

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd now, Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d ask of you, but only to fear Hashem, your G-d, to go in all of His ways and to love Him, and to serve Hashem, your G-d, with all of your heart and with all of your soul, to keep the commandments of Hashem and His statutes, which I (Moshe) am commanding you today, for your benefit” (Devarim 10:12-13). Sounds like G-d expects a lot from us, yet Moshe makes it seem as if it's not that much to ask, using the expression "but only." The Talmud (Berachos 33b) seems to ask this question, but only makes it worse. "Is fear of heaven a small matter? Yes, for Moshe it was a small matter." Aside from the fact that "fear of heaven" was only the first in a long list of things G-d asks of us, what does Moshe's relative ease of fearing G-d have to do with the rest of us? It may have been a "small matter" for him, but didn't he realize that for everyone else it isn't as easy?

The Kli Yakar answers this question by suggesting that the Talmud did not mean that only for Moshe (the individual) was it a small matter, but it was also a "small matter" for the entire generation that he led, or more specifically, the generation he was speaking to ("and now") that was about to enter the Promised Land. It may not be so easy for us, but for them, the Kli Yakar says, it was a "small matter." I'm not sure why the Torah would need to record for us Moshe telling them that it wasn't a difficult task for them. More than that, though, Moshe continues by telling that generation that G-d didn't really love them, only their forefathers (10:15), and that they needed to "circumcise their hearts and no longer stiffen their necks" (10:16), descriptions that would not seem to apply to a generation that found fearing G-d to be a "small matter."

The Or Hachayim addresses the first part of the question, explaining that the focal point in being able to accomplish the long list of things G-d expects of us is to fear Him. Once we have achieved "fearing G-d," loving Him and fulfilling all of His commandments to the fullest will follow. Therefore, there is really only one thing that G-d is asking of us, to fear Him; all the other things are a consequence of attaining "yiras shamayim," fear of heaven. This would explain why the Talmud only focuses on that one aspect, fear, when it wonders how it could be considered a "small matter." I would like to

build on this idea to try to answer our other question on the Talmud as well.

What exactly does "fear of heaven" mean? We find the term "fear" ("yirah") used in conjunction with several other words. Besides "fear of heaven" and "fear of G-d," there is "fear of sin" ("yiras hachet"), "fear of punishment" ("yiras ha'onesh"), and "fear (or awe) of how exalted G-d is" ("yiras haromemus"). Whatever definition we posit for the word "fear" must fit into all of its uses and contexts. Any suggestions to better understand this primary facet of serving G-d are more than welcome (RabbiDMK@cs.com), but I am going to suggest a definition consistent with what I have previously suggested is meant by "loving G-d" (www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/eikev.pdf).

"I have set Hashem before me constantly" (Tehilim 16:8). "This (picturing that G-d is always before you) is a great help regarding 'yirah" (Mishneh Berurah, O"C 1:4). Why is imagining that G-d is always there such a terrific tool in attaining/maintaining "fear of G-d?" It is only relevant to someone who already believes in G-d, it does not speak to the nature of G-d, and it doesn't change the person's perception of G-d. What it does do is make him or her constantly aware of G-d. The human being is the most intelligent of G-d's creatures, and anyone who is not aware of G-d (whether because they don't yet realize that there is a Creator or because they are distracted and are not taking G-d into account at the moment) places themselves (sometimes along with other humans) above everything else. Only when cognizant of a Higher Intelligence and the existence of spiritual beings does one realize that they are in the middle, above the rest of creation but below G-d and His administering angels. If the definition of "fear" in this context means to be aware of, "fear of G-d" would mean being fully aware of G-d (and taking Him into account before acting), "fear of sin" would mean being aware of the gravity and damage done to one's soul when a sin is committed, "fear of punishment" would mean being fully aware that there are severe consequences (aside from the automatic damage done to the soul) if one sins, and "fear of how exalted G-d is" would refer to the awareness of how awesome G-d is. It makes sense that once a person attains a full awareness of G-d, and maintains it constantly, that he will appreciate what G-d is (i.e. love G-d), and fulfill His commandments with a full heart knowing that ultimately it is to the person's benefit to follow the blueprint for life that He gave us.

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
WORLD WIDE WEB AT [HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG](http://AISHDAS.ORG).
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

The material presented in this publication was collected from publicly available electronic mail, computer archives and the UseNet. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any given synagogue.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
973-472-0180 OR EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

But that's only the second half of the equation. The first part is attaining that awareness, both of G-d's existence and of His nature. How does one accomplish that? If doing mitzvos "lishmah" (for the right reasons, because G-d commanded them and they therefore must be the best thing to do) comes after attaining "yirah," then doing them "shelo lishmah," for less than ideal reasons (because of the reward in the next world, because of peer pressure, and the like) must be those mitzvos done before attaining "yiras shamayim." By following the Torah even "shelo lishmah" we can purify the body and soul, focus our attention on the right things, remove our biases little by little, and come to a full realization of who G-d is and what He is.

When starting this spiritual journey (whether as a child, as an adult with little background, or as an adult with a strong background that never used the structure he built to house the flame), it can seem like a daunting task. Returning from sinful actions (which is how many commentators understand the verse quoted at the beginning of this piece) may seem impossible, as the severity of the sin can seem impossible to overcome. To this Moshe tells us that it's not so daunting, as G-d does not afflict us to punish us for the sin, but to make us aware that we need to change our ways. "All G-d wants from us is to fear Him," and as soon as we get there, there will no longer be a need to "punish" us. For those considering trying to start the journey, the corpus of Jewish law may seem too burdensome, so Moshe tells us that the purpose of following the mitzvos is to refine the human being in order to fully realize who G-d is and what He wants from us.

Does telling us that following the Torah leads to a fuller awareness of G-d make it any easier? Is it any less daunting a task? This is why the Talmud asks how Moshe could frame it in a way that makes it seem as if attaining "fear of G-d" is a "small matter." It's not a small matter; it can take years of work. Once one attains it, though, the realization includes recognizing that it really wasn't as difficult as it seemed when the journey started (or even during the journey). Mitzvah gorreres mitzvah, doing one mitzvah brings about the chance to do another mitzvah, and a sincere and sustained effort will be successful. It may not seem so easy before we get there, but once there it doesn't seem as if it were that difficult. Moshe was already there, and was trying to explain to us that it's really not that difficult to attain. "Is

fearing G-d a small matter?" the Talmud asks, and then answers that yes, for Moshe it was a small matter. What does this have to do with us? Because now we also know that once we start out on the journey, getting to the point of "fearing G-d" will not be as difficult as we thought it would be. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe's long oration to the people of Israel continues. He portrays for them the blessings and the lurking dangers that await them in the Land of Israel. He is aware of the temptations that they will face in establishing themselves in their new and ancient homeland. Moshe views his people as a type of recovering alcoholic - always prone to fall off the wagon when passing an establishment that dispenses alcoholic beverages. The Jewish people are always prone to revert to their Egyptian ways - to the influence of the pagan societies that surround them and have a strange allure to them.

Moshe knows he will not be present to try and protect them and he sadly predicts that problems will prevail. Coming into a new country, having to live in a natural instead of supernatural environment, adjusting to new leadership and different challenges all combine to create a difficult and tense situation for the Jewish people. Moshe's warnings are not limited to his generation or Yehoshua's generation but are aimed at the Jewish people in all of its generations.

Jews are always subject to foreign and many times anti-Torah influences. How to protect one's self from that constant difficulty of societal life has remained the perennial challenge of Jewish life throughout the ages. In our time this struggle has been intensified by the establishment of a Jewish state once gain in the Land of Israel. In short, the issue remains how to remain Jewish, nationally and personally, in a very large and influential non-Jewish world.

Moshe's solution is the old time-tested and true one - the study and observance of Torah and its value system. There is no other solution to the "Jewish problem." All of history literally shouts this answer from its story of Jewish life and existence over thousands of years. Moshe warns us not to search for other apparently beguiling answers that eventually bankrupt and lead only to further problems and disasters.

People always search for the "ekev" - the "because" and "why" of Jewish problems and challenges. Moshe answers the "ekev" problem by explaining that it is up to us to live up to the role that the Lord has ordained for us. The Lord eventually does not easily tolerate backsliding from the Jewish people. People may deem G-d's instructions to be irrelevant to their own society and stage of life but in reality these instructions are the keys to personal fulfillment and Jewish survival and triumph.

"Ekev" "because" is the absolute answer to understanding our current world and societal challenges. Rashi comments that "ekev" also means the idea that people step on G-d's commandments deeming them to be irrelevant to their lives. So Moshe wishes us to remember the "because" element of "ekev" as well to warn us not to trample on our heritage and disregard that uniqueness that can save us from the pitfalls of a non-Jewish world, devoid of holy values and lofty aims. There is no substitute for the authenticity of Moshe's message to us. His words should be heeded. © 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Remember the entire path along which the Lord your G-d led you these forty years in the desert, He sent hardships to test you." (Deut. 8:2)

"The land which you are about to inherit is not like Egypt." (11:10)

Our Biblical portion of Ekev devotes much praise to the glories of the Land of Israel - its majestic topography, its luscious produce, and its freely flowing milk and honey. And in order to conceptually explain the truly unique quality of our land promised us by G-d, the Biblical text - in chapters eight and eleven of the Book of Deuteronomy - contrasts the Land of Israel with the desert experience of manna on the one hand and the geographical and geological gifts of Egypt on the other, with Israel coming out far ahead. In this commentary - heavily inspired by Rav Elhanan Samet's "Studies of the Weekly Portions" - I shall attempt to understand what it is that makes the land of Israel so special .

The Israelite wanderers are hardly enamored with the manna they receive in the desert. Again and again they complain about the lack of meat and fish (Numbers 11:1-7), about the scarcity of water and fruits, crying out in despair, "Why did you bring G-d's congregation into this desert? So that we and our livestock should die? Why did you take us out of Egypt and bring us to this terrible place? [the desert] is an area where there are no plants, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, no water to drink." (11:4,5) And even in our portion of Ekev, G-d describes the desert years as years of "hardships to test you," of "chastisement and training" (Deut . (8:3,5). The moral message of the inexhaustible manna was merely to teach the people that the ultimate source of food is G-d, "so that you may observe His commandments and fear Him." (8:3,6)

Indeed, the desert's difficulties are contrasted with future life in the Land of Israel, the Torah narrative praising the Promised Land's blessings. In three packed verses (8:7-9) the land (erezt) - in contrast to the desert

- is referred to seven times, a chiasmic structure revealing in the seven special species of fruit for which Israel is esteemed (wheat , barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and date-honey), a "good land with flowing streams and underground springs, gushing out in valley and mountain, whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you will quarry copper."

The wondrous descriptions depict a wide range of foods and natural resources produced by the earth- from bread and olive oil to copper mines - all of which require serious human ingenuity, input and energy to create a partnership with G-d to properly develop the gifts inherent in the land . After all, to properly irrigate the fields rainwater must be collected and gathered through the underground springs, the making of bread requires eleven agricultural steps, oil must be carefully extracted from the olive trees by means of olive presses, and the copper must be painstakingly quarried from the depths of the mountains. It is precisely this partnership between G-d and humanity that is critically necessary to develop - and ultimately perfect - the world which we have been given .

It shouldn't surprise us that Egypt, representing the very antithesis of the desert ("the gift of the Nile," in the words of Herodotus) is where agriculture had initially developed - a development which made the land of the Pharaohs the most commanding power of the ancient world. And so chapter eleven of the Book of Deuteronomy, in our portion of Ekev , provides a dazzling parallel (verses 8-12) to the passage we discussed earlier (8:7-9), similarly emphasizing the "defining and leading" word eretz, land .

Interestingly enough, in our passage where "erezt" is mentioned seven times, the land of Israel is the focus of all but one, the fourth time , when it refers to Egypt. On one level the contrast is between land and desert, but the Torah's intention is to provide a contrast between Egypt and Israel, the latter introduced as the "land flowing with milk and honey" (11:9). The Biblical text continues: "Because the land you are about to inherit is not like Egypt, the place you left, where you could plant your seed and irrigate it with your feet, just like a vegetable garden." (11:10) Since the fertility of Egyptian land and the cultivation of its crops does not depend on rainfall but is effectively irrigated by the Nile's natural overflow and from the omnipresent moisture of the great river, Egyptians did not need to turn to the heavens for rain .

However, while Egyptian land may be easily cultivated, it remains a dry , desert valley, unlike Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey: milk derived from livestock grazing on fields of natural growing grass and honey from bees that thrive in areas blessed by a natural abundance of flora. It may be difficult to live only on milk and honey - but it is possible. And more importantly: "The land you are crossing to occupy is a land of mountains and valleys, which can be irrigated only by rain. It is therefore a land constantly under the

Lord your G-d's scrutiny; the eyes of the Lord your G-d are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." (Deut 11:11, 12)

Ancient Egypt had very little to offer in the G-d-human partnership. The rich, fertile soil of the 'gift of the Nile' makes the agricultural process a relatively simple one, its dependency on rain removed. Israel, abundant in its natural supply of resources, nevertheless must rely heavily both on plentiful rainfall as well as human input for a successful agricultural crop. And since Israel must rely on G-d - the obvious source for rain - the Israelites must be worthy of G-d's grace by dint of their ethical and moral conduct, their fealty to G-d's laws. Hence our Biblical portion concludes with a call to sensitive fulfillment of G-d's laws as the key to our successful harvesting of the land's produce. Perhaps this is really why Israel is called the land 'flowing with milk and honey: only milk and honey can be garnered without destroying any form of life whatsoever - human, animal or plant. © 2009 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

With the headlines in the newspapers shouting the latest scandals, there are several thoughts we should focus on and lessons that we should learn. First, we have an obligation from the Torah to judge righteous people favorably as it is written in Leviticus 19:15, "You shall judge your fellow man with righteousness."

We learn from the Genesis 11:5: "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower (of Babel) which the children of man built." The Midrash Tanchuma reminds us that the Almighty did not have to come down to view the tower;

He did so to teach judges not to condemn someone until they investigate and understand the entire situation. The lesson applies to us, too.

Mark Twain once said, "If you don't read the newspaper, you are uninformed. If you do read the newspaper, you are misinformed." Anyone who has ever had an article written about himself in a newspaper or magazine knows this for a fact. Anyone who had dealt with the legal system knows that not everything is as it seems to be or as it is represented to the public.

The role of the Jewish people is to be a light unto the nations-a moral beacon and example of how a righteous people should live. In Deuteronomy 7:6, the Almighty tells us: "For you are a holy people to the Lord, your G-d; the Lord your G-d has chosen you to be a treasured nation from all of the nations that are on the face of the earth." This is our banner, this is our mission and our destiny.

The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) is our personal declaration of belief, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d the Lord is One." Following the Shema, the Torah writes

"And you shall love the Lord, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might (possessions)." How are we to love G-d?

The Talmud (Yoma 86a) clarifies that: "This verse in a directive to behave in a manner that will cause the Name of Heaven to be beloved. One should study Torah and serve Torah scholars, be honest in his business dealings, and speak pleasantly to others. Then people will say about him, 'Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah. Fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah. Woe to those who have not learned Torah. See how pleasant are the ways and how proper are the actions of this person who has learned Torah.'" The Talmud continues: "If, however, someone studies Torah and serves Torah scholars, but is not honest in his business dealings and does not speak pleasantly to others, what do people say about him? ' Woe to that person who learned Torah. Woe to his father who taught him Torah. Woe to his teacher who taught Torah. See how corrupt are the actions and how ugly are the ways of this person who has learned Torah.' "This is called Chilul HaShem, desecration of G-d's name and is one of the most serious of all transgressions. Anything one does to make people despise G-d or His teachings-or to look down upon the Jewish people or the Torah, is included in this transgression. Chilul HaShem is one of 24 offenses punishable by excommunication. A person who wishes to repent should do the exact opposite of the transgression by sanctifying G-d's name and bringing many people to true Torah observance.

What is our lesson? In everything that we do we must realize that the Almighty is watching us and thus act with integrity and fairness. Our honesty must go beyond the requirements of the law. We must remember who we are and our mission to bring the world to holiness and perfection. The Almighty Himself commanded us: "Do what is upright and good in G-d's eyes, so that He will be good to you" (Deuteronomy 7:17), and, "You shall be holy for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Each of us must strive our best to integrate these ideals into our lives and our behavior.

The Torah states: "For if you shall diligently keep all these commandments which I command you to do them, to love the Lord, your G-d, to walk in all His ways and to cleave to Him..." (Deuteronomy 11:22).

How does one "cleave to the Almighty?"

The Torah tells us that even someone who observes all of the commandments and has attained the attribute of loving G-d, must emulate G-d ("to walk in all His ways") in order to cleave to Him. Emulating G-d means being compassionate and bestowing kindness upon others. ("He is merciful so we should be merciful, He bestows kindness, so we should bestow kindness" -Rashi).

One might think that a person who loves G-d need only devote himself to prayer and Torah study and by this means he will cleave to G-d. We see from this verse, however, that an essential ingredient in cleaving to G-d is caring about our fellow man. *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As a child I attended Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. Every day when coming to morning services I was mesmerized by an older man named Rabbi Chaim Gelb. I can still remember Reb Chaim calling out "Amen." Sometimes he'd give me a candy and ask me to recite a blessing so that he could mightily respond "Amen."

At Yeshiva University rabbinical school years later, I was deeply influenced by the saintly Rav Dovid Lifschitz. I can still remember Rav Dovid on Simchat Torah surrounded by his students leading us in the niggun "ve-taher libeynu"- words in which we call out to G-d to purify our hearts. It seemed to me whenever Rav Dovid would pray it would be in the spirit of that niggun.

This week's portion offers a halakhic base that enhances the meaning of both of these stories. The torah states "u'le-avdo bekol levavkhem." "And you shall serve G-d with all your heart." (Deuteronomy 10:10) Maimonides concludes that this is the source of prayer. U'leavdoh means that every day we are obligated in prayer.

It would seem that Rambam believes that prayer is a religious obligation. I may not feel like praying-still there is a religious imperative to serve G-d daily.

This was my sense of Reb Chaim Gelb's prayer. Standing before G-d he would call out "Amen." One could sense the great joy he felt in fulfilling the mitzvah of prayer.

There may be another way to understand Maimonides. Without G-d many people feel a deep sense of loneliness. For these individuals, life has no meaning if G-d is absent. Like a lover who constantly longs for his beloved, so does one feel constant despair without G-d. From this perspective, one prays daily as one is in constant search of the Lord without whom life is impersonal, void and empty.

This latter approach to Rambam fundamentally differs with the first. In the first, the desire to pray does not emanate from the petitioner but from G-d. We, therefore, have an obligation, whether we feel it or not, to serve G-d daily. In the second approach the need to pray comes from the petitioner as an expression of constant angst if G-d is not present.

This was the feeling behind the fervent prayer of Rav Dovid Lifschitz. In his heartfelt "ve-taher" I sensed a tzaddik who felt ongoing emotional spiritual

pain if he was not in rendezvous with G-d. Like a fish seeking water, Rav Dovid sought the ongoing presence of G-d.

My father-in-law, Zalman Aryeh Hilsenrad, was a deeply devout Jew. He named his first book (a compilation of articles he wrote for the Jewish Press) "Tzam'ah Nafshi, My Soul Thirsts." Years later he penned a second volume. He called it "My Soul Thirsts Still," nothing less than our second approach to Rambam.

The challenge is to realize that during prayer both approaches are necessary. Solely praying to G-d without listening to our souls minimizes our individual worth. At the same time, expressing only our individual needs to G-d is selfish. May we be blessed to find the balance of listening to G-d and listening to ourselves. © 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 PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

“If you will listen-aikev-to these judgments and observe and do them..." (Devarim 7:12)

"If you will listen to the easy mitzvos that people tend to trample on with their heels-aikev (i.e., not take seriously)" (Rashi)

Tisha B'Av behind us, we are now into the seven weeks of consolation, which will walk us up to Rosh Hashanah, b"H. In a sense, the Three Weeks prior to and including Tisha B'Av, and the seven weeks that follow Tisha B'Av, seem so different from each other; they seem to represent two entirely different Jewish moods. The former seem to deal more with a millennia-old historical issue, whereas the latter deals with the here-and-now: Judgment day is coming; how good were you last year, and what will you get next year? They are, of course, two sides of the same coin, and of course, this week's parshah explains how. Indeed, the very title of the parshah? Aikev? sums it all up in one word, which translates as "heel", but given its deeper meaning, it could just as easily translate as, "heal". The key operating word here is sensitivity, which success in this world, in the true sense of the word, depends upon. True, without sensitivity, one can become the richest person in the world, or the most brilliant physicist, or even become a leader of people. However, if he wants to be known for more than his wealth, brilliance, or leadership qualities, he is going to have to be sensitive. Then a person has a chance to be given the ultimate compliment: he or she is a great person.

The Talmud states: "A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him." (Sotah 3a) However, what the Talmud really means to say is: A person does not sin unless he becomes insensitive. Insensitive to what? Insensitive to the opportunity of life,

insensitive to his potential, insensitive to the damage his behavior causes, and insensitive to the cost of sinning. The Talmud is saying that no matter what the sin, it is, in the end, just not worth it, and if you can't see that, then something is missing from your perspective that denies you the ability to avoid wasting your life.

That is the answer to "eichah" about which we spoke with regard to Shabbos Chazon (Parashas Devarim). How did things ever get so bad? How did you take the good life, and toss it away for a spiritually decrepit life? How does anything that was once so right become so wrong over time? The answer: desensitization. Desensitization is the downfall of any person, or society for that matter, for it allows people to become spiritually rotten to the core, until society as a whole collapses under its own spiritual weight. It is to this that aikev in this week's parshah refers. No matter what the mitzvah, one must deal with it very seriously, for each and every mitzvah is the word of G-d. If people can "step" all over a mitzvah, then it means they have become desensitized to Torah and mitzvos, and above all, to G-d Himself, as the mishnah says:

"Be careful with a 'minor' mitzvah as with a 'major' one, for you do not know the reward for the mitzvos. Consider the loss incurred for performing a mitzvah compared to its reward, and the reward received for sinning compared to the loss." (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

For, it is G-d Who determines the reward for mitzvos, and for us to decide on our own which mitzvos matter to us and which ones do not, then we are ignoring what G-d Himself might think of them. What's worse is that we are assuming that we understand the Divine mind, so-to-speak, enough to make decisions that really belong only to G-d, a very dangerous path to walk. Hence, the seven weeks of consolation are more like seven weeks of becoming re-sensitized to what counts the most in life, and how best to achieve it on a consistent basis. They are for becoming re-sensitized to the need to become re-sensitized, and it will be our level of success for which we will be judged on Rosh Hashanah, and which we will work on improving during the Aseres Yemai Teshuva-the Ten Days of Repentance.

What should we be doing to succeed?

There is a story about Rav Saadya Gaon (882-942 CE) that makes the point, one upon which each person can build. The story is told of how Rav Saadya Gaon used to travel from town to town to speak to the Jews of various different communities to spiritually strengthen them, and to answer any halachic questions that might have arisen. Exile, at that time, had been new to the Jewish people, and having been spread out thin, the ability to clarify halachah was not as easy as it used to be, or as it is today.

However, it was also before the time of printing presses and cameras, so it was not uncommon for so great a man to not be known by his face amongst the

masses of Jews across the Diaspora. This had clearly been the case when the Gaon arrived at an Inn to take a room in the town before which he was to speak the next day.

"I'm sorry," the Innkeeper said politely, thinking that he was talking to a common Jew, "but there are no rooms available. The great Saadya Gaon is coming to speak, and all the rooms are taken already!"

Being the humble man that he was, Rav Saadya did not let on that he was indeed the great man that people had come to hear, saying only, "Surely you must have some kind of room for me?"

The Innkeeper, being a kind man, thought for a moment, and said, "Look, I have a room, but it is not much. But, it has a bed and a sink, and should suffice for a night, if you want it."

"It sounds fine," the Gaon said, happy to have a place to stay for the night.

After checking in, the great rabbi bid the Innkeeper "Good Night," and went to his room where he spent a peaceful night.

The next day, the Gaon addressed the town's Jews, of which one happened to be the same Innkeeper. However, as the Innkeeper came closer to the podium from which the Gaon spoke, he could not believe his eyes, and recognizing his guest from the previous night, his heart sank in his chest. I made the greatest rabbi of our time sleep in a room that is barely bigger than a closet! he thought to himself in despair. What kind of sin have I done! The man could barely contain himself the entire time the Gaon spoke. However, he had no choice but to wait until the Gaon finished speaking, at which time the Innkeeper planned to run and throw himself at the feet of the great rabbi, and beg for forgiveness, which is exactly what he did. "FORGIVE ME," the man sobbed. "Forgive me, for I did not know who the Gaon was when I saw him! Had I known," the Innkeeper said through his bitter tears, "I would have given the great rabbi my own room and catered to his every need!"

Surprised by the Innkeeper's profound sense of regret, the Gaon tried to calm his host down by telling him, "Calm down, my good man," adding "You treated me with perfect respect, and I was more than satisfied with the room in which I slept. There is nothing for which to forgive you!" However, seeing how distraught the man was, the Gaon told him, "But to calm you down, I will forgive you in any case. I forgive you completely, and with a complete heart."

Barely satisfied, the man hesitatingly let go of the Gaon's legs, and made his way back home, while the Gaon finished speaking to the leaders of the community, before leaving for his own home town. Days went by, and it wasn't long before the Innkeeper put the incident behind him, trusting that the great Saadya Gaon had indeed forgiven him for his mistake. However, not the Gaon. Rather than forget the incident, the Gaon took some very serious Mussar from it, and

one night, he could be heard by his students in the Bais Midrash, while he cried and rolled around outside in the snow.

Coming to investigate the matter, to see if someone indeed needed their help, the students were shocked to see their master in such a state. Seeing their puzzlement and concern, the Gaon recounted the entire story of the Innkeeper, adding: "And then, on the way home, it occurred to me: If this humble man, upon learning my true identity, was further humbled to the point that he threw himself at my feet and begged for my forgiveness, even though he had acted perfectly fine given his knowledge at the time of who I was, how much more so must we throw ourselves before G-d, and beg for His forgiveness, as our awareness of Who He is increases with each passing day, even though given our previous knowledge, we may have acted fine at the time!?"

In other words, and there are many midrashim to this effect, though we may be content with our present lifestyles and approaches to G-d and His Torah, that is, more than likely, only because of our present state of awareness. With a higher level of awareness, our present level of living may become unacceptable to us, and motivate us to change for the better. What you don't know, can indeed hurt you. Such ignorance can deny you higher levels of sensitivity necessary to get more out of life than you are presently getting, and more importantly, more out of life in the next world, in Olam HaBah. In that world, we will become fully aware of what we could have been, and the portion of eternal bliss we could have received, had we made a point of becoming more aware, and therefore, more sensitive to the opportunity of life during our lives on earth.

Now is the time to think about this. During these seven weeks of consolation, the build up to the judgment of Rosh Hashanah, it is time to overhaul our system, and to upgrade. The Three Weeks were supposed to help us to realize just insensitive we have become, and the seven weeks that follow are designed to help us to take Mussar from them, in order to rectify the situation, while we still can.

When we do that, we transform the "heel" of aikev into "heal", for then all mitzvos become important to us, which allows us to rectify ourselves, and the world as well. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

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

One of the foundations of the Torah, included by the Rambam in his list of thirteen main principles, is the belief in reward and punishment. In this week's portion, we have been commanded to recite this principle morning and night, to write it on our doorposts, to bind it onto our hands, and to think about it whether

we are sitting in our houses or traveling on a road. In the passage of Shema, "And it will come to pass if you listen" [Devarim 11:13], we are taught not only about the existence of reward and punishment but also about the essence of these matters. The punishment is the exile of Bnei Yisrael from their land, while the reward is to partake of the fruits of the land and to be satiated from its goodness.

However, when we look at our own generation it may seem to us that events do not seem to behave according to this principle. How can we believe that sins are the cause of our being exiled from our land, when the sinners are the ones who have been privileged to rebuild the land after two thousand years of exile? To put this into sharper focus, how can we reconcile the principle of reward and punishment with the well known prediction in the Talmud that Mashiach will arrive in a generation that is totally guilty?

In his book "Daat Tevunot" the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lucato) writes that the Almighty guides the world on two levels: Divine guidance and guidance by justice. The principle of justice is what is explained in this week's Torah portion, and this is what caused us to be expelled from our land into the long and difficult exile. This is what we deserved as a result of our terrible deeds. The return from exile, on the other hand, involves a unique Divine guidance which reveals that all of the complex events taking place, even if caused by human sins, always remain within the bounds of Divine control as part of His plan to bring ultimate good into the world.

Divine guidance represents G-d's absolute good-the reason that He created the world and the reason that He recreates it anew day after day. Redemption is the ultimate expression of the world in which we live, and that is why Rabbi Yehoshua is able to state (as the Rambam notes in his book of halacha) that redemption does not depend on repentance at all. G-d's plan has control over all the historical processes, and this guides events in such a way that everything will unconditionally reach the proper end.

At the same time, the revelation of this ultimate good does not relieve us of the obligation to read the passage "And it will come to pass if you listen." Even though the complete repair of the world is a Divine plan which will take place whether we are worthy of it or not, we still have the power to make this happen soon or to delay it for a relatively long time. "If they have not been privileged, the redemption will come in its due time, but if they have been privileged, I will rush its time" [Sanhedrin 88a]. The words of the GRA are well known: the simple interpretation of the verse is that both types of redemption must come simultaneously-"It will come in its due time and also be rushed" [Yeshayahu 60:22]. What this means to us is that even when the time for Divine mercy has arrived, according to G-d's plan of redemption, we must do all we can to shorten the process and to decrease the days of evil. In this way we

will once again be worthy of the great light that will be revealed to us from the point of view of the guidance based on justice.

"One who Takes Advantage of the Crown will Fade Away" by Rabbi Amichai Gordin, Yeshivat Har Etzion and Shaalvim High School

I reprint below a letter that I sent to my students who are serving in the IDF. I hesitated about whether to publish it because of the issues involved. In the end I decided that in spite of its personal and intimate nature, the contents are important enough that it is worthwhile to make it public.

The letter is on the subject of shaving. I asked my students if they want to grow a beard while in the army for reasons related to religion or for their own convenience. I told them that if the beard is for personal reasons and not because of religious conviction they should remove it. They then asked if they should keep the beard even if it is indeed for religious reasons.

I want to wish you all a good week. Let G-d watch over you as he watched over our ancestors from the time of Egypt until now.

Aviad called me on Friday. Among other things, he told me about the subject of the beards and I told him my opinion. Since this is an important issue and I have an opportunity to write about it, I will summarize what I think.

Let me tell you about something that happened to me many years ago. I was in an officers' training course, and the Fast of Gedalia took place. Near the end of the fast we had a "weekly review" scheduled. I fasted on that day, and since to the best of my knowledge the IDF rules did not require soldiers who were fasting to participate in any activity, I did not appear for the review.

A few hours later my commander asked me why I had not come to the review, and I replied that I was fasting. When he asked me, "Did you feel too weak to come?" I didn't reply.

The following week was one of the worst times of my entire life. I will not go into details about what happened to me that week. It is enough to note that I was put on trial twice for disciplinary failures, and that I was confined to my base as a punishment.

We do not know how closely G-d guides our lives and how he punishes us for our actions, but I was absolutely sure at the time that my troubles were a result of the way I had taken advantage unnecessarily of the fast in order to gain a free hour. I had failed, big time.

We should be very wary before we make use of G-d's name. We must be very careful not to take any advantage of the Torah. Even if the reason that we grow a beard makes no difference at all to the army, we must never make use of G-d's name in vain.

Decide whatever you want, but please be sure of one thing-do not use G-d's name in vain. If you keep

your beard for religious reasons, that is good. But if it is only an excuse do not do it. Your personal integrity is worth much more than whether you shave or not for few days. Be honest with your own selves. There is no substitute for internal personal integrity.

We are not slaves within the IDF. The obligation to obey the commands does not mean complete self-deprecation in the face of our officers' orders. One is allowed to search for legitimate ways to get out of obeying silly orders that the army sometimes gives to its soldiers. But even if the goal is appropriate, we must never make use of the crown of Torah in a distorted way. Even with respect to rules that seem silly to us, such as whether to have a beard or not, it is forbidden to make use of Jewish customs in order to avoid obeying them.

It is important to keep our distance from fraud and deception in general. Even more so we must stay away from fraud that is based on halacha and the Torah.

The sages taught us, "He who takes advantage of the crown will fade away" [Avot 1:13]. Anybody who makes unnecessary use of the Torah will be called to account for his deeds. *(This article is dedicated with appreciation and esteem for the IDF recruits of Av 5769, including the students of the fortieth graduating class of Yeshivat Har Etzion.)*

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Ekev introduced us to the popular phrase "Man does not live by bread alone" (8:3). However, end of that verse is far less famous, although the second part contains the true message. It reads, "Rather, by everything that emanates from the mouth of G-d does man live." If the point is that G-d's emanations are the source of our lives, why use bread as the subject, when bread only becomes edible through the toils of man? Wouldn't fruits be a better example of G-d's influence on the world?

I heard Rabbi Greenberg and saw Rav Hirsch explain that bread is used as the subject because it exemplifies the toils of man, and that the message here is that even when you toil for the bread you eat, don't forget that Hashem (G-d) has toiled for everything that we have, and His goal is not just to sustain us, but to help us live physically AND spiritually. Man should not only seek physical nourishment from the work of his hands, but should seek spiritual nourishment from the word of his G-d. © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.



www.chabadnj.org