

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt... you must obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; you must not forget.” [Deut. 25:17-19]

The command to obliterate Amalek in the very last verses of this week's portion of Ki Tetzee is very apt - and may indeed serve as a fitting end to last week's portion of Shoftim as well. After all, both of these readings deal with warfare - the necessity to destroy the enemy who rises up to destroy you. The Bible has a category of warfare called an "obligatory war," (milhemet mitzvah) understood by the Mishnah (B.T. Sotah 44b) as a war to which "...every Israelite must join, even a bridegroom from his bridal room and a bride from her nuptial canopy." The Talmud in Sanhedrin iterates and re-iterates, "If one is coming with intent to murder [an innocent human being], you must rise up earlier and kill him." We do not subscribe to a doctrine of "turn the other cheek." On the contrary, when confronted by consummate evil, "You must destroy the evil from within your midst."

The bitter truth is that one who stands by silently in the face of evil inadvertently becomes an accomplice to evil; "one dare not stand by silently while one's brethren's blood is being shed," teaches our Torah. One cannot love the good unless one labors to banish evil.

Having said all of this, however, what is the meaning of the command to "...obliterate the memory of Amalek." Amalek is consummate evil: "they [the Amelikites] came upon you as if by accident on your way [out of Egyptian slavery]; when you were tired and exhausted, they cut off those who were lagging in the rear, [the "weaker vessels" who were not in any way displaying belligerence, those who were falling behind, the innocent women and children, the aged and the infirm]. Amalek, in recent history, was the Nazi machinery of murder that effectively removed the slightest semblance of morality and compassion from the world -the killing of millions of innocent children and the aged without blinking an eye. In contemporary terms, Amalek are the suicide bombers targeting innocent civilians, and the more children they take with them the better. No compassion, no morality, no humanity.

"Obliterate, destroy Amalek" ought to be the commandment; what is meaning of obliterating the memory of Amalek?

Although what we have just written is true, it is not the Biblical ideal. Unlike the Greco-Romans, we never sang our song in praise of armaments and strong, virile soldiers, as in the opening phrase of Virgil's Aeneid ("Arma virumque cano"), glorifying war that tests the mettle and strengthens the fiber of the citizenry. Our prophetic song was sung in praise of peace, a time when "...nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore." The Sages of the Mishnah teach that armaments are a burden, a disgrace to a civilization which forces anyone to wage war, never to be considered an ornament permitted on the Sabbath. Weapons are permitted to be carried on the Sabbath only in life-endangering situations! (B.T. Shabbat 63a)

Yes, Seneca taught: "If you wish to have peace, you must prepare for war" - the inscription David ben Gurion assigned to Israel's military bases. But this is precisely the point. War is never an ideal; it is only a necessary preventive measure (and even an obligatory war may only be considered at best a necessary evil) against those who would destroy us. Because the Israelite nation was entrusted by G-d to teach morality and righteousness to the world, we must fight against those who would destroy us and destroy our morality; and since in any given war there is only one victor, it behooves us to fight to win - as the verses in Shoftim and Ki Tetzee clearly imply. But the ultimate vision before our eyes must always be peace.

From this perspective, we understand the Biblical stricture to the special Kohen anointed for exhorting and inspiring the troops "...not to be faint-hearted, not to be afraid, not to panic, not to break ranks... for the Lord your G-d is the One going out [to do battle] for you... and He will save you (Deut 20:3,4). But at the same time, "...when you approach a city to wage war against it, you must first propose a peaceful settlement (ibid 20:10)," the most crucial aspect of which is the acceptance of the Seven Noahide laws of morality by the enemy: "Thou Shalt not Murder, Thou Shalt not Steal, Thou Shalt not Commit Adultery..." Maimonides' formulation of this Biblical demand (Laws of Kings 6,1) reads, "It is forbidden to make war against any human being in the world unless you first offer him a peace settlement" - and Maimonides (as well as Nahmanides) agree that this includes Amalek as well as

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the seven indigenous nations of the land of Canaan. The goal, you see - if it be at all possible - is not the destruction of evildoers but rather the transformation of evil, the redemption of evil, when the evildoer repents and accepts at least the seven Noahide laws of morality. Our goal is to obliterate the memory of Amalek by making Amalek repent and accept the G-d of peace and morality.

Cynics among us might claim that it's impossible to convert Amalek! However, a fascinating section in the Talmud explains that the genesis of Amalek (the child born to Timna from Elifaz the son of Esau) begins when none among Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob are willing to convert Timna when she appears before each of them requesting conversion (B.T. Sanhedrin 99b). The Talmud further states that the grandchildren of Haman (the Aggagi, the Amaleki) taught Torah in B'nei Brak (B.T. Sanhedrin 96b) - and there are those who add the words, "...and who was it [this grand-child of Haman]? R. Akiba."

Be that as it may, as long as Amalek is out to destroy us, we must destroy him. We must continually hope, however, that we will have the merit of converting him, especially during this season of repentance. At that point, we shall have obliterated his very memory.
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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"For the first born [who is] the son of the hated [wife] he (the father) should recognize (acknowledge) to give him [the] double-portion" (Devarim 21:17). The Torah makes it abundantly clear that it is not up to the father to decide who is considered the "bechor" (first-born). Although he can give "gifts" to anyone who wants (including children other than his first born son), it must be as a "gift;" it cannot be as an "inheritance."

The common understanding is that the "double-portion" that the Torah says goes to the first-born is compensation for the added responsibility usually placed upon him, taking care of the needs of the household. Being that the father cannot decide which of his children is best-qualified to handle this responsibility, there must be more to why the status of the "bechor" can only apply to the son that is the father's first-born.

The Chizkuni (Bamidbar 3:12), tells us the following: "The first born were not supposed to get an inheritance so that they wouldn't be busy with anything but the service of G-d, [and] would be zealous and knowledgeable about it; and once the Levi'im were taken in their places, G-d commanded that an inheritance should not be given to them (to the Levi'im), only the tithes should be given to them, and therefore the first born gets a double portion - the portion he is supposed to get and the portion that would have gone to the Levi." Although there is much to be discussed about this Chizkuni, it seems that the double-portion the first-born gets is somehow related to the Levi taking over the role the "bechor" would have had in the Temple service, had the first-born not lost their status after the sin of the golden calf. Why the "bechor" gets more still needs to be investigated.

If the "bechor" was not going to get any portion (so he could focus on serving G-d), and the Levi was going to get an inheritance in the land, the swap in status should just mean that the Bechor gets one portion instead of none and the Levi gets none instead of one. Why does the Bechor get two, "one that he was supposed to get and the portion that would have gone to the Levi," if he originally wasn't supposed to get any? (This question is quoted by Rabbi Yehudah Nachshoni, who leaves it unanswered.) It is also awkward that the "bechor" is being sort-of rewarded for not stepping forward to prevent/protest against the golden calf and not joining Moshe to eradicate its affects (see Shemos 32:26-29) by getting a double-inheritance, when he would have received no inheritance had they done the right thing.

One of the Rishonim (early commentators, of which he was one) that the Chizkuni often bases his commentary on is the Bechor Shor, who expresses a similar idea (Bamidbar 3:13). "Those=2 0that serve in the Mishkan are not appropriate for inheritance so that they won't think about work, only the service of G-d, that they should be zealous and knowledgeable about it. And the first born takes a double portion in the inheritance, and therefore G-d took the Levi'im in their places and commanded that inheritance should not be given to them." Did you notice the difference between the way the Chizkuni put it and how the Bechor Shor said it? Both put forth the idea that those who work in the Temple should not get an inheritance so that they can focus their full attention on serving G-d (an idea also stated by the Rambam, Hilchos Shemita ve'Yovel 13:12). However, whereas the Chizkuni starts off with the "bechor" getting none (because they were going to work in the Temple) and then getting a double-portion after the Levi'im took over their role, the Bechor Shor seems to start off with the "bechor" getting a double-portion, which allows the Levi'im to get none. Although it is certainly possible that the Chizkuni reversed the order because this is how he understood the intent of the Bechor Shor (with my trying to understand the wording

of the Bechor Shor so many centuries after it was written limiting my ability to properly understand what the Bechor Shor - or the Chizkuni, for that matter - meant), a straight-forward reading of the Bechor Shor's words indicate that something else is going on here.

I would like to suggest that rather than the "bechor" getting a double-portion as a payment for the additional responsibilities he has, it is designed to cover his lost revenue/additional expenses incurred because of the work he couldn't get done because of those responsibilities. I don't mean just his representing the family when it comes to material needs, such as going to Beis Din (Jewish court) if there is a case against another family. And I don't mean just taking care of family business such as caring for an elderly parent. I am suggesting that the "bechor" still maintains his role as a spiritual leader, designated as the one to travel to the closest "City of Levi'im" (read: family poseik) when a question needs to be asked, and the one that has to give direction (when needed) to the rest of the family.

While the father is still alive, it all belongs to him. The "bechor" may be the family-leader in training. He may be the most active helper of all the sons. He may even "run the business" when the father is away or not able to run it himself. Nevertheless, as long as there is no "inheritance," there is no "double-portion" to speak of. After the father passes away and the land is divided, each son is responsible for his own portion, reaping the profits if he is successful. However, the "bechor" is the one who must take care of their elderly mother. (Even if all the children must do so, as the family "CEO," the "bechor" must make sure she is being cared for properly.) He represents the family to anyone outside the family. And he must also make sure that the family is heading in the right direction, keeping the Torah and its laws. These additional responsibilities take time, time that could have otherwise been spent making his field, his "inheritance," more productive. Or he must hire workers to do what the other brothers can do themselves but he can't, thereby diminishing the profitability of his fields. The bottom line is that he gets less out of each square cubit of his land than his brothers get from theirs. Giving him a double-portion is not designed to give him more than his brothers, but to allow him to come away with the same amount as his brothers.

From this perspective, the "bechor" isn't being "rewarded" after the golden calf. Instead, he still has the responsibility to be the spiritual head of the family, but now has to work the fields to make a living. In order that he not get less than his other brothers, the Torah gives him a double-portion of the inheritance.

The Bechor Shor is telling us that once the tithes were taken away from the first-born, they had to be given a double-portion in order to maintain the same income level as their brothers. Getting a double-portion therefore occurred concurrently with the Temple service (and tithes) being taken away from the first-born,

followed by the service and tithes being given to the Levi'im. The Chizkuni is saying the same thing, only in a way that tells us the Levi'im were given the Temple service and tithes at the same time they were taken away from the first-born

Had the first-born retained their status, the "non-bechor" would have received much less land (as Levi would have received a full inheritance) and he would still have to give a tenth to the "bechor." The Chizkuni's point is not that there was a trade of the portion that would have gone to the Levi'im now going to the first-born, but that the "non-bechor" isn't losing out even though his eldest brother gets a double-portion. Not having to give one twelfth of the land to the Tribe of Levi is evened out by the additional portion given to the "bechor," a portion that allows the "bechor" to feed his family as well as his brothers can feed theirs. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's Torah reading begins with all of the ills that can befall a domestic society - lust and exploitation of other human beings, especially women by men in a dominant male society; unhappy marriages, dysfunctional families and disputes over inheritances that wreck family life; and finally seriously troubled, rebellious and violent children that defy all authority, especially parental authority. We are all witness almost daily to these circumstances and occurrences in our general and specific societies.

The Torah in the parsha deals only with the treatment of the symptoms and not with the pathology that lies behind the problems. It attempts to protect the abused woman, to bring order into the rights and priorities of potential heirs and to punish the wayward son. Yet it does not directly comment on the underlying causes that generate such painful issues and heartbreaking problems.

It is not that the Torah is unaware of the causes of the problems that it describes. Rather it is that the Torah always "descends into the exploration of the human psyche" and thus always presumes that in spite of all of its warnings, commandments and values instructions human beings - good decent people - fall prey to weaknesses and do not wish to gaze at the consequences of their previous behavior.

If all of the preceding parshiyot of the Torah did not impress the reader to understand how to raise children, how to enter and conduct a marriage, how to treat other human beings with dignity and respect, then repeating these lessons now is almost useless. The Torah merely points out for us that the facts, the results of life and our previous behavior in it, speak for themselves in the results that now face and challenge us. We already know the causes for these problems. The Torah now wishes us to see the results of those

causes for ourselves as they manifest themselves in our lives.

There is also an element present in our lives that always remains inexplicable to human reasoning and understanding. The greatest, smartest and most wonderful parents sometimes raise dysfunctional if not even monstrous offspring. The example of Yitzchak and Rivka with Eisav or of King David with Avshalom rise before us

And the opposite situations as well where people of dubious character and sinful behavior raise children of outstanding merit such as Terach with Avraham or Lavan with Leah and Rachel. In short, quick and easy judgments as to the causes of family behavior in these matters are not in place. There are too many variables and the freedom of choice entrusted to every human being for good or for better remains paramount in human behavior.

Therefore perhaps the Torah does not dwell upon the deeper causes of the dysfunctional and wrongheaded behavior that it describes in the parsha. Instead it concentrates upon the behavior itself and its resultant problems and consequences. The hidden things belong to an inscrutable Heaven but it is our task to do the best we can and follow the general principles and values as well as the specific commandments of the Torah and pray to G-d for success and achievement. © 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One of the most esoteric laws in the Torah is yibum, the law of the Levirate marriage. The Torah forbids a man from marrying his brother's wife, but if one brother dies childless, one is obligated to marry his deceased brother's widow. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

The Torah offers a rationale for this command. The marriage takes place so that the deceased name will continue on. In truth, the words of the Torah: "The first born (from the Levirate marriage)...shall succeed to the name (shaim) of his dead brother, so that his (the dead brother) name not be blotted out...from Israel." (Deuteronomy 25:6)

In truth, this law is saturated with the principle of chesed-kindness. The greatest kindness may be helping the dead who are after all, unable to help themselves. Through yibum, the deceased leaves a legacy in the world—a child born of those closest to him who carries the name of the deceased.

It is, in fact, a conscious decision of the living brother and the childless widow to keep the name of the deceased alive that permits what is otherwise an incestuous relationship—the marriage of a man to his

sister in law. Rabbi David Silber notes that three cases in Tanach of yibum follow an interesting pattern.

In the first, Lot has relations with his daughters. Of course, this is not the exact case of yibum. Still, the intent of the daughters was the same—to continue their father's seed. But in this case of yibum, Lot who is drunk, has NO consciousness of the act being performed. (Genesis 19:30-38)

In the second, Yehudah (Judah) has relations with his daughter in law Tamar. This too is not the exact case of yibum. Still, Tamar's intent was to have a child from Yehudah. Here, Yehudah is originally unaware that he was engaging in an act of yibum, as Tamar was dressed as a harlot. In time, however, Yehudah comes to recognize what he had done. And, AFTER the fact, he realizes that he had continued his seed through Tamar. (Genesis 38)

In the third, Boaz has relations with Ruth. This too is not the exact case of yibum since Boaz was the second redeemer in line. Still, the goal was to continue the line of Ruth's deceased husband. In this case, Boaz engages in the Levirate marriage with full intent and consciousness BEFORE the act. (Ruth Chapter 4)

The pattern of yibum in Tanach is clear. From lack of consciousness, to consciousness after the act, to consciousness before. Not coincidentally the Messiah comes from Lot and his daughters, Judah and Tamar, Ruth and Boaz. Individuals engaged in acts of kindness on behalf of others are destined to redeem the world. © 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 DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah displays Hashem's boundless love for the Jewish people. In the end, after a long painful exile, the Jewish people will be granted permission to return to Eretz Yisroel. Most appropriately, the prophet Yeshaya opens and invites Yerushalayim to rejoice over the ingathering of her exiles. He says, "Rejoice barren city who never expected such an overwhelming influx within your walls...Extend your annexes without interruption...Because your children will inherit the cities of the nations and settle the desolate areas." (54:1-3) The proportions of the Jewish redemption will be so overwhelming that Eretz Yisroel won't be capable of containing it. Yerushalayim will overflow from her newly acquired inhabitants and the surrounding areas will rapidly fill to capacity. The entire Judean hills will be saturated with newly sprouted neighborhoods but the Jewish influx will continue. The new wave of Jews will take possession of the entire land of Israel and settle therein but even these broadened quarters will not suffice. The return will be so encompassing that Zion

will truly wonder in bewilderment from whence did all of her people emerge.

Yet the kindness of Hashem won't end here and the prophet continues to describe the setting of the future. Yeshaya tells the Jewish people, "Do not be afraid or embarrassed because your shameful past will never be remembered." (54:4) He adds in the name of Hashem, "I forsook you for a brief moment and I will gather you in with great compassion. With mild anger I concealed My countenance from you and with everlasting kindness I will have mercy upon you." (54:7,8) These passages reflect the concern of the Jewish people over their dark and rebellious past. They hesitate to return to Hashem because their previous wrong doings remain fresh in their minds. They cannot imagine bonding perfectly with Hashem given how unfair they acted towards Him in the past. Hashem responds that they should not hesitate to return because no trace will remain of their earlier ways. Hashem's blessing will be so encompassing that it will be virtually impossible for the Jewish people to relate to their earlier experiences. They will develop such close relationships with Hashem that they will be incapable of imagining what it was like without Him. How could they have ever appreciated life without their close and perfect relationship with Hashem?!

The prophet continues and reveals to us the merit through which this unbelievable experience will transpire. Yeshaya says in the name of Hashem, "For the mountains may move and the hills may sway but My kindness will never leave you and My covenant of peace will never be swayed." (54:10) In explanation of these words, our Chazal in Yalkut Shimoni (477) share with us a beautiful insight. They explain that the mountains mentioned here refer to the firm and sound merits of the Patriarchs and the hills refer to those of the Matriarchs. Although the Jewish nation continuously draws upon these merits for its basic existence there are times when even these merits do not suffice. The Jews stray so far from the proper path that they cease to identify with the virtues of the Patriarchs. During such times, Hashem doesn't identify with the Jewish people as children of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and the mountains and hills-merits of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs- begin to sway and cannot be of any assistance. Yeshaya advises the Jews that in those difficult moments they should cleave to acts of loving kindness. In return for their loving kindness Hashem promises to show them His loving kindness resulting in the indescribable proportions mentioned earlier.

With the above insight we begin to comprehend the unbelievable Messianic era awaiting the Jewish nation. The Malbim (ad loc.) explains this merit of loving kindness and notes that, by nature, kindness is boundless. Unlike compassion and mercy which depend upon the recipient's worthiness, kindness is shown without calculation or consideration. The recipient of pure kindness is never deserving of it and such acts are

therefore not subject to limitations. In essence whenever Hashem showers His kindness upon someone it is, by definition, unlimited and everlasting. This, incidentally is the deeper meaning of Dovid Hamelech's words in Tehillim, "For His kindness is everlasting." (107:1) Accordingly, when the Jewish people will be the beneficiaries of Hashem's kindness they will experience it in boundless proportions. They will be privileged to establish such closeness to Hashem that they will never be capable of understanding life without Him.

However, in order to elicit true kindness from Hashem the Jewish people must conduct themselves in a very special manner. To this end Yeshaya offers them an inside tip and advises them to cleave to acts of loving kindness amongst each other. When, in the end of time, we will be totally committed to benefiting others Hashem will reciprocate in that same manner. If we will provide for others above and beyond our obligation Hashem will do the same. We now understand that those acts of loving kindness-by definition beyond the call of duty-will truly serve as the keys to our glorious future. Such acts of pure kindness are not subject to calculations and computations and are the true expression of boundless concern for others. Hashem therefore responds with His acts of loving kindness and showers us with His boundless love in the most indescribable proportions. Eretz Yisroel will be continuously expanding to allow for the influx and our association with Hashem will be so perfect that our entire life will revolve totally around Him. © 2009 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

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

This week's Torah portion is blessed with more mitzvot than any other portion. Most of these mitzvot involve situations that can occur between one man and another. Many of the cases are very rare while some of them are very common. One mitzva is both rare and common at the same time: "Be wary of the blemish of a tzara'at... Remember what your G-d did to Miriam on your way out of Egypt." [Devarim 24:8-9]. Tzara'at itself is a malady which does not appear at all today, but the reason for its appearance, as is hinted in the verse about Miriam's punishment, is probably one of the most common sins between one man and another-"lashon hara," or slander.

Speech is the writing instrument of thought, the tool which expresses what a person is thinking and how he or she relates to the surrounding world. There are mitzvot of the Torah in this realm too, such as "Love your colleague as yourself" [Vayikra 19:18], or "Do not hate your brother in your heart" [19:17]. It seems as if the sins of the tongue are mere symptoms, a view of

the ugly waves which sometimes beat within the hidden chambers of the heart.

But then why should we be upset at the person who engages in slander? It would be better to get involved in the roots of the sin and not struggle against the consequences, which are so hard to overcome. The Ramchal replies to this by noting that there are times when curing the branch will also bring a cure to the root. "It is true that the best result from serving the Almighty is the desire of the heart and the yearning of the soul, but what happens is that the external movement awakens the internal spirit. And the external elements are certainly more easily influenced than the internal ones, such that if one works on what he has in hand he will eventually be able to gain possession of what he does not directly hold in his hand."

The command to love a colleague and to eradicate hatred from the heart is very difficult to observe because the heart of man does not follow the dictates of his intellect. Therefore the Torah teaches us that taking charge of our tongues, aside from the direct benefit to society as a whole, also brings about an internal benefit-it mends and purifies a person's heart and leads him to a better path.

When a person makes it a habit to constantly check his speech in order to avoid harming or embarrassing any other person, even if what he says is the truth-and certainly when he is careful not to exaggerate or repeat any disgraceful thing or to accuse him falsely-he thereby trains himself to look at other people in a just and righteous way. In addition, experience has shown that when a person is careful how he speaks he often discovers very surprising things. He will find that the disgrace that upset him at first can be viewed as the result of a broad spiritual complex which stems from the circumstances of life. This can lead to a completely different way of interpreting events, often in a way that is a complete revolution. He may well see that in spite of the initial image in his mind everybody around him really wants good in the depths of their hearts and they are really trying to mend their ways and follow a righteous path.

This reasoning explains why this mitzva is considered so important that it is included in the list of six elements which we are supposed to remember every day, deeply ingrained in our conscious.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "A woman shall not wear the garments of a man and a man shall not wear the dress of a woman, for it is an abomination to the Almighty, your G-d, all who do these things" (Deut. 22:5). Why?

Targum Yonoson informs us that the garments of a man include tzitzis and tefillin. Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz commented that we see from this the

principle that each person has his own mission in life. The same thing that for one person is "Holy of Holies" for another person who does a similar thing- though it is not his life's task-it is an abomination. Each person should feel joy in carrying out his or her life's mission and should not try to do things that he or she was not meant to do.

An example of the above can be seen regarding people who differ greatly in their intellectual abilities. It is very easy for someone who lacks the creative genius of another person or has a poor memory or difficulties understanding abstract concepts to feel envious of those who excel in these areas. However, if the Almighty did not endow you with these, then He did not consider them to be necessary for your unique and individual life task. Realize that anything you do need for life, the Almighty gives you. What you do not have and cannot get are not needed by you. Utilize the attributes you do have in order to fulfill your unique role in life.

An illustrating story: A disciple of Rabbi Avraham of Sochotchov was ill and felt great suffering because he was not able to fulfill the commandment of putting on tefillin. He sent his son to consult Rav Avraham, the author of Avnai Nezer. The son told Rav Avraham that his father was crying because he could not put on tefillin due to his illness.

The Rebbe replied, "When I was in Kotzk, I once became so ill on the day before Yom Kippur that the doctors forbade me to pray and study that entire night. You might think that the thought of not praying and studying would make me sad. No. I was in a state of great joy! Since this was the will of the Almighty, I felt joy in carrying out His will. Similarly, you tell your father in my name that if it is the will of the Almighty that he should not be able to put on tefillin, he should carry out the Almighty's will with love and joy." *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

“When you go out to war against your enemies, and G-d, your G-d gives them over to you and you take captives, and you see among the captives a desirable, beautiful woman who you want to marry" (Devarim 21:10-11)

Elul Zman is upon us, the last month to get serious about life before Rosh Hashanah and the Heavenly Court arrives to judge the worthiness of our lives. The shofar is blowing, and in some parts of the Jewish world, Selichos is already being said. It may still be hot outside, but the summer is definitely over, according to the Torah calendar.

It is important to be a problem solver, something I learned to do from a very young age, from a man for whom I have always had great respect: my

father. Working for my father, I was taught early that every problem is just another challenge in need of a solution, the finding of which is one of the greatest sources of excitement and accomplishment in life. I may still kvetch a lot when problems arise, but in the background, my mind is usually busy working on a solution.

Indeed, the Jewish people in general are good problem solvers. When you have had as many problems to solve as we have had over the course of our 3,300 years of history, you become quite good at it after while. Too good, sometimes, for, it seems, after a while, rather than see the problems as reasons to pray to G-d to end the exile, we just work on solving them instead.

Today, the Jewish people are experiencing many problems, both physically and spiritually. In one sense, nothing is new, for the Jewish people have always had to deal with Jews forsaking the way of Torah, intermarriage, and a whole host of other problems that seem to be becoming more prevalent with each passing day, R"L. And, according to some, physical illnesses that used to by-pass the religious community seem to make no exceptions anymore.

Perhaps, it is more like some say, that nothing really has changed. It is just that modern medicine has become better at diagnosing problems than ever before, and therefore we are finding out more, and earlier, about health problems we always had, but just didn't understand or know about in the past. Furthermore, enhanced communication has served to amplify problems that have always existed, in one form or another, but which we didn't always find out about, since communities were not as in touch with one another as they are today.

Perhaps. However, historically that has not been the case, starting at the beginning of Jewish history, with the descendants of Avraham in the Egyptian exile. Clearly, in that situation, the Jews called out to G-d to help them from their suffering, not because modern medicine told them they were sick or dying, or because communication between communities improved. It was because the situation facing the Jewish people at the time became unbearable because of the exile.

Eventually the king of Egypt died. By that time, the Children of Israel were broken because of the servitude, and they cried. Their cry for help came to G-d, who heard their groaning. G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and saw the Children of Israel. G-d was aware of their suffering. (Shemos 3:23-25)

It was a two-step process. First the Jewish people had to call out because of their servitude, and this caused, so-to-speak, G-d to hear their groaning, and remember His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Well, not really, not in the conventional sense of "hearing" and "remembering," because, one

can safely assume, G-d was there the entire time, heard every kvetch from the beginning of the exile until its end, and never once forgot the covenant He made with the ancestors of the enslaved Jewish people.

Then what? Why the charade?

It was no charade. The missing component in Egypt, and in every exile for that matter, is not G-d's hearing, or His remembering. Every single second G-d hears the complaining of His people, and every single second He is ready to fulfill ALL the promises made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, as the Talmud indicates:

"Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi met Eliyahu standing at the entrance of the cave of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai and asked him...'When will Moshiach appear?'

"He answered, 'Go and ask Moshiach himself.'

"'But where can he be found'

"'At the gate of Rome.'

"'And by what sign [can I recognize him]?'"

"'He is among the poor people afflicted with wounds. They open the bandages of all their wounds at one time, adjust and dress them. He opens, adjusts, and dresses one wound at time, for the reason that when he might be called there should be no delay.'

"I went to him, and said, 'Peace be upon you, my master and teacher,' and he answered, 'Peace be with you, Bar Levi.'

"I asked him, 'When will the master appear?'

"He answered, 'Today.'

"I then went back to Eliyahu and asked regarding all that Moshiach said, and told him that he said, 'Peace be with you, Bar Levi.' Eliyahu then said, 'I can assure you and your father a share in the World-to-Come.' 'But he made a fool of me,' I told Eliyahu, 'because he said that he would come today.'

"Eliyahu answered and said, 'The expression 'today' means the same as it does in the verse, 'Today, if you will listen to His voice' (Tehillim 95:7).'" (Sanhedrin 98a)

In other words, every single day redemption is in place. It's just that we're not. We may be waiting for the Final Redemption, but that is not enough. We have to WANT it, and want it more than anything else. For, embodied in the Final Redemption is everything we Jews are supposed to strive for and achieve. Accepting exile as a normal way of life is unacceptable.

The fact that we kvetch from day-to-day about our problems, something we are also fairly good at, is not called wanting redemption. The fact that we pay lip service to Moshiach and the ultimate era he will usher in, b"H, does not count as yearning for such a period. It's hard to convince someone of your desire to leave when you seem to be having such a good time staying.

We may not have smiled a lot over the last couple of thousands of years of exile, but we certainly have done a lot of it over the last 60 years in many of the Western countries in which we have grown up. The "good life" in these countries has drained the yearning

for redemption and Eretz Yisroel right out of many people, perhaps even most, which, for the time being wasn't a major issue since we needed to be in these countries in order to build towards the redemption.

However, every exile has an end, even the Roman one. It's been a long haul, the longest of all, but it will have its end. It may not feel like it, but intellectually we know it is true, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of this everyday. How can one fulfill the mandate to anticipate the Final Redemption, and to anxiously await Moshiach's arrival, if they do not?

I have learned this the hard way. Ever since before Pesach, two (and now three) of my neighbors have been renovating their homes, which has involved a lot of demolition of concrete walls, and hence, some serious jack hammering. It is five months later, and I still have to put the music up full blast at times, and use earphones, just to drown out the annoying noise.

Part of the problem is that we live in a six house building, all of us having common walls. As a result, the jack hammering is noisier through the walls than in person, or so it seems, and there have been times when I expected to see one pop through my living room wall, it sounded so close. I have lost many hours of work as a result, and have suffered anxiety as a result.

I can't wait for it to end. I mean, I reaaaalllly can't wait. Every day that I hear the noise triggers all kinds of negative emotional reactions, and I have to hold myself back from thinking not-so-nice things about my neighbors, and the workers. They are certainly in their right, but tell that to my psychological make-up. My nerves don't seem built to take such noise for so long.

I know that, by necessity, the construction has to end at some point, but it has been going on for so long now that I can't imagine that it will. I can't even imagine anymore what it will be like once it is finally over, not even on Shabbos or Yom Tov since I know they will start again the next day! I can honestly say that, I want this personal exile of mine to end NOW!

If only I felt the same way about our national exile. If only all of us felt the same way about our national exile! Then we'd be living in our national redemption, and all the problems we are frantically trying to solve would be no more-at all. All evil would be a thing of the past then, and all that would remain to do is to heal from all the spiritual scars we suffered until that time, and bask in the light of G-d, and not in the light of material success.

So, as we confront our national and personal problems that seem to be increasing in scope and intensity, and problem solve, it may worth our while to wonder if that is all we should be doing at this time. Perhaps, the days of problem solving are behind us now, and with the redemption being imminent, we need to start wanting it, and I mean, reaaaalllly wanting it, something we seem to do best when we have more problems than we can solve, and all that we can do effectively is call out to G-d to end the exile.

If that is the case, and that is true, let's call out now as if it really hurts, which it does, so that it doesn't have to be made to hurt more, in order to really make us scream out to G-d. A high threshold of pain, in this case, is not a merit-worthy thing, for enduring suffering at this stage of history will only prolong the exile, something which may be appealing to many at this time, but won't be in the next moment, if our past has anything to say about the process of transition from exile to redemption.

Which brings me to our parshah. This week's parshah begins with the law of the yafas toar, the beautiful gentile woman for which the Jewish soldier has fallen, emotionally that is. As the Talmud explains, knowing that the soldier has lost the battle to his yetzer hara, the Torah prescribes a course of action to regain some spiritual ground, even if the soldier does end up converting the gentile woman and marrying her.

However, warns the Torah, even still, danger lurks in the future. For, as Rashi explains, the section about the hated wife and the wayward child follow to portray what is more than likely to occur, if the soldier gives in to his whim and takes the captive woman as his wife. In the end, not only will the marriage be less than ideal, but it will backfire and produce offspring that will make his life more than difficult.

As the rabbis point out, though the halachah of the yafas toar is actual, it is also a parable for different situations in which the yetzer hara subdues us into thinking that the path we are pursuing is the one we will ultimately want as well. Huh! When was the last time a yetzer hara chose a path for us that was ultimately beneficial? It's simply not his job.

Exile in the Western world is a yafas toar: attractive, seductive, but ultimately dangerous for a Jew. There is a way to subdue it and bring it into the fold, so-to-speak, but ultimately, it doesn't work so well, and even backfires on us in the end. Whatever it produces has a way of coming after us in the end, as the string of recent scandals in the States has shown us, and we can be sure that it is not over yet.

The best thing? Yearn for redemption. Want it with all you heart. And, if you can't, at least want to want it. And, do it now, before the situation gets any tenser, and before we get to a point where we can't control our crying out for G-d because the situation has become unbearable. It has in the past, and it can and will again, unless we ourselves choose to the end the exile as much as we humanly can. © 2009 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

