

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**W**hat is the real challenge of maintaining a free society? In parshat Ekev, Moses springs his great surprise. Here are his words: "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.".... If you ever forget the Lord your God... I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed." (Deut. 8:11-19)

You thought, Moses says to the new generation, that the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were the real challenge, and that once you conquer and settle the land, your problems will be over. The truth is, that it is then that the real challenge will begin. It will be precisely when all your physical needs are met-when you have land and sovereignty and rich harvests and safe homes-that your spiritual trial will begin.

The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not insecurity but security, not slavery but freedom. Moses, for the first time in history, is hinting at a law of history. Many centuries later it was articulated by the great 14th century Islamic thinker, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), by the Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), and most recently by the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson. Moses is giving an account of the decline and fall of civilizations.

Ibn Khaldun argued that when a civilization becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their *asabiyah*, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilized than they are but more cohesive and driven.

Vico described a similar cycle: "People first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful,

next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates."

Bertrand Russell put it powerfully in the introduction to his *History of Western Philosophy*. Russell thought that the two great ages of mankind were to be found in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. But he was honest enough to see that the very features that made them great contained the seeds of their own demise: What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.

Niall Ferguson, in his recent book *Civilization*, argues that the West rose to dominance because of what he calls its six "killer applications": competition, science, democracy, medicine, consumerism and the Protestant work ethic. Today however it is losing belief in itself and is in danger of being overtaken by others.

All of this was said for the first time by Moses, and it forms a central argument of the book of *Devarim*. If you assume you yourselves won the land and the freedom you enjoy, Moses implies, you will grow complacent. In an earlier chapter he uses the graphic word *venoshantem*, "you will grow old" (Deut. 4:25). You will no longer have the moral and mental energy to make the sacrifices necessary for the defence of freedom.

Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments, injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane.

This has happened, sooner or later, to all civilizations, however great. To the Israelites-a small people surrounded by large empires-it would be particularly disastrous. As Moses makes clear towards the end of the book, in the long account of the curses that would overcome the people if they lost their spiritual bearings, Israel would find itself defeated and devastated.

This issue of *Toras Aish* is dedicated  
in memory of  
Esther Lutwak, a"h  
May her memory be for a blessing

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Only against this background can we understand the momentous project the book of Devarim is proposing: the creation of a society capable of defeating the normal laws of the growth-and-decline of civilizations. It is an astonishing idea.

How is it to be done? By each person bearing and sharing responsibility for the society as a whole. By each knowing the history of his or her people. By each individual studying and understanding the laws that govern all. By teaching their children so that they too become literate and articulate in their identity.

Rule 1: Never forget where you came from.

Next, you sustain freedom by establishing courts, the rule of law and the implementation of justice. By caring for the poor. By ensuring that everyone has the basic requirements of dignity. By including the lonely in the people's celebrations. By remembering the covenant daily, weekly, annually in ritual, and renewing it at a national assembly every seven years. By making sure there are always prophets to remind the people of their destiny and expose the corruptions of power.

Rule 2: Never drift from your foundational principles and ideals.

Above all by recognising a power greater than ourselves. This is Moses' most insistent point. Societies start growing old when they lose faith in the transcendent. They then lose faith in an objective moral order and end by losing faith in themselves.

Rule 3: A society is as strong as its faith.

Only faith in God can lead us to honour the needs of others as well as ourselves. Only faith in God can motivate us to act for the benefit of a future we will not live to see. Only faith in God can stop us from wrongdoing when we believe that no other human will ever find out. Only faith in God can give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and the self-belief that leads, as Paul Kennedy argued in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, to military overstretch and national defeat.

Moses' argument recently received endorsement from an unlikely source. In *Civilization*, Niall Ferguson quotes a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, part of a team tasked with the challenge of discovering why it was that Europe, having lagged behind China until the 17th century, overtook it, rising to prominence and dominance.

At first, he said, we thought it was your guns. You had better weapons than we did. Then we delved deeper and thought it was your political system. Then we searched deeper still, and concluded that it was your economic system. But for the past 20 years we have realised that it was in fact your religion. It was the (Judeo-Christian) foundation of social and cultural life in Europe that made possible the emergence first of capitalism, then of democratic politics.

A society is as strong as its faith, and only faith can save a society from decline and fall. That was one of Moses' greatest insights, and it has never ceased to be true. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**“Y**ou shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you" (Deut. 8:10). Ekev first and foremost provides us with a paean of praise to the Land of Israel; its very special fruits and its beautiful topography.

It also gives us the "mother of all blessings," the source for all of the blessings we make on objects of physical enjoyment: "You shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you," our grace after meals.

This is the only time in the Bible where we are commanded to make a blessing. But this blessing is strange, because instead of thanking God for the food, we are thanking Him for the land. Why bless the land? My suggested answer partly explains why we have become a pariah nation, and why we seem to be losing our legitimacy especially in the eyes of Europe, which was originally so supportive.

Yoram Hazony, head of the Shalem Institute, argues that it is not the actions of Israel but rather the values of the Western world that have changed. In the wake of the horrors of Auschwitz, not only the Jews but the Western world understood that it was the powerlessness of the stateless Jewish people which facilitated the tortures and tribulations that we suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany. Therefore, the need of the Jews for a nation-state became almost axiomatic - despite continuing anti-Semitism.

During the last decade, the paradigm of the Western world has changed. It has become apparent to many political scientists and even spokespeople of popular culture that indeed it was the power of individual nation states like Germany that led to Auschwitz; by continuing such nation-states, we are merely preparing the way for another Auschwitz.

They argue that the world is now changing from a separatist-nationalist paradigm to a world of united peoples, individual rather than national rights, universal ideals and ultimate demilitarization. The most powerful example of this is the European Union in which

countries like Germany, France and the UK are losing their particularities and national histories in favor of a more universal cultural expression. In this milieu, Israel has become an anachronism; it is only because of this new mind-set that Israel can be called an Auschwitz state and it becomes accepted rhetoric.

In an excellent article which appeared in the Shalem Institute's Azure journal (Spring 5770- 2010), Dr. Daniel Gordis trenchantly argues that our Bible would vigorously disagree with this new paradigm, arguing that we've already "been there, done that" in the story of the Tower of Babel.

The story opens with a world of "one language and uniform ideas" - and that uniformity led to a mass totalitarian state, devoid of individual worth and rights, which ultimately self-destructed in the manner of the Nazi axis and the former Soviet Union.

The message is rather one of universal ethical absolutism, but with separatist and national pluralism, a world of nation-states, each with its own cultural narrative and ethnic expressions, but "they will all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent" (Zephaniah 3:9) when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

It is within the individual ethnic expressions that cultural creativity is fostered, that national pride, which - when limited by proper ethical norms based upon every individual having been created in the image of the Divine - will produce an idealistic national purpose that will provide the impetus to continue the narrative into succeeding generations.

It is specifically in cultural diversity that we begin to appreciate the glory of a God who created people who look and think differently, which leads to creative accomplishment and healthy competition.

Indeed, the European Union is lying down dead before the steady march of Islam, which is taking it over with lightning speed. The nation-state Israel may be an anachronism in the minds of the post-modern world, but the paradigm of Israel is the only way to go. Witness the uniform facelessness of the despotic Soviet Union which had no recourse but to return to the separate cultural and ethnic entities that humanity needs in order to survive creatively.

Food, the staff of life, is an interesting and valid expression of cultural separatism; hence different nations have their own distinctive foods, like the pasta of Italy and the wines of France. The Land of Israel produces unique fruits that have become an expression of the uniqueness of the Jewish people who live on it and eat from its bounty, the Seven Species for which we make a special blessing.

In respect to cultural separatism, our Bible crafts the blessing "You shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" - the fruit of Israel, which is

unique to the Land of Israel, the patrimony of the people of Israel. © 2011 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd I fell down [in prayer] before G-d for the [previously mentioned] 40 days and 40 nights that I caused myself to fall down, and I prayed to G-d and said, 'G-d Almighty, do not destroy Your people'" (Devraim 9:25-26). After the sin of the golden calf, G-d threatened to destroy the Nation of Israel, and build a new nation from Moshe (Shemos 32:10). The prayer that follows (Devarim 9:26-26-29) mirrors the one described in Parashas Ki Sisa (Shemos 32:11-13), including Moshe pleading with God not to destroy the nation, how destroying them would be perceived by the Egyptians, and mentioning the merit of our forefathers. There is one major difference; whereas in Ki Sisa this prayer is offered immediately (before Moshe descended from Mt. Sinai with the Luchos), in our Parasha it was made after Moshe descended, broke the Luchos, and tried to repair the damage caused by the golden calf.

Ibn Ezra says that these two prayers are one and the same (as indicated by their substance), and was offered after Moshe came down from Mt. Sinai, as indicated by the context in our Parasha (Devarim 9:18-19 and 9:25-26). After all, how could Moshe ask G-d to forgive them for something they were still doing? Rather, G-d hinted to Moshe (by saying "leave me alone and I will destroy them") that after he goes down and tries to fix the problem, he should return to pray for them. As far as why (in Ki Sisa) the prayer is placed before Moshe descended even though it wasn't offered until after he went back up, Ibn Ezra explains that the Torah was not taught in chronological order, and if there's a reason to teach things in a different order, this is how it's taught. In this case, the Torah wanted to place Moshe's prayer adjacent to G-d's hint that doing so could save the nation, as well as putting G-d telling Moshe that He won't take his life instead of the sinners (32:33) next to G-d smiting the sinners (32:35).

Not everyone is comfortable with the Torah's narrative being out of order. There's an even bigger issue with Ibn Ezra's approach, though; the Torah describes a second prayer (32:31-32), one that everyone agrees occurred after Moshe came down and tried to fix the damage. According to Ibn Ezra there was only one prayer; we would need to find a reason why the Torah split it up, telling us about different parts in different places. Even if the preferences for the adjacencies were reason enough to split it into parts, the two "halves" don't match. Did Moshe understand why G-d was angry (32:31), or did he claim G-d shouldn't be angry (32:11)? Did G-d change His mind (32:14), or insist on punishing the sinners (32:33)? Although G-d could have changed His mind about wiping out the whole nation and limited the punishment

to just the sinners, why would G-d wipe out those who hadn't sinned? (If these were two separate prayers, Moshe could have helped some repent, with only those who had sinned more severely and/or not repented being punished, even if G-d originally threatened to wipe everybody out.) In short, although Ibn Ezra's approach addresses when this prayer was said, a straightforward reading of the text (in Ki Sisa) indicates that there were two separate prayers, one before Moshe descended and one when he re-ascended.

Ramban takes the opposite approach, telling us that although the first prayer in Ki Sisa is the same as the prayer in our Parasha, it was offered before Moshe descended. There are still several issues Ramban has to address. First of all, why was a second prayer necessary (when Moshe went back up) if G-d had already changed His mind and was not going to destroy the nation, a prayer that was preceded by Moshe telling the nation "perhaps I can achieve forgiveness for your sin" (32:30). This question is not that difficult to answer, though, as the forgiveness came in stages; first G-d agreed not to wipe out the nation, then He agreed to re-establish His covenant with them (by giving them the second Luchos), then He agreed to re-establishing a closer relationship with the nation (which manifested itself in the building of the Mishkan). Even though G-d had agreed not to destroy the nation before Moshe descended, He hadn't yet agreed to re-establish His covenant with them until after the second set of 40 days; this was the "forgiveness" Moshe had told them he would try to achieve before he re-ascended. G-d telling Moshe to carve out new Luchos and bring them up with him (at the start of the third set of 40 days) indicated that this prayer worked. (Being commanded to build the Mishkan at the end of the third set of 40 days, on Yom Kippur, indicated that Moshe's prayers regarding the special relationship were answered as well.)

Another issue, raised by Ibn Ezra to disprove those who thought this prayer was offered before Moshe descended, is how Moshe could have tried to achieve forgiveness while the sin was still being committed (and how G-d could have agreed). Ramban addresses this by pointing out that Moshe had no other choice; he had to try to minimize the damage (and the danger) as much as he could, as fast as he could, as otherwise by the time he rejoined the nation it might be too late.

The issues not as easy to explain relate to the context of the prayer as described in two places in our Parasha. Moshe told the nation he had to pray on their behalf for "40 days and 40 nights" (9:18), because he was terrified of G-d's anger, as "G-d was upset at you [to the point of] destroying you" (9:19). The sin of the golden calf was committed on the last day of the first set of 40 days, so the "40-day" period of prayer couldn't be this set. If G-d had already agreed not to destroy the nation before Moshe descended, why would he still be

afraid that they would be destroyed? The Ramban seems to address this by saying that even though there was no longer a danger of the nation being wiped out, since the sin they committed was serious enough to warrant being wiped out, he tried to achieve forgiveness for that grave sin. It was the extent of the deserved punishment that terrified Moshe, not a fear of it being exacted by destroying them. Another possibility, based on Ralbag's explanation of how Moshe's prayer could help others, is that G-d's agreement not to destroy the nation was conditional. Moshe asked for some time to try to correct the problem, and this is what G-d agreed to. He wouldn't destroy the nation right away, but that didn't mean He wouldn't destroy them later, if the problem wasn't corrected. Therefore, after Moshe did what he could to repair the damage, he returned to G-d hoping that it was enough, and that the temporary reprieve would become permanent.

When Moshe refers again to the prayer that was offered for "40 days and 40 nights" (9:25), he continues by relating the prayer that Ramban maintains was offered before Moshe descended. Here again Ramban is forced to say that Moshe is telling the nation that the reason he had to pray for such a long period of time is because their sin was so grave that G-d had originally intended to wipe them out because of it. Although this allows for consistency between the narrative in our Parasha and in Ki Sisa, it is not the most straightforward way of understanding the text. This is especially true of Moshe's repeating the prayer he offered at the end of the first 40-day period (9:26-29) after discussing having to pray on their behalf for another 40 days (rather than mentioning it earlier).

Malbim suggests that after Moshe's first prayer, G-d only agreed not to wipe the nation out all at once. He still intended on killing them all, over time (the way they were punished after the sin of the spies), which is why Moshe still had to pray that they wouldn't be destroyed. However, aside from the peculiarity of this still considered being "destroyed," the prayer described in our Parasha also refers to the perception of the Egyptians, which, it would seem from the fact that this punishment was meted out after the sin of the spies, wasn't really a problem. Additionally, as long as the nation would somehow survive, the promise to the forefathers could still be fulfilled. Netziv suggests that after G-d agreed not to wipe out the nation completely He was going to wipe out just the adults; this may qualify as "destroying" the nation, and would be noticed by the Egyptians, the promise to the forefathers would nevertheless be intact even if Moshe's prayer wasn't successful.

Shemos Rabbah (44:1) indicates that Moshe didn't mention the forefathers until the very end of the second set of 40 days, to which G-d immediately responded by agreeing not to destroy the nation (quoting Shemos 32:14). It would seem that this Midrash understands the prayer described in Ki Sisa

(32:11-13) to be a compendium of the main prayers Moshe offered during these 40 days of prayer (as the part about the forefathers was only said of the 40th day of the second set). If so, it could be suggested that Moshe started to pray right way ("veyechal," and he began), before he descended, went down to repair the damage, then returned to pray for 40 days/nights, until G-d agreed not to destroy the nation. If the entire prayer described in Ki Sisa was not only said when Moshe returned, it being placed in the narrative right after G-d told him how angry He was is not as problematic, even if the narrative returns to events that transpired earlier than the last part of those prayers. This could also explain why remembering the forefathers is mentioned last in Ki Sisa, but towards the beginning in our Parasha; they were only mentioned on the last days those prayers were offered, but when they were finally included, they were mentioned early on in those specific prayers.

Panim Yafos reluctantly suggests that Moshe offered these prayers every day (and night) of the second 40-day period, prayers that were first offered before Moshe descended with the first Luchos. Using this approach (with some minor adjustments), the text is rather straightforward, both here and in Ki Sisa. Moshe "begins" this 41 (1+40) day series of prayers right away, before he descends, which is why it is placed that way in Ki Sisa. The first line ("why should Your anger be kindled") may have only been included that first time, before Moshe saw with his own eyes how grave the sin was; when he returned to G-d, he said "viduy," confessing that "this nation has committed a grave sin" (32:31), and attempted to have some of the punishment enacted upon himself (which G-d refused to do). Otherwise, the prayer was the same all 41 days. G-d agreeing not to destroy the nation (32:14) could refer to the temporary reprieve and to the permanent one achieved at the end of the second 40-day period (since the prayers mentioned happened every one of those 41 days). Moshe refers to G-d possibly destroying the nation throughout those 40 days because it was still very much a possibility. In our Parasha, the prayer is placed at the very end of the narrative because it was still being said on the last day of this 40-day period, when G-d agreed not to destroy the nation and asked Moshe to carve a second set of Luchos. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**lthough we may live lives dedicated to following the commandments of the Torah, the core question of "What does God ask of us?" is posed in the Torah portion this week. It offers the following answer; "Only," to "fear" and "love Him"...and to "observe the commandment of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 10:12, 13)

The fact that the Torah uses the word "only" seems to imply that following the commandments is a minimal request. Yet, keeping 613 commandments is far from a small demand, it is, indeed, a major commitment that requires all of the self.

Some suggest that these words, offered as they were by Moshe (Moses), were said from his perspective. For him, it was a minimal request because for Moshe, the prophet of prophets, keeping all of the mitzvot (commandments) came naturally.

This is a bit troubling for it seems that by using the term "only," Moshe, who was a master teacher was making a grievous error by not speaking on the level of the people. He was not speaking in the "language" they could understand.

The key to understanding the use of "only" may lie in resolving the larger question of why God gives the commandments at all. Are they primarily given for His sake, or for ours?

One could look at the mitzvot as God's way of expressing rulership over us. When we keep His laws we profess allegiance and commitment to Him.

There is, however, an alternative approach. The mitzvot are not haphazard laws given by a God who wants "only" to rule us just for the sake of ruling us. Instead, the commandments express what God feels is best for His people. They are for our sake. It's God's way of saying, I've created a beautiful world - follow these laws and you will find inner happiness. In the words of God to Avraham (Abraham), "hithalekh le-fanai veyei tamim, walk before Me, and you will find fulfillment." (Genesis 17:1) Note the similarity between hithalekh and halakha. God tells Avraham, follow the commandments, follow the halakha-and you will find inner peace and inner meaning.

By focusing on three major Jewish rituals, family purity, the dietary laws and Shabbat, we can better understand that the mitzvot are for our sake. These rituals correspond to the three basic human drives. Family purity corresponds to the sexual encounter, the dietary laws to eating, and Shabbat to the human quest for power. Since Judaism views human passions as God's gifts to us, the halakha is meant in part as a mechanism to sanctify these passions, allowing us to better appreciate and find greater meaning in life itself.

Many have felt that a God of love would never have initiated commandments which seem to limit and restrict human beings. Yet, this week's parsha tells us while these "limits" and "restrictions" are complex and sometimes difficult to follow, they are the key to living a life of meaning and holiness. When Moshe tells us what God wants, he uses the word "only" - a minimalistic request - teaching that God gives the laws out of his great concern for our welfare, for what is best for us. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox

*Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.*

### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

**T**he main topics that Moshe discusses in Dvarim are reflected in this week's parsha in detail. These topics are the status of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel and the cardinal sin of worshipping strange gods and foreign ideologies. Moshe points out that the sojourn of the Jewish people in its promised homeland is not at all one of guaranteed permanence.

The Land of Israel itself, seemingly, has something to say about who resides within its confines. It is most inhospitable to those who violate God's basic moral code, and the dire consequences that occur when immoral and pagan behavior occurs there are inevitable and unavoidable.

Rambam, in his Moreh Nevuchim, relates most prohibitions listed in the Torah to the general principle of avoiding idolatrous behavior. Idolatry is so attractive to humans that the Torah has to resort to great and repeated lengths to separate the Jew from those beliefs, behaviors and ideas.

We are witness to Jewish behavior throughout history that always seems to fall back into idolatrous behavior. Sometimes the idols are made of stone and wood, sometimes they are human beings who advertise themselves as gods or superhuman savants of holiness - and sometimes they are ideologies and utopian promises that only lead to tragedy and disillusionment.

But, they are all paganism and are forbidden by Torah edict and values. The last century brutally illustrated to us the cost of following strange gods and false utopian ideologies. Moshe's warning to his generation resonates down the millennia to reach our ears as well. Types and forms of idols may come and go in human history but the presence of idolatry and its attendant consequences remain constant in all generations.

Moshe appeals to three factors that can save the Jewish people from losing its presence in the Land of Israel. They are 1) historical experience, 2) common sense, and 3) obedience to God's commandments. Historical experience abundantly shows the errors of following other value systems than the Torah. Paganism, Hellenism, the Sadducees, Jewish Christianity, Karaism, false messianism, uncontrolled mysticism, secularism, the Enlightenment, Marxism, nationalism, assimilation, Reform, humanism, etc. have all had their moment on the Jewish stage and have disappeared or changed.

Many Jews are now searching for the new idol that will bring us hope and salvation. They are doomed to disappointment. The brilliant and wise nation of Israel needs to use a little common sense sometimes.

Following policies and ideas that have never yet worked for us should no longer be accepted and trumpeted as somehow being valid and useful. Common sense should teach us who are those that are for us and those that are against us, no matter what their protestations of affection for us may be.

Forsaking Jewish tradition, halachic observance and the Torah's value system only brings us grief and angst. These factors that Moshe outlines for us constitute the blueprint for Jewish survival in the Land of Israel and in the world generally. These are matters not to be taken lightly nor stepped upon casually by the heel of our foot - but rather they are the key to our future and ultimate success. © 2011 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)

### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

*by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg,  
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne*

**M**oshe prayed on Mount Sinai three times. The first time was when he was told, "Go down, for your nation has become corrupted... And now leave Me be, and My anger will burn within them, and I will destroy them" [Shemot 32:7,10]. So Moshe prayed, and G-d responded to his prayer: "And G-d changed His mind about the evil that He had talked of doing to His nation" [32:14]. The second time, on the eighteenth of Tammuz, Moshe said, "And now, I will rise up to G-d, perhaps I will be able to atone for your sin" [32:30]. And in this week's Torah portion we are told, "And I fell down before G-d like the first time, for forty days" [Devarim 9:25]... for I was afraid of the anger... And G-d heard me this time too" [9:19].

At the beginning of the month of Elul Moshe ascended the mountain a third time, and we are told that "I stood on the mountain like the first days... And G-d heard me that time too, and He did not want to destroy you." [Devarim 10:10].

Why was it necessary for Moshe to pray three separate times, after he had already been told his first time on the mountain that G-d had changed His mind about the evil that He had wanted to do to the nation?

Rabbi Soloveitchik explained this as follows: The first time, Moshe did not ask for the nation to be forgiven, since at that point they had not yet danced around the Golden Calf. He therefore asked that the decree to destroy the nation should be repealed, and he received a positive answer. But he received no promise that Bnei Yisrael would be restored to their former status, and it might be that they would wander around the desert like all the other nomadic nations. Therefore, the second time, Moshe asked that the nation should be restored to its status as a kingdom of priests and a holy

nation. The Tablets were like a betrothal contract between Yisrael and the Holy One, Blessed be He, and when the nation sinned Moshe shattered the Tablets, like a patron at an engagement celebration, who tears up the betrothal documents so that the woman can return to her unmarried status. And now Moshe asked for permission to write a new betrothal document-and G-d responded by saying, "Carve out for you two stone tablets like the first ones" [Shemot 34:1].

But a question still remains: After G-d cancelled the decision to destroy Bnei Yisrael and returned them to their original status, why was there a need for Moshe to pray a third time for forty days more?

The third time that Moshe went up to pray, he said, "Let G-d go among us, for they are a stiff-necked people" [Shemot 34:9]. This would seem to imply that they should be forgiven for their sins even though they were stiff-necked. But Onkeles translates this in a different way: "Because the nation is stiff-necked." That is, Moshe asked for the presence of G-d BECAUSE of the fact that the nation is stubborn. Since he was sure that they would sin again, who would be there to pray for them again? The answer of the Almighty is, "Behold, I will make a covenant with them" [34:10]. He revealed the Thirteen Traits of the Almighty, starting with "G-d; G-d..." [34:6]. As the Midrash explains, He is G-d before they sin and also G-d after they sin.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin noted that the Almighty is called both a father and a mother. "As a man whose mother consoles him..." [Yeshayahu 66:13]. A father likes to play with his son, but when he sees that the son is dirty he gives him back to his mother to clean him. A mother is capable of kissing her son even when he is filthy. The additional element in the third prayer of Moshe was that the Almighty related to us as a mother, and even if we are filthy He does not throw us away.

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

**P**arshat Ekev is where we learn of the benefits and rewards, punishments and consequences, of following and not following the Mitzvot (commandments) set forth for us in the Torah. Among those commandments is a famous one (8:10), which says that "you will eat and you will be satisfied, and bless Hashem, your G-d, for the good land that He gave you." If you just ate food, why are you thanking G-d for land? You should be thanking Him for the food itself. Why be indirect? The answer lies in understanding the true difference between animals and people... What separates us from animals is our ability to choose, and our exercising of that choice. Our nature tells us what we NEED to do, while our mind (and religion) tells us what we SHOULD do. Therefore, the more things we do simply because of habit and without thinking, the less free will we're exercising, which makes us more like animals. Conversely, the more restraint we exercise,

the more freedom we're expressing, because we weren't slaves to our nature. What makes being a Jew so special is that we have so many 'choices' of commandments we can perform, and each of those positive choices make us less like animals and more like G-d.

With this in mind, even if we already 'perform' Mitzvot now, if we do it out of habit and without thinking and actively deciding to do it, we're just as guilty of doing it 'naturally'. For Jews, deciding to do something is just as important as doing it, because then we think about why we do it, and the source, reason, and meaning of it all become part of the action. Now we can understand why we thank G-d for the LAND, when we merely eat its bread: We not only thank G-d for the bread we eat, but we also think of the land that it came from, because we've thought it through to its source, instead of taking bread at face value. The lesson of the Parsha is for us to think about what we're doing, why we're doing it, and realize how much control we have. Perhaps we should think of at least one habit we have, and use this lesson to push us to overcome our natural tendency to blindly surrender to that habit. © 2011 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI WOLLENBERG**

### **Weekly Thoughts**

**T**his week's Parsha begins with the statement "Vehaya Eikev Tishme'un". The literal translation is 'because of your listening to these Commandments...' (you will merit the blessings which the Torah goes on to enumerate).

The word Eikev can also mean a heel. The Commentator Rashi explains that the verse is alluding to the 'light' commandments, the seemingly less important mitzvot which a person 'tramples with their heels'. The type of things which all too easily fall by the wayside. We all know about the 'major' mitzvot, such as keeping Kosher, or Yom Kippur, things like that. What about the smaller details? Are we as careful?

This idea applies across all aspects of our lives. The quietest child, do we too easily ignore him/her precisely because they are quiet and shy?

What about all those big multi-million dollar campaigns for this or that cause? It is very good that some causes get such high publicity - but what about the causes nobody hears about? The 'little' things which fall by the wayside?

What about the workplace? Obviously I would never dream of embezzling from my employer. That is clearly immoral and not right. On the other hand, I need to make a quick international personal call - surely nobody will mind, it's only a few dollars, right? Are we taking advantage of someone else, even in a small, seemingly insignificant manner?

Then there is my relationship with G-d, my behavior as a Jew, charged with maintaining high

standards in all aspects of my life. Obviously I would never do anything REALLY terrible, but what about the 'small details'? Are they as important to me?

These and many other examples come to mind in our everyday lives, at home and at work, in our business, financial and personal dealings. It is all too easy to rationalize and justify a small-scale violation of our principles, much more so than a 'major' violation. Besides which, a large number of small quantities add up to a much larger quantity, even if they are seemingly insignificant by themselves.

There is an additional reason why the 'small details' are so important. A person has two inclinations - the 'good inclination' and the 'evil inclination', the yetzer hara in Hebrew. The yetzer hara is very smart. It does not come to a person and say 'go on, rob a bank' or a similarly large-scale misdeed. Why not? Because it knows no decent person will fall for such a suggestion. So it comes to a person and suggests a much more reasonable sounding idea - why not add a few dollars to the expenses claim, after all you worked hard, you deserve to get paid more anyway, right? Once we fall for the lighter temptation, our resistance has been eroded and it will be much easier to become ensnared in worse and worse behavior until we find ourselves falling into large-scale violations of our principles. This is why the seemingly little things are so important - they must not be trampled on, allowed to fall by the wayside. By withstanding the small temptations we avoid the slippery slope that leads to greater transgressions and remain true to our principles.

Let us not forget the little things. © 2004 Rabbi M. Wollenberg & weeklytorah.com

### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **On Cue**

**N**ot often does G-d Almighty tell anybody to leave him alone. But then again, Moshe isn't everybody.

This week, Moshe recounts the sad tale of the Golden Calf. Moshe had promised to return from Mount Sinai after receiving the Torah in forty days, but the Jews miscalculated. According to their calculations, he was late. Fearing that Moshe would never return from his celestial mission, the Jews made themselves a golden calf and worshipped it while proclaiming, "this is our god that took us out of Egypt." Obviously, the calculations and miscalculations of the Jewish People are not as simple as they appear on the surface. That, however is an entirely different issue.

I'd like to focus in on the aftermath of the calamity of the Golden Calf. Hashem actually wanted to destroy the Jewish Nation and rebuild a new folk with Moshe, as its patriarchal leader. "Release me," said G-d, "and I will destroy them and build a new nation from you" (Deuteronomy 9:14)). Immediately after the words, "release me" Moshe sprung into action. In the Book of Exodus, it details how Moshe pleaded, cajoled,

and reasoned with Hashem with a multitude of persuasive arguments that calmed His wrath. The Jews were spared. What is troubling is Moshe's chutzpah. Didn't Hashem specifically tell him, "leave me alone"? What prompted him with the audacity to defy a direct command of Hashem?

Herbert Tenzer served as a distinguished congressman from New York in the 1960s. More importantly, he was an observant Jew who was a proud activist and was instrumental in providing relief for many Holocaust survivors. A few months before his passing, some years ago, he related to me the following story:

The energetic and often outspoken Rabbi Eliezer Silver of Cincinnati, Ohio was a prominent force in the Vaad Hatzallah Rescue Committee. He worked tirelessly throughout the terrible war years and their aftermath to save and place the victims of Nazi depravity. In addition to his prominence in the Jewish world, Rabbi Silver enjoyed a personal relationship with the very powerful Senator Robert Taft of Ohio.

Rabbi Silver had a very difficult request that needed much political pressure and persuasion to accomplish. He asked Mr. Tenzer to accompany him to the Senator. "Shenator Taft!" he exclaimed, mixing his distinct accent in which the s would sound as sh, with a high pitched intoning of emotions. I have a very important and difficult request!"

Rabbi Silver went on to plead his case of obtaining a certain number of visas for some refugees who may not have met all the criteria. Senator Taft looked nonchalant and non-committal. The Senator thought for a while then grimaced. He slowly and carefully stretched his response. "It would be arduous and burdensome," he began. "but technically," he continued, implying all the while that he was not the least bit anxious to get his hands dirty, "it can be done."

But Rabbi Silver did not hear anything except the last three words. "IT CAN BE DONE?" He shouted with joy. "SHO DO IT!" Needless to say the stunned Senator got to work immediately and obtained the visas for the beleaguered Jews.

Moshe heard one line from Hashem, "leave me alone, and I will destroy them." That was his cue. The Talmud in Berachos explains that hearing those words, Moshe knew that now it all depended on him. The only way Hashem would destroy His people was if Moshe left him alone. And he didn't. Moshe badgered, cajoled, and pleaded with the Almighty and we were spared.

My Rebbe once quoted legendary slugger Ted Williams, the last player to achieve a batting average of over .400. "Every player gets one pitch that he definitely can hit. To hit .400, don't miss that pitch." Instead of recoiling at the words "release me" or "leave me be," Moshe saw his pitch. And he hit it awfully hard.

In life there are many cues. This week Moshe teaches his nation that when you get your cue, don't miss it. Even if it takes a little chutzpah. © 1997 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org