith in Hashem!? This is difficult to digest after considering the severe demands of Shmita. During that year, one may not exert any effort towards his personal sustenance and livelihood. Hashem demands that one place his total faith and trust in Him. If one does not achieve this lofty level and fails to display total

faith can he be compared to an agnostic possessing no faith?

We can raise similar concern regarding the repercussions of profiting from Shmita fruit. In addition to Shmita's agricultural prohibition one is prohibited from engaging in any profitable transaction with fruit grown during the Shmita year. The Talmud predicts the severe hardships one will endure for violating this prohibition. His first repercussion will be his sale of all his fields and possessions. This process could continue and include the sale of his home and eventually even result in the sale of his daughter as a maid servant. (see Kiddushin 20a) These punishments seem extremely severe relative to their offense. There are many grave sins whose consequences are trivial in comparison to those of Shmita violations. What establishes Shmita so significant as to warrant these responses?

We can shed light on this entire subject through the Malbim's classic commentary on this week's haftorah. He explains that the prophet discusses three approach to one's faith in Hashem. Yirmiyahu showers praise and blessing upon one who places his total trust in Hashem. Although this person undoubtedly involves himself in securing his sustenance he realizes that Hashem is ultimately his true provider. A second prevalent attitude comes from those of dual allegiance, who place their trust in Hashem and in their personal efforts. Although this is certainly not a supreme form of service and doesn't receive words of praise it is nonetheless acceptable. There exists yet a third attitude amongst some, one that is totally unacceptable and condemned by the prophet. Yirmiyahu curses one who places total trust in his personal involvement without even including Hashem as a factor in the equation. This person totally disregards Hashem's involvement and believes that he obtains success and fortune exclusively through personal efforts.

These insightful words place the mitzvah of Shmita in its proper perspective. Every seventh year Hashem reminds us that He is constantly involved in our lives and sustenance. Hashem facilitates this recognition by restricting us from personal involvement in our livelihood for an entire year. One who adheres to Shmita's restrictions clearly demonstrates his total faith in Hashem as his provider. However, one who violates Shmita's laws shows his total belief and trust in his personal efforts. Hashem absolutely banned these efforts during that year and will undoubtedly have no part in helping them bear fruits. Such activity reflects a defiant attitude that Hashem need not be involved for one to succeed. He expresses to all that irrespective of Hashem's approval or involvement these efforts will nevertheless produce as usual.

This totally unacceptable attitude inevitably engages Hashem in a clear demonstration that all sustenance and provisions are ultimately His doing. Hashem's response to such misguided individuals will

be to gradually force them to sell their possessions in exchange for basic sustenance. This process helps them realize that all possessions come from Hashem and that He is their sole provider. A similar response will be given to the Jewish people when they display this defiant attitude. Hashem will remind them that He controls their lives and not themselves. Their failure to observe Shmita laws will cause them to forfeit their privilege of living in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Divine Providence. Conceivably whoever merits to live in Eretz Yisroel should sense Hashem's closeness and direct involvement in every step of their lives. If the entire nation fails to recognize this reality it truly has nothing to gain from dwelling in the king's palace. Hashem will therefore banish the people from His presence until they recognize and learn to appreciate His active role in their lives.

If we could only internalize this lesson our lives would be so much better. May we soon merit to return to our father's table with His full return to His people in the nearest future. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

AIn the middle of Parshat Behar, the Torah implores us to "perform the laws without logical explanations, the laws with logical explanations we should keep, and we should also perform them." (25:18, loose translation). The Torat Kohanim, which is brought down in Rashi (26:3), clarifies the reason why the verse uses different terms by explaining that it's not enough to just perform the commandments (Mitzvot), but we have to LIVE them. It goes on to explain that if a person just performs the Mitzvot without learning more about them, they will end up performing less, and resenting those that perform more. It would then make sense that we're commanded to keep (learn about the reasons) the commandments that have reasons, as well as performing those that we don't understand. But if we turn ahead to the very first verse of Parshat Bechukotai, the Torah adds a new requirement that we "walk in G-d's laws". What does it mean, and how does walking fit into our understanding?

Rav Nachum Zev explains that when a group of people is sitting, you can't tell when one of those people can't walk. It's only when they get up and walk away that you can tell. The same is true with Jews keeping the Torah's laws. The way to really tell if someone is keeping the commandments properly is by observing them as they "walk" in the world. It's critically important to follow the Torah's rules, and to understand them. But the final challenge is that when we're faced with everyday trials and tribulations, we don't give in to temptations, maintain those Torah standards, and walk the TRUE walk of life! © 2006 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.