

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

At the end of his life, having given the Israelites at G-d's behest 612 commands, Moses is instructed to give them the last; command 613: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be my witness within the people of Israel." (Deut. 31: 19)

According to the plain sense of the verse, G-d is speaking to Moses and Joshua and is referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; Hear, O earth, the words of My mouth." Oral tradition, however, gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write-or at least take some part in writing- a Sefer Torah, a scroll of the law: "Said Rabbah: even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: 'Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel.'" (Sanhedrin 21b).

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be construed as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Secondly, the passage goes on to say (31: 24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud (Nedarim 38a) offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "that this song may be My witness within the people"- implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32.

There is something poetic about this being the last of the commands. It is as if G-d were saying to the Israelites: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from Moses. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be periodically renewed.

So it is to this day, that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill-as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion almost devoid of sacred objects (icons, relics), the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to endowing a physical entity with sanctity-and this is an understatement. The Torah is less like an object than a person. In its presence we

stand as if it were a king. On Simchat Torah we dance with it as if it were a bride. If one is, G-d forbid, damaged or destroyed we bury it as if it were a human; we mourn as if we had lost a relative. Judaism is the story of a love affair between a people and a book, the Book of Books.

What though-if we take the command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter-is the significance of the word "song" [shirah]: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song"? The word shirah appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key-word. Why? On this, two nineteenth century scholars offered striking explanations.

Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose (the word shirah in Hebrew means both a song and a poem). To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but it has, argues Netziv, two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not. (Kidmat Davar, preface to Ha'amek Davar, 3).

In this brilliant insight, Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach's 'Odysseus' Scar'. Auerbach contrasts the narrative style of Genesis with that of Homer. Homer uses dazzlingly detailed descriptions so that each scene is set out pictorially as if bathed in sunlight. By contrast, biblical narrative is spare and understated. In the example Auerbach cites-the story of the binding of Isaac-we do not know what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through:

The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal... remains mysterious and "fraught with background".

A completely different aspect is alluded to by R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, author of the halakhic code Arukh ha-Shulchan (Choshen Mishpat, introduction). Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of

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arguments, about which the sages said: "These and those are the words of the living G-d." This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called "a song"-because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively- as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the "sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns / And the round ocean and the living air." Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

Music is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we davven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward heaven. Nor do we read the Torah; instead we chant the weekly portion, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studied; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival or one of the High Holy Days. There are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from the Mosaic books, the prophetic literature, or the Ketuvim, 'the writings.' Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic tonality.

The 613th command-to make the Torah new in every generation-symbolizes the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody

sung. The Torah is G-d's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though, when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds. The Torah is G-d's song, and we collectively are its singers. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“For I know your rebelliousness and your stiff neck; while I was still alive with you today you have been rebellious with G-d, and also after my death" (Devarim 31:27). These are among the last words Moshe spoke to the nation before he died, telling them that they must learn the "song" of Ha'azinu in order to withstand the consequences of the sins that they will commit. One word in the above-quoted verse, "today" ("hayom") caught my attention, as it seems not only superfluous, but also inaccurate. The sins Moshe refer to did not occur on "that day," but throughout the 40 years that the nation traveled through the desert. If anything, by "that day," only those that "cleaved to G-d" were still around (see Devarim 4:4); how can Moshe imply that they were behaving as bad, or worse, on that final day of Moshe's life? What was Moshe adding by including the word "today" in this sentence?

The only commentator I have seen discuss this is the Or Hachayim, who says that Moshe was telling them that he is only around "today," but will be gone by the next day. In other words, "today" refers to Moshe being alive, not when they have been rebellious. [The Or Hachayim also considers the word "imachem" (with you) to be extra, and explains it to be a hint that Moshe will still be "alive" after "today," as the righteous live on in the next world, it just won't be "with them" in this world. I had understood it as clarifying that it was only after Moshe accepted the role as leader that they were rebellious. Before that, even though it was during his lifetime, they had not been rebellious (or Moshe couldn't know whether or not they were), so Moshe had to put in the modifying "with you" to clarify that it was only after he was "with them" that he knew of their rebelliousness.]

Getting back to the Or Hachayim's approach as to why the word "today" was necessary, I'm not sure why Moshe had to remind them that this was his last day alive. He had made it rather clear that this was his last day (31:1-3); just mentioning that they have been rebellious throughout his life should have been enough of a reminder that by tomorrow he will be gone. The silence of the other commentaries leads me to the conclusion that the word "today" does not necessarily mean that one day (24 hours), but can signify a much

longer period of time. Checking the Radak's "Sefer Hasherashim" verified this, as he tells us that the word "yom" could mean one "daytime," it could include both day and night of a single day, and it could refer to period of time ("ais"). Although the Radak's examples of this third definition are all periods of time less than a "day," I would suggest that, as long as it is a defined period of time, the word "yom" applies as well. (Rabbeinu Yonah Ibn Genach's "Sefer Hasherashim" backs this up as well, with his third usage of the word "yom" being *ais min ha'itim, u'zeman min hazemanim yadua.* Although I'm not sure how to differentiate between "ais" and "zeman," being a separate definition than either a 12 or 24 hour period, I am quite confident that "yom" can also refer to a period of time much longer than a day.)

Using this definition, Moshe could have been saying that during the period of his entire lifetime (or at least while he was their leader), there has been a constant rebelliousness. Not that there was always a manifestation of rebellion, but just as they were always "stiff-necked," with that character trait causing a confrontation only at certain times, so too was there a constant rebellious nature, even if there were only flash points of actual rebellion. Because Moshe knew that this nature made a rebellious outbreak a constant threat throughout his life, he realized it would be at least as true after his death.

This definition of "today" can be applied to many other instances where the word "yom" is employed (and I don't mean just the six "days" of creation). For example, at the beginning of Parashas Nitzavim, Moshe tells the nation that they are "all standing today before G-d" (29:9). If "today" refers to the period of time when there is a covenant with G-d (29:11), we can easily understand why it included all future generations (29:13-14). When Chazal tell us to consider it as if the Torah was given to us "today" (see Rashi on Devarim 26:16), rather than being just a metaphor to help keep things fresh, it could be taken more literally to mean that they were really commanded "today," as we are still in the period of time that the mitzvos are to be fulfilled (from Matan Torah until this world comes to an end).

With the High Holidays fast approaching, one more example seems appropriate. After Musaf on both days of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, we sing the piyut of "Hayom." "Today, may You strengthen us; Today, may You bless us; Today, may You make us grow; Today may You see seek us out for positive things; Today, may You hear us crying out; Today, may You accept our prayers with compassion and favor." Which "today" do we mean? The first day of Rosh Hashanah, the second day, Yom Kippur, or each and every one of them, asking G-d to make "today" the day three times, referring to three different days? Perhaps we are referring to all of them together, i.e. the whole period of the Ten Days of Repentance. Please, G-d, help us use this special period of time to grow as much

as we can and begin anew for the remainder of the time You have given us in this world. Amen. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

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

Many of the faithful people in Yisrael found it difficult in the past and still find it hard to accept Zionism as part of "atchalta d'geula"- the beginning of our redemption. Their opinion seems to be backed up by very powerful logic. Final redemption is a complete Divine revelation, "And the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d just as the seas are covered with water" [Yeshayahu 11:9]. G-d can certainly not be revealed through a movement which in principle turns away from the Almighty, His Torah, and His mitzvot. Since the leaders of the Zionist movement were in general far removed from the Torah and the mitzvot and some of them even campaigned for their opinion openly and adamantly, many religious people came to the conclusion that the era of the beginning of the redemption has not yet arrived.

It must be admitted that at first glance this seems correct. We might well have expected the light of the redemption to grow out of a holy flame lit by those who serve G-d and fear Him, people who yearn to renew their contact with the land, to rejuvenate our nation as in the days of old, and to bring the descendants back to their forefathers. Or perhaps a different path will be followed, with a completely miraculous process, a heavenly awakening that is beyond the capabilities of human beings. But to have irreverent people who have no respect for the name of G-d serve as the driving force to bring us back to the land-that seems problematic, to say the least.

However, this is exactly what can be seen explicitly from the sequence of the verses in this week's Torah portion. First, we are told, "If your people will be dispersed to the end of the heavens, your G-d will gather you and take you from there, and your G-d will bring you to the land which your fathers inherited, and you will take possession of it" [Devarim 30:4-5]. Only after this is it written, "And your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring" [30:6]. This clearly implies that during the time when the people are gathered together and we take possession of the land we still maintain our hearts of stone.

There is a hint of the reason for this sequence in the Torah portion of Ha'azinu, "I will put people to death and bring them to life, I have struck them and I will heal" [32:39]. The sages explain that this is in sequence: "What I kill I will bring back to life, and what I have struck down I will cure." It means that people will rise with their existing blemishes and only afterwards be cured. Why should this be so? "It is so that it will not be

said that those who died are not the same ones who have risen again." If people who have a blemish rise up without any blemishes, their perfection at the time of resurrection will be like having a patch put on over their former selves. There will not be any strong link between the former existence and the later one, and it will be assumed that the person who died previously is not the one who rose up later.

This is true for the entire nation just as it is true for the individual. The nation must also rise up again with the same blemishes that it had during the exile, and it then heals slowly, bit by bit. The people who brought us back to the land had a heart of stone and they were far from Torah and the mitzvot. They will repent of their ways, and the redemption can then continue. Starting in this way, we will then experience eternal redemption, a process which will not replace us with somebody else but will reveal who we really are. Our entire history, with all of its difficulties and darkness, has returned at the time of our redemption in order to circumcise our impure hearts and to reveal-underneath our external shells-that in reality we were always children of the living G-d.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The final chapters of the Torah are poetic and to a certain extent melodious. Moshe sums up the Torah with a final warning to the Jewish people of the consequences of ignoring the covenant with G-d. But he also has soothing words about the ultimate destiny and accomplishments of the Jewish people, of their unending loyalty to their G-d and land, and of a better world for all of humankind.

In reality the parshiyot of this week sum up the pulls and twists of Jewish history. All other nations facing the events and destructions visited on the Jewish people over the ages would not have survived, let alone prospered and persevered. But it is the eternal covenant of G-d with Israel that has sustained us till this very day. And the covenant exists and remains binding and effective even when portions of the Jewish people deny or are unaware of its existence.

Ben-Gurion, the reputed skeptic and agnostic, nevertheless once famously said that miracles are the normalcy of Jewish life and existence. That idea is certainly the basis for Moshe's words in these final chapters of the Torah. The realization of the existence and continuing effectiveness of this ancient covenant that has weathered all storms and survived all attempts to obliterate it. Moshe tells them in advance that the song of the covenant will eternally rise to remind Israel of its mission and ultimate role in human affairs.

That is part of the mystique that allows the Torah to call itself a "song." It is the melody of holiness that resonates in our hearts and souls even amongst those who have forgotten the lyrics - the holy words - of

the song itself. Melodies are not easily forgotten or eradicated from our subconscious. They create associative memory that does not easily leave us. People have their favorite songs. Countries have their national anthems. The melodies govern us even when the words are no longer sounded or expressed clearly. The Torah is therefore not only its holy words but also the haunting melody of Jewish existence and G-d's covenant throughout the ages.

Melody is one of the great memory aids of all time. For Selichot, we will say "to listen to the melody and to the prayers." Apparently, prayer without lasting melody accompanying it falls short of its desired purpose. Therefore, Jewish prayer throughout all of our history has been infused and beautified by melody. Some melodies are considered so sacrosanct that they defy change or improvisation. The Torah itself is read publicly to melody and special cantillations. In fact, rabbinic commentary has drawn upon the melodies of the Torah reading to find meanings and direction in the very words of the Torah itself. Thus, the covenant of the Torah itself is put to music, so to speak, by its holy melodies, and it rises continually to refresh our memories and strengthen our souls in all times of danger and challenges. © 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

Parshat Netzavim is replete with the message of teshuvah (repentance). Teshuvah is most often associated with our return to G-d. This portion also speaks of a different form of teshuvah-the return of G-d.

Note the sentence "V'shav Hashem...et shevutk'ha" which is often translated "then the Lord your G-d will bring back your captivity." (Deuteronomy 30:3) The term used here is not "ve-heishiv" which means G-d will "bring back" your captivity, rather it is "ve-shav" which literally means that G-d "will return with" your captivity. The message according to the Midrash is clear. When we are in captivity G-d is in exile with us. (Rashi, Deuteronomy 30:3) Thus, when we return, G-d returns with us as He, too, has been exiled.

Similarly, G-d first appears to Moshe in a burning bush telling him to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:2) The Midrash points out that G-d purposely appears in the lowly bush to teach that He felt the pain of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt. As we were lowly, so did G-d feel that lowliness. G-d is one in our suffering, empathizing with our despair. (Rashi, Exodus 3:2)

This idea teaches an important message. G-d is a G-d of love who cares deeply for His people.

Hence, when we are cast aside, G-d suffers with us and is cast aside as well.

This concept finds expression in the mourning process. When leaving someone sitting shiva, we recite the formula of "ha-Makom yenehem etkhem - may G-d comfort you." But suppose there is only one mourner? Should we use the word etkhem (you, plural) rather than otkha or otakh (you, singular).

Many rabbis insist that we still use the plural form. According to this view, it can be suggested that even when one mourns alone, one is not alone. G-d feels our loss to the extent that He is sitting shiva with us, hence etkhem. From this perspective, G-d is the comforter and the comforted. And so we recite, may G-d comfort you-with "you" including G-d.

No wonder then, when reciting kaddish, we begin with "Yitgadel, ve-yitkadesh" which means "may G-d become great, and may G-d become holy." With the death of a human being, with a family in bereavement, G-d, as it were, is not fully great and holy as He suffers with us. Thus, these words are in the future tense. Indeed, the kaddish may be interpreted as our words of comfort to G-d Himself.

As we participate in the teshuvah process on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this idea teaches that G-d is one with us, caring, leading and carrying us from step to step, higher and higher. As we return to G-d, G-d returns to us. © 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your G d, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all of the men of Israel." [Deut. 29:9]

"Will the last Jew in America please turn off the lights," is a bittersweet joke. The future existence, character and complexion of the Jewish people -not only in the Diaspora but even here in Israel - is a heady subject for the doomsayers. I'd like to suggest that a Midrashic interpretation of the opening verse in this week's portion of Nitzavim/Vayeilekh provides an answer to the 'school of doom and gloom.' We do have major problems, but we shouldn't forget that we have always had major problems. Our portion opens with the words, "You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your G d, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all of the men of Israel." [Deut. 29:9] Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanhuma, which suggests that the verse answer an implicit problem generated by the multitude of grim warnings unloosed in last week's portion of Ki Tavo.

The Midrash describes how the Israelites are overwhelmed with the enormity of this second set of

warnings (the first appeared in Ch. 26 of Leviticus). As described by Rashi, the 49 curses of Leviticus were bad enough, but this new litany of "one hundred less two" chastisements turns their "...faces green and they didn't understand how they would be able to stand up to so many chastisements."

According to the Midrash, Moses' opening words are a subtle response to the nation's expression of doom. The declaration, "You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your G d...." comes to address their shattered state. Moses is telling the nation not to despair; after all, they are still standing, they are survivors, no minor achievement given the number of trials and sufferings they've been through ever since leaving Egypt and the long years of wandering in the desert. Therefore, they should not lose heart because of the plethora of curses and chastisements.

On the surface, this certainly sounds like a decent consolation, but Rav Yedidya Frankel, later chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, asks two poignant questions.

First of all, why is it any more reasonable for the Israelites to have "turned green" after this second set of chastisements when the first set of 49 couldn't be described as relatively 'cheerful.' Here is an example from Leviticus: "I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish, and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it." [Lev. 26:16] (With friends like this, who needs enemies?)

What compounds the issue is that according to this Midrash, the Jewish people are responding to the actual number of chastisements -forty-nine from Leviticus plus another ninety-eight from Deuteronomy. But the fact is that last week's portion goes out its way to point out the exact opposite idea: a specific number of curses is not the issue because just in case we try to comfort ourselves with the idea that the Torah's admonitions couldn't be totally exhaustive, the text adds a general chastisement that minces no words: "Also every sickness and every blow, and every plague that are not mentioned in this book of teaching, until you are wiped out.." [b'Sefer haTorah], G d will bring about against you until He destroys you." [Deut. 28:61]

And in fact, the entire span of Jewish history bears out the horrible truth of this verse. Where in the chastisements are the gas chambers of Auschwitz mentioned? Therefore, why should a second set of warnings (one hundred less two) make that much of a difference when this all-inclusive warning is already so much more terrifying?

Furthermore, asks Rav Frankel, why the expression, "one hundred less two," to refer to the chastisements in our portion when "fifty less one" is not how the Midrash refers to the chastisements in Parashat Behokotai. Since 49 is exactly half of 98, we might expect a reference that reflects this mathematical relationship, but instead the Midrashic term "one

hundred less two," creates a certain dissonance, forcing us to pay closer attention.

According to Rav Y. Frankel, an understanding of the term "one hundred less two" answers both questions. Significant here is not the 98 chastisements, but the fact that it's "less two." If we go back to the initial set of chastisements in Parashat Behokotai, we discover that after the curses and the warnings are presented, the Torah then includes two promises: "Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the land." [Lev. 26:42] Two verses later, "And even this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, and I will not abhor them, to destroy them utterly in order to nullify my covenant with them...." [Lev. 26:44]

Rav Y. Frankel explains that when the Israelites turned "green with fear," prompting Moses to address them with the encouraging, supportive terms, "You are standing all of you this day before the Lord your G d..." we shouldn't think that the nature of the "fear" was the enormity of another 98 chastisements over the original 49, but rather that it was "less two," less the two consolations that were intrinsic to the chastisements in Leviticus.

Seeing the fear in their faces, Moses addresses them: You are standing here, aren't you, you've gone through it, you've made it, you have a future, the eternal promise. You are standing here this day is a confirmation that despite the long, disappointing trek in the desert and the many miserable days and awful nights, the plagues, and the grumblings, you have survived. All this time G d could have destroyed you, but the fact that He didn't should be a great comfort. You've made it. You exist. You are standing upright!

I believe that Rav Y. Frankel's interpretation resonates for our own times, (and it is no accident that Rav Frankel was the father-in-law of our present day chief rabbi, Rav Lau, whose own life reflects the great upheavals of the 20th century). Our generation also need to hear, You are standing here this day.

A strange thing has happened to the Jews in America. The most successful community in the history of the Diaspora has begun to tremble because of their success—a staggering rate of assimilation and intermarriage, the earlier 52% figure is now reaching 60%. What will it be in 5 years, 20 years? The very openness of western society makes it inevitable that more and more highly educated Jews will not allow themselves to be defined by the expectations of others. Try and tell a Harvard PhD in Chinese history that he can't date an Asian woman, or a neurologist in Atlanta that she can heal all races and religions, but only fall in love with Sidney, her cousin Molly's next-door neighbor's son.

Israel has also been struck by a mood of 'gloom and doom.' Newspapers print story after story about

declining morale in the army, corrupt values in government, children of kibbutznikim seeking greener pastures in Greenwich, Connecticut. And even among those who keep the law and love the land, all too often they end up on different sides of the battlefield in the constant strife between the secular and the religious, endangering the very fabric of our society. Where are we heading? Is this the Jewry we imagined when the state was first established?

But I, for one, am not so pessimistic about our future. In my travels across the length and breadth of the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, I find a genuine hunger for Jewish values, tradition and learning. Yes, these may be the children of totally assimilated parents and even mixed-marriages, but the commitment and desire of their offspring is astonishingly vital. I recently attended a national convention of Hillel, rabbis serving college campuses, the hothouse of new ideas challenging Judaism. They report a student body that is productive, alive, and anxious to learn. Wherever someone has something genuine to say, young Jews are listening. Today's young Jews—once he or she starts on the path of education—is better equipped to make serious strides in mastering the Great Books of the Jewish People. Even reform Jews are returning to traditional practices, seeking more authentic expression of their Judaism.

Of course, our collective tragedy is that even after the Holocaust, the total number of Jews in the world continues to decrease. Yet I believe that those who choose to remain Jewish are all the more committed, much more serious than parents who took so much for granted. This minority of serious Jews makes all the difference in the world. If Josephus is correct that at the time of the Second Temple there were 5 million Jews, then the natural birthrate of Jews should have easily reached 200 million by today. And even with all the deaths due to the rampant killings throughout our history, we should still be left with a 100 million Jews. But where are they? How did they disappear?

We have to conclude that throughout our history, Jews have always been leaving our faith, we have always lost Jews to the prevailing winds and the marauding swords. Sometimes the temptation is too strong, and sometimes the sacrifice needed to remain Jewish was too difficult to bear. This is our destiny. Whoever is a Jew today is the product of generations of the most serious Jews in our history, the survival of the most committed.

Even if we can only speak of 13 million Jews today, we must remember that a significant portion of this group seeks commitment.

Perhaps this is why the words "You stand this day before G-d..." resound so profoundly for us as well. We, the generation after Auschwitz and Treblinka, can also be told by G d: You are here, you are still standing. Despite everything that happened to you in the desert

and in Egypt and in the death camps, G-d's commitment to the Jewish people has not waned. You are alive, you are a people, and after two thousand years, you finally have your own Jewish state. Doesn't this demonstrate that a lot more than 'gloom and doom' hovers over the Jewish people at this present moment in our history.

Ironically, despite our low numbers and increased assimilation, there has never been more reason for hope. But this doesn't mean we should be complacent about problems swallowing up the best Jewish souls of our times.

How many of you remember an American magazine called Life Magazine, circulation in the millions. An article from the 1950's featured the theme of the 'Vanishing American Jew.' In the meantime, Life Magazine has long since vanished, but the American Jew is still holding strong. We are still standing here today. © 2009 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Youthful Discretion

Children play a major role in this week's double portion. In Nitzavim, Moshe tells the nation, "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem." He enumerates the different categories of people, from elders to water-carriers, and he makes sure to include everyone, even the small children (cf. Deuteronomy 28:9-10).

In Vayeilech as well, the Torah is cognizant of the youth. Moshe commands that every seven years "the men, the women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities shall gather in Jerusalem to hear the king read the Book of Devorim" (ibid 31:12). Commentaries expound that the aforementioned children are those who are too young to understand. But Moshe also talks about youngsters who have a basic grasp as well: "And their children? they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it." The Ohr HaChaim explains that this verse refers not to toddlers, but rather to children who are old enough to learn the fear of Hashem. What troubles me is the end of the posuk, "they shall learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it."

Shouldn't the Torah say "all the days that they live on the land to which they are crossing the Jordan"? After all, we are teaching them, not the adults! Why does the Torah tell us to teach the children, for all the days that their parents live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it?

Lieutenant Meyer Birnbaum was one of the only Orthodox US army officers commissioned during World War II. Last year, he spoke at our yeshiva, and though I was enraptured by the harrowing tales of his war-time activities, one small incident that occurred to him as a

young boy growing up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn during the Depression did not escape me.

In those days, few young men attended yeshiva or were committed to vigorous Torah observance. Meyer went to public school as well, but his parents wanted to raise him as an observant Jew. His friends would often make fun of his yarmulka, and few attended his bar-mitzvah. But that did not deter him. In fact, from the time he was old enough his mother would make sure that he attended the mincha service.

Imagine the sight. A young boy coming to pray together with a group of elderly men who were hanging on to their tradition while their inheritors looked for newfound freedoms outside the decaying walls of the synagogue. Even the men who came to pray were only there to say kaddish for a dearly departed. So when young Meyer entered the portals of the shul for the very first time their eyes widened in amazement. Their shock turned to pity as they assumed the young boy came to shul for the same reason that most of them came, and for the very reason that they prayed their children would one day come the sole purpose of saying kaddish.

The moment came when the kaddish yossum, the mourner's kaddish, was to be recited, and the congregation began in a cacophonous unison the hallowed words, "Yisgadal V'Yiskadash." Meyer just stared up into space, waiting to answer the first responsive Amen. He was startled by the jab in the ribs by a crooked finger, which left his searing side and began pointing to the correct place in the prayer book.

"Nu!" shouted the man, "They are saying kaddish!?"

"I know that they are saying kaddish!" answered Meyer.

"So, what are you waiting for? Say along!"

Meyer did not understand where the conversation was heading. But he had no time to think when another old man looked his way, motioning for him to join the mourners in the kaddish recitation!

"But I don't have to say kaddish!" answered Meyer tearfully, "my parents are alive!"

"Your parents are alive?" asked the old-timer incredulously.

"Yes, thank G-d, they are both alive! Why do you think that they are dead and that I should say kaddish?"

They gathered around him as the final Amen was said and explained their actions. "We could not imagine someone your age coming to shul for any other reason!"

The Torah tells us that children must be trained and taught not for post-parental existence, but rather it tells the parents "all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan." You must teach them to practice while you can enjoy the nachas as well! Torah is a living entity, not only to pass from dying embers to rekindle new flames, but rather to pass a vibrant torch with leaping flames onto the youth whose

boundless energy will inspire new generations, when even you live on the land that Hashem has given you!
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RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah marks the climax of a seven week series of reflection on Jewish redemption. In this final presentation, Hashem announces His personal return to the Jewish people. Now that every other dimension of redemption is in place, the time has finally arrived for Hashem to rest His Divine Presence amongst His people. Eretz Yisroel has been revived, Yerushalayim has been rebuilt, the exiles have returned en masse, but the ultimate objective has yet to be seen. In response to this, the prophet Yeshaya quotes the Jewish people saying, "I will be gladdened by Hashem, My soul will rejoice over My G-d." (61,10) Chazal in Yalkut Shimoni (505) view the Jewish people's response to be specifically related to the return of Hashem to Yerushalayim. The Jewish people respond to all the magnificent prophecies of their glorious future and proclaim that their true source of happiness is but one, the return of Hashem to His beloved people. They sorely long for the privilege of sensing the presence of Hashem amongst them and feeling the closeness and love He has for His people. They resolve that they will be gladdened and happy only through His return to them.

The prophet continues and describes the proportions of this return and the extent of Hashem's cherished relationship. "No longer will you be referred to as forsaken because about you it shall be proclaimed, 'My desire is in you'." (62, 4) Hashem pledges to fully identify with His people and to display His true desire in them. His relationship with them will be so encompassing and evident that a newly gained identity will be conveyed upon the Jewish people, "Hashem's desirable one". But a worry crosses the minds of the Jewish nation concerning the nature of their forthcoming relationship. After all, weren't they previously associated with Hashem in similar proportions before being rejected by Him? If so, they reason that although Hashem will truly return to them it will only feel to them like a remarriage. Their long awaited association will have a nostalgic air to it and won't bring them the true happiness they seek.

The prophet responds and reveals to them the indescribable proportions of their new relationship. Yeshaya says, "Hashem will rejoice over you like a groom over His bride." (62, 5) The Radak explains that Hashem's return to the Jewish people will possess all the freshness and novelty of a groom to his bride. Their relationship represents the epitome of happiness and appreciation as they begin forging their eternal bond with love and respect. In this same manner, Hashem's newly founded relationship with His people will possess

similar qualities. It will be so complete and perfect that it won't leave room for reflections upon their past. The happiness and fulfillment that they will experience will be so encompassing that it will feel like a fresh start, a relationship never experienced before. The Radak adds an indescribable dimension to this relationship and explains that this sense of newness will actually continue forever. Instead of becoming stale and stagnant, their relationship with Hashem will always be one of growth and development and will constantly bring them to greater heights. Each newly gained level of closeness will be so precious and dear to them that it will be regarded as a completely new relationship replete with all of its sensation and appreciation.

But the most impressive factor of all is that the above description is not only our feelings towards Hashem but is, in truth, Hashem's feelings towards us. The prophet says that Hashem Himself will forever rejoice over us with the sensation of a groom over His newly acquired bride. From this we discover that Hashem's feelings towards His people are literally boundless. Even after all the straying we have done, Hashem still desires to unite with us in the proportions described above. He desires to erase the past and establish a perfectly new relationship, so perfect and new that it will continuously produce the heightened emotions of a bride and groom for eternity.

These emotions are, in truth the hidden message behind the tefillin which we don each day. As we wrap the tefillin strap around our finger we recite special passages expressing our betrothal to Hashem. This experience represents our placing the wedding ring of Hashem on our finger, portraying our perfect relationship with Him. But our Chazal (see Brochos 6a) inform us that Hashem also wears tefillin. In proof of this they cite a passage in this week's haftorah which states, "Hashem swears by His right and by the strength of His arm." (62, 8) Chazal explain that the words, "the strength of His arm" refer to the tefillin worn on the left arm. The Maharsha expounds upon this concept and explains that Hashem actually binds Himself to the Jewish people. Hashem's tefillin, like ours, represent devotion and commitment, His commitment to His beloved people. Hashem cherishes His relationship with us and as an expression of His commitment to us, He also wears a betrothal band. Eventually our boundless love for Hashem will find its expression together with Hashem's boundless love for us and together we will enjoy this indescribable relationship forever and forever.

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