

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

**T**he biblical portion of Re'eh contains many laws - ritual and ethical - but with a marked emphasis on the ethical, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships and finances. In this context, our portion includes the law of the Sabbatical year requiring the Israelites to leave their land fallow every seventh year, neither sowing nor pruning nor reaping nor harvesting. The land is allowed to rest and restore itself, fruits and vegetables are left "free for all takers" and the clear lesson is that "no land may be sold [or owned] in perpetuity, for the land [even land which G-d gave to Israel] is Mine [G-d's]; you [human occupants] are merely strangers and residents with Me [on My land]" (Lev. 25:23).

Our portion of Re'eh adds one critical nuance to this law: Not only must each landowner relinquish (Hebrew *shmita*) his ownership of the land by not "working" it and by allowing every passerby to benefit from its produce, but he must likewise release his debtors from repaying their loans at the end of this seventh year. "This is the matter of the remission: every creditor must remit his authority over what he has lent his fellow; he may not press his fellow or his brother for repayment, since a remission [*shmita*] has been proclaimed for the Lord" (Deuteronomy 15:2).

Many modern biblical scholars maintain that the Bible is merely calling for an extension, and not a cancellation, of the loan; after all, if the farmer cannot harvest and sell his excess produce, how can he be expected to repay a loan? Therefore, the creditor must wait until the end of the eighth year, after the following harvest, to press for repayment. However, the sages did not interpret *shmita* as merely a temporary suspension of the loan, but rather as a complete cancellation, an opportunity for every debtor to start afresh, to gain a new lease on life, emerging from the sabbatical year with a clean slate. Indeed, the very next passage enjoins the Israelite to open his hand to his destitute brother, to freely lend him whatever he requires and to

beware "lest there be a malevolent thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the debtor-release year, is approaching,' and you will look meanly upon your destitute and you will not give him a loan; he may then appeal against you before the Lord, and it will be accounted to you as a sin. You must give, yes give him... and, in return, G-d will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking" (ibid 15:9,10).

But is this really fair? Can the Bible legitimately expect creditors to wipe out their IOU receivables in the sabbatical year? And the fact is that when society changed from an agrarian to an industrial system, and individuals began making business rather than personal loans, the sages allowed for a *prozbul*, wherein loans were to be made through the religious court and therefore would not have to be rescinded on the seventh year (B.T. Gittin 36, 37). Nevertheless, the biblical law would certainly require, even today, well-to-do creditors to cancel personal loans, especially to indigent debtors. What is the basis for this requirement?

I believe the answer is to be found in a literal reading of the passage which forbids taking interest on loans: "If you [have surplus funds, and therefore are in a position to] lend [money] to My nation, [understand that] G-d has given the money which should have gone to the poor to you [in trust, as a test]; do not press him in an overbearing way, and do not charge him interest [since you are only returning to him what should have gone to him in the first place]" (Exodus 22:24, in accordance with the interpretation of the Ohr Hahaim, R. Haim ben Attar). Hence not only our land but also our funds really belong to G-d, and He expects us to distribute those funds fairly! It is not what we have which is significant, but who we are; and who we are depends in great measure on what we give - to others, to society.

I heard a beautiful story from a very special Jew, Victor Alhadeff, who - together with his gracious wife Suzie - is a leader of the Seattle and world Jewish community. Eight extremely wealthy, nonobservant Jews took a trip together to Israel for the first time. As was to be expected, they were hounded by donation seekers, all of whom left them unimpressed. And then they were taken to a *haredi* yeshiva, whose representative promised that they would be taught Torah in the central study hall for only one hour by English-speaking students - and there would be no appeal for funds. After a fascinating hour, the elderly yeshiva head, stricken with Parkinson's, rose to address them: "I am old, and have lived my life; you are young

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Micha Berger  
for all his tireless efforts at assisting with the weekly  
publication of Toras Aish for almost 18 years!  
Yaasher koach! You rock!

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and have much to accomplish. I know you are busy, and have no patience for long speeches. You have visited our yeshiva and studied with our students - all very dedicated, all very poor, and living literally from hand to mouth. "Permit me to leave you with one thought. I spent the Holocaust in a concentration camp. We were eight people in one bunk who were cruelly pushed to work with rigor and almost without food for 16 hours a day. We came back at night to a freezing room with only one blanket. What did we, what could we do? We shared!" The old yeshiva head sat down. His lesson was clear, as is the lesson of the Bible. We must all share! © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

In this week's parsha, the Torah presents the ultimate challenge to any minority group living in a society where the majority culture, mores and lifestyle differ radically from those of that particular minority group. Human nature abhors outsiders, aliens, those who are obviously different. And therefore within all of us lies a deep seated drive to conform, to belong, to become part of the perceived whole and not to remain so isolated and strange.

The Torah phrases it succinctly; "How is it that the many nations of the world all worship pagan gods?" Is everybody wrong and only I am correct? Can fifty million Frenchmen be wrong? And therefore "I will also do so," I will join the crowd and bow down before gods of wood and stone handcrafted by humans themselves.

In spite of the absurdity of this logic, it truly reflects human nature. The Talmud teaches us that a great scholar once saw Menashe, the king of Judah, the son of the righteous king Chizkiyah, in a dream. Menashe, at the beginning of his long fifty-five year reign as king, installed paganism as the state religion of Judah.

He later repented but the damage was already done. The scholar asked Menashe how he could have, even for a moment, fallen victim to paganism as a serious belief. Menashe answered him that had the scholar lived in his time and social environment he would have "lifted the hem of the robe he wore to run faster to worship that idol!" Menashe and his society

were influenced by the majority culture against all realistic evidence and Divine fiat to the contrary.

Jewish history, over the last three centuries especially, is littered with the debris of majority cultures that have bankrupted and proven to be disastrous. From being "Germans of the Mosaic persuasion" to Marxists of the first order, disastrous results have emanated from Jews following majority cultures.

Today's majority culture of not only tolerating but encouraging sexual hedonism, the pursuit of wealth and gain at any cost, phony universalism and distorted concepts of intellectual and academic rights, is slowly leading to disaster for many unsuspecting Jews. Part of the problem lies in the fact that most Jews, unaware and ignorant of any Jewish history or tradition, simply cannot recognize the trap that they are falling into.

They "pick up the hem of their robes" to run faster to worship the currently fashionable gods of the majority culture. Their attitude is a danger to the very survival of the Jewish people. And yet, blissfully, no one is allowed to speak against these current majority norms lest one be branded as an obstructionist and old-fashioned.

In this week's parsha, the Torah's warning against blindly following majority cultures certainly should resonate in our current "Jewish democratic" world. We should be careful to choose wisely, listen to our tradition and history and be content to be a G-dly minority, unwavering in our principles, ideals and Jewish way of life. © 2010 *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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

### Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's Torah portion gives us a curious mitzvah. It tells us not to add or subtract to the commandments. (Deuteronomy 13:1) This seems to go against the idea of the ongoing development of Jewish law on the part of the rabbis. (See Deuteronomy 17:8-13)

Consider, for example, one of the dietary laws. The Torah states that one may not eat meat and milk together. The rabbis take this prohibition, and extend it to include the consumption of fowl and milk. Does this extension violate the prohibition of adding to the Torah?

Rambam (Maimonides) feels that this in fact may be the case. He codifies that if one maintains that fowl and milk are enjoined by Torah law, this extension is a violation of adding to the Torah. However, if the rabbis declared that as an added precaution, because of the similarity between fowl and animal food, that fowl together with milk is rabbinically forbidden-including fowl as a rabbinic prohibition is perfectly legitimate. (Laws of Mamrim 2:9)

This idea helps explain a well known midrashic comment on the Garden of Eden narrative. According to the text of the Torah, Eve tells the serpent that G-d had commanded that the tree of knowledge not be touched. Eve, however, adds to the decree. As the Midrash explains, G-d had only forbidden eating, not touching. The serpent then pushed Eve against the tree, declaring, "as you have not died from touching it, so you will not die from eating thereof." In the words of Rashi: "She added to the command (of G-d), therefore, she was led to diminish from it." (Rashi, Genesis 3:3,4)

One could argue that Eve acted properly, after all, she, like the rabbis, only tried to protect G-d's commandment by extending the prohibition to touching. Her mistake, however, was saying that G-d had actually issued such a command. She should have declared that while G-d forbade the eating from the tree, as a precaution, as a "fence" around the law, she decided not to touch it as well.

Thus, rabbinic law is pivotal. Still, it is important to understand which laws are rabbinic and which are biblical in nature.

One final note: Separate from rabbinic legislation and interpretation is the halakhic realm of humra. Humra is imposing a very stringent observance of the law. While stringency can elevate spirituality, it is essential to know when a practice falls into the category of humra and when it does not. Failure to make this distinction can often lead to the humra becoming the only accepted practice. This can be dangerous because it can lead to a lack of understanding and intolerance of the sometimes wide range of practices within a certain rabbinic law.

So, rabbis can extend the laws when there is a critical need, but they must do so with a realization of their responsibility not to blur the lines set out in the Torah. Throughout the ages rabbis have done so with the hope that their interpretations and legislations bring people closer to G-d and to one another. © 2010 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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Gut Feeling**

**T**here is an interesting directive in this week's portion: "Keep and listen to all these words that I command you, that it may benefit you and your children after you, forever, when you do what is good and proper in the eyes of the Lord, your G-d" (Deuteronomy v. 28). Two phrases need to be expounded upon and, of course, Rashi explains them both. Rashi is bothered by the word "Listen and keep", if one listens, doesn't he keep?

Rashi explains that "keep" refers to the Oral Law. "Since it is not written down, you must "guard" it "in your innards (stomach)," so that it should not be

forgotten, as it is said, "For it is pleasant that you guard them in your innards" (Proverbs. 22:18). Why does Rashi refer to keeping Torah in your innards? Why not the brain?

Second, Rashi explains the words at the end of the verse: "That it may benefit you...when you do what is 'good and proper' in the eyes of Heaven." Rashi explains: Good and proper: "'Good' in the eyes of Heaven; 'Proper' in the eyes of Man." What does Rashi mean? If it is "good" in the eyes of Heaven, is it not "proper"? If it is "proper" is it not "good"?

The (Perhaps) True Story My dear friend, Rabbi Moshe Plutchok, of Manhattan Beach, related a story that he had heard about the great conductor, Arturo Toscanini. (I believe it apocryphal) Toscanini was one of the most celebrated musicians of the last century. His phenomenal ear for detail and his meticulous attention to every element of a symphony were legendary.

There was a particular writer who was working on a biography of Toscanini and pleaded for an evening interview in the home of the maestro. Toscanini was adamant. "Not tonight! I will be listening to a symphony on my shortwave radio. I need absolute concentration. You see, I was supposed to be conducting it but could not. I do not need intruders while I listen!

For the biographer this was a golden opportunity. Imagine! Just watching the master listen would be an amazing experience. He begged Toscanini to be allowed to sit in absolute silence far away in the corner of the room. He promised not to say a word unless the maestro gave permission.

The author prevailed, and together, they sat that evening, Toscanini huddled over the radio, his eyes furrowed in intense scrutiny to the melodious sounds[image: Arturo Toscanini] of the symphony, the writer observing from the other side of the room. When the symphony was over, Toscanini was visibly shaken. He turned to the author in dismay. "Absolutely terrible." The biographer was confused, although he was no expert, to him the symphony sounded spectacular.

"You know why?" said Toscanini, shaking his head. "There should be fourteen violins in that orchestra. I only heard thirteen."

The author shrugged. Toscanini was not in the mood of talking, but the writer was baffled. How did he know? It must be pure bluster, he surmised.

The next morning after a couple of calls to the concert hall in Vienna, the writer confirmed the truth. Toscanini was correct. One of the violinists was ill and did not show up. Immediately the writer called the Toscanini to ask him the simple question. "How did he know?"

"I don't understand!" shouted the writer. "I heard the concert exactly the same way you heard the concert. How in the world did you know that a violin was missing?"

Toscanini laughed. "Don't you understand? You are just a member of the audience. In the harmony of

the many sounds of the great symphony it all sounds the same. I, however, am the conductor. It is my job to recognize the perfect symmetry of each chord and instrument, and if something is not perfect, I know it. When I have a gut feeling that something is not right, I know it is not right. I hear things differently. I listen differently. That is why I am the conductor. To you it may be proper, but I know if it is really good or not!"

Perhaps that is what the Torah means, Listen and Keep. There are always two components. One must listen on the highest G-dly level, before he can keep. And when Rashi explains, "Keep it in your innards," maybe he is referring to a place that transcends intellectual rationalization. There are certain elements of Yiddishkeit that need "gut feelings-the kishkes. I have often hear my elders say about certain newfangled ideas, "es shmecked mir nisht gut-in simple English, "it does not smell right. "Of course," says Rashi, "Strive for the level where it is not only "proper" in the eyes of man, but really "good" in the eyes of the Master! What humans think is wonderful may simply not be the best! And when you reach that level of understanding, you will surely know it in your innards. And of course, one has to act in a way that is indeed proper to his fellow man.

The Mishneh in Avos tells us (2:1) Rabbi Judah the Prince said: "Which is the proper course that a man should choose for himself? That which is an honor to him and elicits honor from his fellow men." So there you have it "Proper and Good", but remember your innards. Because in addition to all the simple rationalization, you still need to reach the pinnacle, to know when something is just not right, to remember the Torah in your innards and trust your "gut feeling!" © 2010 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and Project Genesis, Inc.

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Taking a Closer Look**

**T**hroughout Sefer Devarim, Moshe speaks to the Children of Israel about their imminent entry into the Promised Land. This land is sometimes described as "being given" (present tense), i.e. it wasn't ours until now but is about to be given to us. Other times, it is described as land that "was given to us" (past tense) or that was "given to our forefathers" (obviously also past tense).

These different tenses appear in very close proximity in our Parasha, with Moshe telling the nation that they are about to cross the Jordan River "to inherit the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you" (Devarim 11:31), followed shortly thereafter by Moshe telling them which commandments they should be careful to follow "in the land that Hashem the G-d of your forefathers gave to you" (12:1). The Chasam Sofer points out another anomaly, as the first set of verses is accompanied (11:32) by the need to keep all of the commandments, while the second is only accompanied

by the commandment to remove all of the idols that were worshiped by the previous inhabitants (12:2).

In order to address both of these differences, the Chasam Sofer references the Ramban's approach to a different issue (quoted in the commentary originally attributed to the Ritva on Shabbos 88a). The Talmud says that the nation being put "under the mountain" (Shemos 19:17) refers to G-d threatening to kill them if they don't accept the Torah. Lest this be used an excuse not to keep the Torah (since we were "forced" to accept it), the Talmud says that this excuse was nullified in the days of Achashveirosh (after the Jewish nation was saved from Haman's decree to wipe them out) when the nation accepted the Torah willingly. The Ramban asks how, if the excuse wasn't nullified until after the Purim miracle (which occurred after the destruction of the first Temple), could the nation have been punished - prior to their accepting the Torah willingly - by being sent into exile? Although there are numerous approaches to answer this question, the Ramban suggests that even though (until the Purim miracle) they had been forced to accept the Torah, being given the Promised Land was conditional. As long as they observed G-d's commandments they could live on it, but if they didn't, they would lose it. Therefore, after they stopped keeping the Torah, G-d took the land away from them, and sent them into exile. This, the Chasam Sofer suggests, is what the first set of verses is referring to. G-d is (present tense) giving you the land on the condition that you keep all of His commandments.

Normally, if a non-Jew used something for idol-worship, it does not need to be destroyed; the misuse needs to be disavowed and the items nullified. Nevertheless, the Torah commanded the nation to destroy the items used for idol-worship, despite that worship having been done by the non-Jewish inhabitants of the land. The Chasam Sofer suggests that when the Children of Israel worshiped the golden calf, it gave implicit approval to the idol-worshiping going on in Canaan. In essence (he says) they were doing it on our behalf, which necessitated destroying those items. However, if we first got the land when we entered it, there would be no connection between our worshiping the golden calf and their worshiping idols. It is only because G-d had already given (via His promise) the land to our forefathers that this connection was made, as they were living on land that had already been given to us, and it was as if those items already belonged to us. Therefore, when commanding us to completely destroy those things used for idol-worship, the fact that it had already been given (past tense) to us (through our forefathers) is mentioned.

This provides a local explanation for the change from present to past tense; an explanation would still be necessary for each time the land being given to us is mentioned in either tense. Aside from the complexity involved in considering the idols "ours" before we ever

entered the land, the most straight-forward reading of the verses is that the necessity to destroy them stems from the need to remove them so that we do not serve them too. I would therefore like to suggest a different reason for the tense changes, as well as why the commandments referred to switch from all of them to just the removal/destruction of the idols.

Several years ago ([www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/eikev.pdf](http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/eikev.pdf)) I discussed how we become connected to our forefathers by following in their footsteps and continuing their mission. This manifests itself by keeping the Torah, thus allowing us to tap into the promises G-d made to them. G-d had promised He would give them the land of Canaan, not by giving it to them directly, but by giving it to their descendants. First, though, there had to be 400 years of "living in a land that did not belong to them," which included the years Yitzchok spent in Gerar, Yaakov spent in Aram and Egypt, and the Children of Israel lived in Egypt. Had the generation of the exodus been worthy, they would have been able to enter the Promised Land right away, since the 400 (430 from the "Beris Bein Ha'besarim") had already passed. Yet, Yitzchok didn't live in Gerar all of his life, and Yaakov lived in Canaan for a number of years as well. These years "counted" because the land wasn't really theirs yet (as evidenced by Avraham having to buy the plot to bury Sara). It was "promised" to them, and G-d's promise is as good as if it were given, but the land wasn't actually given yet.

The land wasn't "given" to us until four decades after the 400 years of "living in a land that wasn't theirs" had passed, because we weren't worthy yet. If the next generation wasn't worthy, they wouldn't have been given the land either. This is what Moshe was afraid might happen if Reuvein and Gad's request to keep the land on the east side of the Jordan affected the nation the way the report of the spies had affected them. There was no guarantee which generation would get the land, only that, eventually, the descendants of our forefathers would get it. Moshe was therefore telling them that if they want to be the generation that gets it (present tense), they have to keep the Torah and its commandments.

However, they didn't deserve to get the land on their own merit, but because it had been promised to their forefathers and were continuing their mission. This was emphasized in last week's Parasha (Devarim 9:4-6), when Moshe told them that they would not be able to conquer the land because of their own righteousness, but because of the sins of the nations that lived there coupled with the promise made to the forefathers. (The wickedness of the other nations is mentioned with both sides of the equation to make sure that they know that righteousness is not relative, and even if they are more righteous than the other nations they are only getting the land because of their forefathers.) In order to be reminded that even though they are being given (present tense) the land now, Moshe adds that it is only

because it had been promised/given (past tense) to their forefathers.

Keeping the Torah is incumbent upon every generation. There is one specific commandment, though, that is directed at the generation the land is actually given to: destroying the idols that were there. (If this was done properly, it couldn't apply to any other generation.) Nevertheless, to make sure that they understood that despite fulfilling this commandment, which (ideally) only applied to them, the land was really given to them because of their connection with their forefathers (through their Torah observance), Moshe used the past tense; "you are getting the land now because it was promised to them." © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

### RABBI YAKOV HABER

## TorahWeb

This week we read the third of the haftorot of consolation, "Aniya so'ara lo nuchama", "Agitated pauper who is not consoled" (Isaiah 54:11 ff.). In this reading, G-d comforts his beloved nation, personified as a forlorn woman, assuring her that the land of Israel and Jerusalem will be rebuilt with dazzling splendor. All the children will be learned; the nation, being re-founded on charity and honesty will not have to fear their enemies (both internal and external-Malbim). It continues with beseeching all who are thirsty to imbibe the waters of Torah and all who are hungry to partake of the bread, wine, and milk all representing Torah and mitzvos (based on Malbim). The haftora ends with an assurance of the restoration of the Davidic dynasty with the arrival of Mashiach whose commands all nations will heed.

Interestingly, the first half of this chapter from the prophet Yeshayahu- "Rani akara lo yalada" (Isaiah 54:1) -- is read two weeks later as the haftora for parshat Ki Teitsei. Avudarham (quoted by Levush 428) quotes a Midrash that this order was chosen in order to convey a dramatic sequence of events. The order of the seven haftorot of consolation is: "Console, console my nation", "And Zion said G-d has abandoned me", "Agitated pauper who is not consoled" (our haftora), "I am the one who consoles you", "Sing out barren one who has not given birth", "Arise, shine, for your light as come", concluding with "I will rejoice in my G-d". The logical sequence being conveyed is that G-d calls his prophets to console his nation but she refuses to be consoled claiming that G-d has abandoned her. The prophets report back likening her to a pauper who refuses to be comforted. But then G-d Himself consoles her calling to her to sing and shine. Zion is finally comforted and proclaims she will rejoice in G-d who has consoled her.

Malbim notes an anomaly concerning the order as it appears in the text itself. First, the prophet states, "Rejoice O barren one.. for many are your children"

(54:1) and then "Agitated pauper who is not comforted" (54:11). Why is Zion still compared to a pauper after her children have returned to her? He answers that at first the children of Israel will return to Eretz Yisrael. But Zion will not yet be rebuilt. Consequently, she is still referred to as a pauper who is inconsolable. She rejoices over the return of her children but mourns the absence of Hashem's openly revealed Divine presence through the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash. Hashem assures her that this too will occur by promising its rebuilding. The Gemara (Megilla 17b) bears out this sequence of events. Noting the order of the shemone esrei, the Gemara relates that starting from the blessing of "bareich aleinu", the tefila follows the order of the redemption of Israel. The blessing of the ingathering of the exiles (t'ka b'shofar) appears earlier on with the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the coming of Mashiach following later.

(The application to current events of the last century cannot be overlooked. B"H, as a recent oleh, I personally witness daily in our own neighborhood of Ramat Beit Shemesh the fulfillment of the first part of the chapter to be read in two weeks: "Widen the place of your tent and the curtains of your dwelling places shall be stretched out; do not stop; lengthen your ropes, and your pegs strengthen, for you shall spread out to the right and to the left." Malbim interprets this to apply to the building of new homes as well as expansions of old ones to accommodate the constantly growing population both in Jerusalem and the other cities of Israel. Although applications of prophecies can only properly be done by Gedolei Yisrael and will only be fully understood after the final redemption, I humbly submit a personal observation.)

These seven haftorot are read from after Tish'a B'Av through the month of Elul culminating with two haftorot of repentance read between Rosh Hashana and Yom HaKippurim: "Shuva Yisrael" and "Dirshu Hashem b'himatz'o". Apparently, the first seven also relate to the theme of repentance falling as they do in the preparatory period toward the Days of Repentance. Rav Kook zt"l as well as others often noted the connection between Israel's return to G-d and its return to its Land. Here, we would like to connect the two ideas mentioned above to repentance. The mishna at the end of Yoma, quotes the famous statement of R. Akiva: "Before whom do you purify yourselves and Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven.... Just as the mikveh purifies the t'mei'im, so too the Holy One blessed be He purifies Israel!" The comforting of Israel through her return to her Land and the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash and the purification of Israel following its repentance are both done directly by our Father in Heaven. Zion is not satisfied with the comfort of the prophets and insists on consolation by Hashem directly. As during the original Exodus from Egypt, G-d Himself redeems Israel (at least during the final stages of redemption) and rebuilds the Beis HaMikdash, not

through emissaries. (See "Beit HaMikdash: Built by Whom?" <[http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2000/parsha/r\\_hab\\_kedoshim.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2000/parsha/r_hab_kedoshim.html)> for further elaboration on whether the future Beis HaMikdash is to be built by G-d or Israel.)

As mentioned above, in the process of redemption there are different stages: the physical return to Eretz Yisrael and the later spiritual return of Hashem's presence. Repentance as well requires mental, verbal, and physical efforts performed by us (see Ramban, Nitzavim 30:14) hopefully to be blessed with the return of Hashem's Presence to us. (These are the three steps of t'shuva: regret, confession and commitment not to return to the sin.) Rambam (Teshuva 7:7) beautifully describes this process:

How great is repentance! Before, [the penitent] was separated from Hashem, the G-d of Israel...he cries out as is not answered...and today [after repentance] he is cleaved to the Shechina... he cries out and is answered immediately, and he performs mitzvos and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is written "and the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem will be pleasing to G-d as in days of old".

The prooftexts the Rambam quotes (only one quoted above for brevity) relate to the avodas HaMikdash, perhaps further verifying our analogy.

As we approach the month of Elul and the Days of Repentance, may we all merit our return to G-d and the return of the entire Jewish nation to its Land. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Haber and The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

#### **CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## **Covenant & Conversation**

**“Y**ou are children of the Lord your G-d. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your G-d. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be His treasured possession" (Deut. 14: 1-2).

These words have had a considerable history within Judaism. The first inspired the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: "Beloved is man because he was created in the image [of G-d]. Beloved are Israel for they are called children of the All-present" (Avot 3: 14). The phrase, "Do not cut yourselves", was imaginatively applied by the sages to divisions within the community (Yevamot 14a). A single town should not have two or more religious courts giving different rulings.

The plain sense of these two verses, though, is about behaviour at a time of bereavement. We are commanded not to engage in excessive rituals of grief. To lose a close member of one's family is a shattering experience. It is as if something of ourselves had died too. Not to grieve is wrong, inhuman: Judaism does not command Stoic indifference in the face of death. But to give way to wild expressions of sorrow - lacerating one's flesh, tearing out one's hair - is also wrong. It is, the

Torah suggests, not fitting to a holy people; it is the kind of behaviour associated with idolatrous cults. How so, and why so?

Elsewhere in Tanakh we are given a glimpse of the kind of behaviour the Torah has in mind. It occurs in the course of the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah had challenged them to a test: Let us each make a sacrifice and see which of us can bring down fire from heaven. The Baal prophets accept the challenge: Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. (I Kings 18:26-28)

This was, of course, not a mourning ritual, but it gives us a graphic sense of the rite of self-laceration. Emil Durkheim provides us with a description of mourning customs among the aborigines of Australia. When a death is announced, men and women begin to run around wildly, howling and weeping, cutting themselves with knives and pointed sticks.

Despite the apparent frenzy, there is a precise set of rules governing this behaviour, depending on whether the mourner is a man or woman, and on his or her kinship relationship with the deceased. "Among the Warramunga, those who slashed their thighs were the maternal grandfather, maternal uncle and wife's brother of the deceased. Others are required to cut their whiskers and hair and then cover their scalps with pipe clay." Women lacerate their heads and then apply red-hot sticks to the wounds in order to aggravate them (Emil Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen Fields, Free Press, 1995, pp. 392-406). (A similar ritual is performed by some Shia Muslims on Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the prophet's grandson, at Karbala. People flagellate themselves with chains or cut themselves with knives until the blood flows. Some Shia authorities strongly oppose this practice.)

The Torah sees such behaviour as incompatible with kedushah, holiness. What is particularly interesting is to note the two-stage process in which the law is set out. It appears first in Vayikra/Leviticus 21: The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: A priest may not defile himself for any of his people who die, except for a close relative . . . They may not shave their heads or shave the edges of their beards or cut their bodies. They must be holy to their G-d and must not profane the name of their G-d." (Lev. 21: 1-6)

There it applies specifically to cohanim, priests, on account of their holiness. In Deuteronomy the law is

extended to all Israel (the difference between the two books lies in their original audiences: Leviticus is mainly a set of instructions to the priests, Deuteronomy is Moses' addresses to the whole people). The application to ordinary Israelites of laws of sanctity that apply to priests is part of the democratization of holiness that is central to the Torah idea of "a kingdom of priests". The question remains, however: what has restraint in mourning to do with being "children of the Lord your G-d", a holy and chosen people?

[1] Ibn Ezra says that just as a father may cause a child pain for his or her long-term good, so G-d sometimes brings us pain - here, bereavement - which we must accept in trust without an excessive show of grief.

[2] Ramban suggests that it is our belief in the immortality of the soul that is why we should not grieve overmuch. Even so, he adds, we are right to mourn within the parameters set by Jewish law since, even if death is only a parting, every parting is painful.

[3] R. Ovadiah Sforno and Chizkuni say that because we are "children of G-d" we are never completely orphaned. We may lose our earthly parents but never our ultimate Father; hence there is a limit to grief.

[4] Rabbenu Meyuchas suggests that royalty does not defile itself by undergoing disfiguring injuries (nivul). Thus Israel - children of the supreme King - may not do so either.

Whichever of these explanations speaks most strongly to us, the principle is clear. Here is how Maimonides sets out the law: "Whoever does not mourn the dead in the manner enjoined by the rabbis is cruel [achzari - perhaps a better translation would be, 'lacking in sensitivity']" (Hilkhos Avel 13: 12). At the same time, however, "One should not indulge in excessive grief over one's dead, for it is said, 'Weep not for the dead, nor bemoan him' [Jer. 22: 10], that is to say, weep not too much, for that is the way of the world, and he who frets over the way of the world is a fool" (ibid. 13: 11).

Halakhah, Jewish law, strives to create a balance between too much and too little grief. Hence the various stages of bereavement: aninut (the period between the death and burial), shiva (the week of mourning), sheloshim (thirty days in the case of other relatives) and shanah (a year in the case of parents). Judaism ordains a precisely calibrated sequence of grief, from the initial, numbing moment of loss itself, to the funeral and the return home, to the period of being comforted by friends and members of the community, to a more extended time during which one does not engage in activities associated with joy. The more we learn about the psychology of bereavement and the stages through which we must pass before loss is healed, so the wisdom of Judaism's ancient laws and customs has become ever more clear. As it is with individuals, so it is with the people as a whole. Jews have suffered more than most from persecution and

tragedy. We have never forgotten these moments. We remember them on our fast days - especially on Tisha B'Av with its literature of lament, the kinot. Yet, with a power of recovery that at times has been almost miraculous, it has never allowed itself to be defeated by grief. One rabbinic passage (Tosefta Sotah 15: 10-15; see also Baba Batra 60b) epitomizes the dominant voice within Judaism:

After the Second Temple was destroyed, ascetics multiplied in Israel. They did not eat meat or drink wine . . . Rabbi Joshua told them: "Not to mourn at all is impossible, for it has been decreed. But to mourn too much is also impossible."

In this anti-traditional age, with its hostility to ritual and its preference for the public display of private emotion (what Philip Reiff, in the 1960s, called "the triumph of the therapeutic"), the idea that grief has its laws and limits sounds strange. Yet almost anyone who has had the misfortune to be bereaved can testify to the profound healing brought about by observance of the laws of *avelut* (mourning). Torah and tradition knew how to honour both the dead and the living, sustaining the delicate balance between grief and consolation, the loss of life that gives us pain, and the re-affirmation of life that gives us hope.

### Religion is about open hearts not closed minds

*The Times - Credo 2009*

Back in 1993 I received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University together with Thomas Watson, co-discoverer with Francis Crick of DNA. Meeting him gave me the opportunity to say the blessing, coined by the sages two thousand years ago and still to be found in all Jewish prayer books, thanking G-d for bestowing his wisdom on human beings. Essentially it's a blessing to be said on seeing a great scientist, although the word 'scientist' wasn't coined until 1833. What a difference between the first century and now, when there seems so often to be at worst hostility, at best estrangement, between religion and science. It shouldn't be like that.

The rabbis had every reason to fear science. It was done, in their day, by the Greeks, and there was a profound difference between the two cultures, so much so that Jews had fought a war - essentially a war of culture - against Hellenism. The name Epicurus, the Greek thinker who more than anyone was the forerunner of atomic science, was synonymous for Jews with 'heretic'. Yet the rabbis knew wisdom when they saw it, and they valued it even though they dissented from some of its conclusions. They did so for three reasons. First, it was evidence of the fact that G-d had indeed created humankind 'in his image, after his likeness', meaning according to Jewish tradition, 'with the capacity to understand and discern.' Intellect, insight, the ability to frame and test hypotheses: these are G-d-given and a reason to give thanks.

Second, scientific method can apply to religion as well. The Talmud tells the story of a Rabbi Shimon Ha-Amsoni who had spent a lifetime applying certain exegetical principles to biblical texts. On one occasion he encountered a verse which, if interpreted by his rules, would yield an unacceptable conclusion. He then and there declared his principles unsound, in effect abandoning his entire life's work. His students were aghast. They asked him: are you really willing to give up everything you have taught because of one counterexample? He smiled and said, "Just as I received a [divine] reward for the exposition, so I will receive a reward for the retraction." This is in effect an anticipation, many centuries earlier, of Sir Karl Popper's account of scientific method in his book *Conjectures and Refutations*. Religion may not be science but it can use the same rules of logic.

Third, science, regardless of the conclusions drawn from it, provides stunning testimony to the law-governed orderliness of the universe and the beauty and intricacy of creation. That was evident to the sages long ago, and it has become all the more pronounced today. I lose count of the number of times I have had reason to say, reading about some new scientific discovery, "How many are your works, O Lord: You have created them all in wisdom" (Psalm 104: 24). The rabbis felt so strongly about this that they said about those who could study astronomy but failed to do so, that they were the people about whom the prophet Isaiah was speaking when he said (5: 12), "they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord, no respect for the work of His hands."

One passage in the Talmud is indicative of the rabbinical approach. The topic under discussion is the question, where does the sun go at night? The sages give their account. Next they give the Greek account, that of Ptolemy. They then conclude that the Greek explanation is more plausible than the Jewish one. End of discussion. They got it right; we got it wrong. That to me is a model of intellectual integrity. I mentioned that the Jewish blessing on seeing a great scientist uses the word 'wisdom,' and that is the key concept. Judaism recognises two distinct sources of knowledge, wisdom and Torah, the products respectively of reason and revelation. Entire books of the Bible, notably Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, are dedicated to wisdom. Unlike revelation, wisdom is universal. Anyone can achieve it, regardless of religious belief, and traces of it are to be found in all the world's cultures.

There are tensions between reason and revelation, and that is particularly evident in Ecclesiastes and Job, two of the most dissident books ever to be included in a canon of sacred scriptures. Yet they too are part of the religious life. So let's continue to thank G-d for great scientists. Religion is about open hearts, not closed minds. © 2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org