

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The book of Bemidbar draws to a close with an account of the cities of refuge, the six cities—three on each side of the Jordan—set apart as places to which people found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, were sent.

In early societies, especially non-urban ones that lacked an extensive police force, there was always a danger that people would take the law into their own hands, in particular when a member of their family or tribe had been killed.

Thus would begin a cycle of vengeance and retaliation that had no natural end, one revenge-killing leading to another and another, until the community had been decimated, a phenomenon familiar to us from literature, from the Montagues and Capulets of Romeo and Juliet, to the Sharks and Jets of West Side Story, to the Corleones and Tattaglias of The Godfather.

The only viable solution is the effective and impartial rule of law. There is, though, one persisting danger. If Reuben killed Shimon and is deemed innocent of murder by the court—it was an accident, there was no malice aforethought, the victim and perpetrator were not enemies—then there is still the danger that the family of the victim may feel that justice has not been done. Their close relative lies dead and no one has been punished.

It was to prevent such situations of "blood vengeance" that the cities of refuge were established. Those who had committed manslaughter were sent there, and so long as they were within the city limits, they were protected by law. There they had to stay until—according to our parsha—"the death of the High Priest" (Num. 35:25).

The obvious question is, what does the death of the High Priest have to do with it? There seems no connection whatsoever between manslaughter, blood vengeance and the High Priest, let alone his death.

Let us look at two quite different interpretations. They are interesting in their own right, but more generally, they show us the range of thought that exists within Judaism.

Please keep in mind
Mordechai Asher ben Miriam
for a refuah shelaima

The first is given by the Babylonian Talmud: "A venerable old scholar said, I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Rava, that the High Priest should have implored divine grace for the generation, which he failed to do." (Makkot 11a)

According to this the High Priest had a share, however small, in the guilt for the fact that someone died, albeit by accident. Murder is not something that could have been averted by the High Priest's prayer. The murderer was guilty. He chose to do what he did, and no one else can be blamed. But manslaughter, precisely because it happens without anyone intending that it should, is the kind of event that might have been averted by the prayers of the High Priest. Therefore it is not fully atoned for until the High Priest dies. Only then can the manslaughterer go free.

Maimonides offers a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed (III:40): "A person who killed another person unknowingly must go into exile because the anger of "the avenger of the blood" cools down while the cause of the mischief is out of sight. The chance of returning from the exile depends on the death of the High Priest, the most honoured of men, and the friend of all Israel. By his death the relative of the slain person becomes reconciled (ibid. ver. 25); for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one has befallen another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest."

According to Maimonides, the death of the High Priest has nothing to do with guilt or atonement, but simply with the fact that it causes great collective grief, in which people forget their own misfortunes in the face of larger national loss. That is when people let go of their individual sense of injustice and desire for revenge. It then becomes safe for the person found guilty of manslaughter to return home.

What is at stake between these two profoundly different interpretations of the law? The first has to do with whether exile to a city of refuge is a kind of punishment or not. According to the Babylonian Talmud it seems as if it was. There may have been no intent. No one was legally to blame. But a tragedy has happened at the hands of X, the person guilty of manslaughter, and even the High Priest shared, if only negatively and passively, in the guilt. Only when both have undergone some suffering, one by way of exile, the other by way of (natural, not judicial) death, has the

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moral balance been restored. The family of the victim feel that some sort of justice has been done.

Maimonides however does not understand the law of the cities of refuge in terms of guilt or punishment whatsoever. The only relevant consideration is safety. The person guilty of manslaughter goes into exile, not because it is a form of expiation, but simply because it is safer for him to be a long way from those who might be seeking vengeance. He stays there until the death of the High Priest because only after national tragedy can you assume that people have given up thoughts of taking revenge for their own dead family member. This is a fundamental difference in the way we conceptualise the cities of refuge.

However, there is a more fundamental difference between them. The Babylonian Talmud assumes a certain level of supernatural reality. It takes it as self-understood that had the High Priest prayed hard and devotedly enough, there would have been no accidental deaths.

Maimonides' explanation is non-supernatural. It belongs broadly to what we would call social psychology. People are more able to come to terms with the past when they are not reminded daily of it by seeing the person who, perhaps, was driving the car that killed their son as he was crossing the road on a dark night, in heavy rainfall, on a sharp bend in the road.

There are deaths-like those of Princess Diana and of the Queen Mother in Britain-that evoke widespread and deep national grief. There are times-after 9/11, for example, or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 -- when our personal grievances seem simply too small to worry about. This, as Maimonides says, is "a natural phenomenon."

This fundamental difference, between a natural and supernatural understanding of Judaism, runs through many eras of Jewish history: sages as against priests, philosophers as against mystics, Rabbi Ishmael as against Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides in contradistinction to Judah Halevi, and so on to today.

It is important to realise that not every approach to religious faith in Judaism presupposes supernatural events-events, that is to say, there cannot be explained within the parameters of science, broadly conceived. G-d is beyond the universe, but his actions within the

universe may none the less be in accordance with natural law and causation.

On this view, prayer changes the world because it changes us. Torah has the power to transform society, not by way of miracles, but by effects that are fully explicable in terms of political theory and social science. This is not the only approach to Judaism, but it is Maimonides', and it remains one of the two great ways of understanding our faith. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**C**ommand the children of Israel: This is the land which shall fall to you as an inheritance, the land of Canaan and its boundaries" (Numbers 34:2).

These closing portions of the Book of Numbers conclude the story of the desert generation, almost all of whom perished before reaching the Promised Land. The sin of the scouts occurred in the second year of the desert sojourn, after which they were all informed that the desert would become their grave. How did the Hebrews have the fortitude to persevere for the next 38 years, knowing that the goal of settling the Land of Israel would not be realized during their lifetimes? How does someone persist with the struggles of life knowing that they are suffering from a terminal illness?

On the deepest level, each of us is plagued by this problem as soon as we become aware of our own mortality. Most of us manage to repress such "intimations of mortality" fairly successfully. The Midrash teaches that each year, after the sin of the scouts, Moses ordered every Hebrew to dig his own grave on the evening of the ninth of Av and sleep in it. The next morning, a significant percentage would not get up (B.T. Bava Batra, 121a Rashbam). The desert generation could not repress their impending doom. Perhaps the way in which they coped will teach us all an important lesson.

The secret lies in the manner in which the Land was to be divided, as described in this week's portion of Masei, but also harks back to last week's portion of Pinhas. One verse implies that the Land was to be divided according to the number of people entering it (Numbers 26:53), whereas two verses later, the text implies that the division was based on the numbers of the generation that left Egypt and died in the desert.

The Talmud (B.T. Bava Batra 117a) orchestrates a solution to the apparent contradiction by means of a practical illustration: Reuben and Simeon leave Egypt; Reuben has one son, Simeon has two sons. The three sons who enter the land receive three portions, representing the fact that this is the number of sons who enter the homeland. But in order to give credit to the two fathers who came out of Egypt, the three boys divide their portions in half, with Reuben's one son

receiving a portion and one half, and Simeon's two sons combining theirs to receive their portion and one half. This prompts Rabbi Yonatan to cry out: "How different is this from any other inheritance; generally the living inherits the dead, whereas here the dead inherit the living!"

The logic of the Talmud is a glory to behold. The narrative of Israel is an unfinished symphony, which began with Abraham and will not conclude until the eventual Redemption of the world. Every generation owes its accomplishments to the foundations established by its forebears. Hence, the generation which left Egypt but did not enter the Promised Land, can likewise share the inheritance of the children.

This is the significance of the teaching in the Passover Haggada: "It is incumbent upon every individual to feel as if he came out of Egypt." Superficially, such an emotion seems impossible, how can one traverse 4,000 years?

But the first time I sat at the Pessah Seder with my grandchildren and recognized my genetic characteristics - but even more importantly my values and customs - within their words and deeds, I realized how much of me was in them and how much of them was in me. Indeed, I am them and they are me.

At that moment, I ceased being afraid of my mortality, for I realized to what extent it is possible to participate in eternity. As the Talmud says so eloquently: "Father Jacob never died" (Ta'anit 5b). As long as his children and descendents are alive, and following his customs and values, he too is alive.

It is this interpretation which prompted our sages to declare, "Whoever teaches his grandchild Torah is as if he received it from Sinai," as our sages teach, "The crown of the elders are their grandchildren and the glory of the children are their forebears" (Mishna Avot 6: 8).

And this does not necessitate biological children and grandchildren; anyone who influences the next generation - as a teacher, as an author, as a patron, anyone who makes the continuity of the narrative possible - shares in that eternity. "Spiritual children" can be even more significant than biological children. What is crucial is to be imbued with the desire to preserve our narrative into the next generation © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd you shall not defile the land that you are living in, that I am dwelling within, for I am G-d, [Who] dwells within the Children of Israel" (Bamidbar 35:34). This verse, which refers to the consequences of inappropriately letting murderers off the hook (such as by allowing them to go free if they pay a court fee), can be understood in two ways. The Torah could be warning us not to defile the land

because it will cause G-d's divine presence, which had been resting upon us, to leave us. This is how the Talmud (Shabbos 33a), the Sifre (on our verse) and Bamidbar Rabbah (7:9) explains it. Alternatively, the Torah could be asking us not to defile the land because G-d dwells amongst us, and He will be forced (as it were) to dwell in a now-defiled land. This is how the Sifre (also on our verse) and Bamidbar Rabbah (7:8) understand the verse, based on a concept put forth by the Talmud (Yoma 57a) as well. How can letting people (literally) get away with murder cause G-d's divine presence to leave us, if His divine presence remains with us regardless?

The fact that the same verse is used, by the same sources, to teach us two different things is not problematic; the Torah often communicates multiple messages simultaneously. The issue at hand is that these two ideas aren't just different, they're contradictory; either G-d will leave us because of these actions/inactions, or He won't leave us despite them. How can He remove His divine presence from us because of the defilement we caused, if He stays with us despite the defilement?

Several commentators address this issue, explaining that because of this "defilement" G-d distances Himself from us, just not completely. There was a closer connection beforehand; it being weakened by our actions/inactions is described as G-d removing His divine presence from among us. Nevertheless, there still is a connection, albeit a weaker one, described as G-d's divine presence still being with us despite the defilement. How this manifests itself can be very informative about our relationship with G-d, and how He relates to us.

Malbim differentiates between G-d's divine presence resting on the Land of Israel and resting on the Nation of Israel. This distinction fits very well with the wording of the verse (and the Sifre), which mentions the "defilement of the land." The verse can now be broken up into two parts; first we are told about the defilement of the land, which causes G-d to remove Himself from it, then we are told that despite the land being defiled, G-d maintains His connection with us. However, Malbim does not explain what it means that G-d no longer rests His divine presence on the land while still resting it on the people. Toldos Udum (a commentary on the Sifre), in his second approach, uses kabbalistic terms to describe (if I understand them correctly) how the relationship between G-d and His creations is more direct in the Holy Land than it is anywhere else. This unique relationship is lost after "defilement," and our relationship with G-d becomes the same as if we were living elsewhere. The Vilna Gaon (Aderes Eliyahu on Devarim 1:7, quoted in Chumash HaGra on our verse) contrasts the temporary connection created when G-d's divine presence rested on the Mishkan in the desert with the more permanent connection made after we entered the Promised Land.

Whatever difference being in the Holy Land makes in our relationship with G-d, according to Malbim it was lost due to our letting murderers off the hook. There was still a connection, as G-d still rests His divine presence upon us when we are "defiled" (and, as the Sifre continues, even in exile), but it isn't the same as it had been.

Netziv, in his commentary on the Sifre, takes what seems to be the opposite approach, suggesting that as long as we are still living in the Holy Land, G-d's divine presence remains with us even when we are "defiled," but leaves us if our sins are so great that we are exiled because of them. I'm not sure how to reconcile this with the Sifre saying explicitly that G-d stays with us even in exile, or with the implication of the wording (of the verse and of the Sifre) that G-d leaves us even when we are still in the Land.

In his first approach, Toldos Udim differentiates between individuals and the nation as a whole. G-d's divine presence abandons individuals who are "defiled," but rests upon the nation even when they are in a state of "defilement." B'er BaSadeh says that the "abandonment" mentioned in the Talmudic-era sources do not mean complete abandonment, but G-d "hiding His face" from us (see Devarim 31:17-18). Even though G-d allows bad things to happen to us, He is still "with us" to the extent that He will not allow us to be destroyed. [This is similar to how I explained G-d dealing with us "with a wrath of unintended consequences" (Vayikra 26:28), allowing even consequences so harsh that He would have protected us from them had we not continued to sin, see <http://rabbidmk.posterous.com/parashas-bechukosai-5771; baruch she'kivanti.>] Rinas Yitzchok (volume two), quotes the Maharsha (Yoma 57a), who compares the connection between us and G-d that remains despite "defilement" to that of a husband with his wife when she is ritually impure (a nidah); he must separate from her, but they still live in the same house. Similarly, if we let murderers off the hook, G-d will separate from us, but not completely leave us.

After Uchun took from the spoils of Yericho, "G-d became angry with the Children of Israel" (Yehoshua 7:1). As a result, despite the fact that Ai should have been easily conquered (7:3), Israel was soundly beaten, and 36 soldiers lost their lives (7:4-5). How could one person's sin affect the nation so harshly? Ralbag (see also Malbim) says that Uchun's sin caused G-d's divine presence, and the protection it brings, to abandon the nation, thus leaving the soldiers vulnerable. Similarly, Rabbi Yaakov of Lisa (the Nesivos), in his commentary on Eicha (Palgay Mayim 1:5) explains how young children, who haven't yet had a chance to sin, could be taken captive; "for [G-d's divine presence] turned away from [Israel], leaving them subject to unintended consequences rather than under divine supervision." Without G-d's divine protection, on a national level, bad things can happen even to

individuals that did not cause G-d to stop protecting us as He had been.

On the other hand, even if we are not worthy of this divine protection on a national level, individuals can be worthy of G-d's intervention and protection (see Rabbeinu Bachye on Beraishis 18:19). The Mishna (Avos 3:2 and 3:6) tells us that G-d's divine presence rests on those who are studying Torah, and the Talmud (B'rachos 6a) says that His divine presence rests on a group of 10 davening together and on judges hearing a case. Even if G-d's divine presence isn't resting on the nation as a whole, it rests on worthy individuals and on those doing spiritual things.

It can therefore be suggested that letting murderers off the hook causes G-d's divine presence to leave us as a nation, even though it still "dwells amongst us," i.e. on those individuals worthy of it. These individuals are the "chariot" upon which G-d's presence "rides," maintaining the connection between G-d and His people even when, as a nation, they are in a state of "defilement." © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion of Masei includes the sentence that speaks to the commandment of living in Israel. The key phrase is "and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein." (Numbers 33:53)

Rashi is of the opinion that this sentence does not constitute a command to live in Israel. It is rather good advice. Take possession of the land from its inhabitants, otherwise you will not be able to safely live there.

Ramban (Nahmanides) disagrees. In his addendum to Rambam's (Maimonides) Book of Commandments, Ramban notes that Rambam failed to mention living in Israel as a distinct mitzvah. Ramban writes: "We have been commanded in the Torah to take possession of the land which G-d gave to the patriarchs and not leave it in the hands of others or allow it to remain desolate, as it says 'and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein.'" (Addendum, Mitzvat Aseh 4)

Some commentators argue that implicit in Rambam is the commandment to live in Israel. So basic is the mitzvah, writes the late former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, that it need not be mentioned, as it is the basis for all of Torah.

But whether or not one maintains that Rambam believes it is a mitzvah to live in Israel, doesn't this commandment, as certainly understood by Ramban, fly in the face of our mission to be an *or la'goyim*? How can we be a light to the nations of the world if we don't live amongst Gentiles and are ensconced in our own homeland?

One could argue however, that the mandate to live in the chosen land of Israel is crucial to the chosen

people idea. Being the chosen people doesn't mean that our souls are superior. Rather it suggests that our mission to spread a system of ethical monotheism, of G-d ethics to the world, is of a higher purpose. And that can only be accomplished in the land of Israel.

From this perspective, the significance of the modern state of Israel is not only as the place of guaranteed political refuge for Jews; or as the place where more mitzvot can be performed or where our continuum as a Jewish nation is assured. Rather it is the only place where we have the potential to carry out the chosen people mandate.

In exile, we can develop communities that can be a "light" to others. But the destiny of the Jewish people lies in the State of Israel. Israel is the only place where we as a nation can become an or la'goyim. In the Diaspora, we are not in control of our destiny; we cannot create the society envisioned by the Torah. Only in a Jewish state do we have the political sovereignty and judicial autonomy to potentially establish the society from which other nations can learn the basic ethical ideals of Torah.

As we near Tisha B'av, the fast commemorating our exile from the land, this position reminds us of our obligation to think about Israel, to visit Israel, and, most important, to constantly yearn to join the millions who have already returned home. Only there do we have the potential to be the true am ha-nivhar (chosen people). © 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

The Torah records for us the travels of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai during their forty-year sojourn there. All of the stops and way stations are mentioned. Rashi explains that this is analogous to a parent reviewing to a grown child the record of a long family trip that was taken long ago and recalling how the then young child reacted to the matter at each and every location.

We are all acquainted with the cliché (trite as it may seem but nevertheless true) that life itself is a journey. When people travel and go forth on a journey they take photographs so that when they return home they can remember and recall the locations visited and the events that occurred in those places.

There is an inner drive within us to remember where we have visited and been in life. In fact, this is the basis for all memoirs and autobiographies. We do not wish to forget what happened to us on our life's

journey and we do not wish to be forgotten by others that come after us.

This drive to remember and recall and then to retell our story is a very powerful one. If all politics is local then all history is personal and individual. Therefore the review in this week's parsha of all of the stops and locations in the desert made and visited by the Jewish people carries with it special and poignant meaning. It speaks to our human emotions and not only to our intellect and sense of the past.

Part of the benefit of reviewing past events and their locations is to enable us to learn from those experiences and not to foolishly repeat past errors and wrong decisions. That is what Rashi means when he recounts for us the example of the parent and child revisiting their long trip - "Here your head hurt, here you tripped and fell, etc." The parent is telling the child to watch out in the coming years and not to be so negligent in the future.

The entire thrust of knowing Jewish history and understanding and appreciating our past is to guide our attitudes and behavior in the present and future and not to unnecessarily repeat past errors and wrongs. An individual or a nation that knows little or next to nothing of its past cannot realistically expect to make wise decisions in the present or immediate future.

The Jewish people have had such a long, eventful and rich history. We have lived everywhere on this planet and experienced every type of government rule ever known to humankind. Our travels, so to speak, should have given us the ability to judge current problems in the light of past experience. But this ability is naturally contingent on somehow remembering and recalling the events of the past.

The abysmal ignorance of a large section of the Jewish people regarding this long past of ours has contributed to much of the dissonance in our current Jewish world. We should take out our old photo album and study it. © 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

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

“**A**nd Moshe wrote down the beginnings of their journeys as directed by G-d. And these are their journeys based on their beginnings.” [Bamidbar 33:2]. What is the meaning of the repeated phrase in the verse, and why is "as directed by G-d" written only the first time?

A person sometimes goes to a new place because he no longer wants to remain where he is, while some people leave their old place because they want to be in a new place. Some people go to Eretz

Yisrael because they want to flee from the exile, while others come because they understand its value and want to live there.

Yeshayahu describes the vision of the return to Zion in two ways-"Who are those who fly as a thick cloud, like doves toward their nests?" [60:8]. Rav Kook explains that clouds are pushed around by the wind, and they will release their water wherever the wind sends them. Doves, on the other hand, return to their nests because that is their home. Yeshayahu is describing two different motives for aliya to the land: Some people flee the exile and do not care where they go, while others return home like doves that go back to their nests.

The same is true of the words of Yirmiyahu: "And they will return from the land of the enemy... And the sons will return to their boundaries" [31:15,16]. Some people come from exile, fleeing from the land of the enemy, while others are sons returning to their land. We therefore ask in our prayers, "Raise us up to our land..." We want our entry into the land to be an ascent and not flight from exile.

"This is the land which will fall to you as a heritage" [Bamidbar 34:2]. But does a land ever fall? The Ramban writes, "If you have sufficient merit to understand the first time the earth is mentioned in Bereishit... you will begin to know a lofty and hidden secret, and you will understand what our rabbis taught us-that the Temple in heaven is oriented towards the Temple on the earth." [Ramban, Vayikra 18:25].

This is a reference to the first verse in the Torah, "In the beginning G-d created... the earth" [Bereishit 1:1]. It refers to the heavenly earth, and the earth below is a development of this-just as the Temple on the earth develops from the Temple in the heavens. The Sefat Emet writes, "Eretz Yisrael is hidden and revealed." The earth below is exposed, and the earth above is mysterious and hidden. In order to understand the unique trait of the land it is necessary to have a unique point of view. When Yisrael entered the land, the heavenly earth fell down, and the sanctity of the land was revealed.

"Moshe wrote down the beginnings of their journeys as directed by G-d." As far as G-d was concerned, the start of the journey was for the purpose of going to Eretz Yisrael, but Moshe also noted that there were some people for whom the purpose of the journey was merely to move away from where they were at the time.

The innate benefit of Eretz Yisrael is dual and includes both physical and spiritual factors. There are some who see only the spiritual side and ignore the material aspects, and there are others who are involved only in the exposed reality and do not have any spiritual vision. "And both of these miss the truth... One type is not aware of the spiritual vision, and the other type does not see the physical reality with their eyes... Even though they dwell in the land, they remain enveloped in

exile and darkness... For the truth is that there is no spirit without a body, and there is no body without a spirit." [Rabbi Charlap].

And that is why Yeshayahu declares, "The voice of your observers will be lifted in praise together... Let the ruins of Jerusalem burst out together in joyous praise" [52:8].

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

This week's parsha, Masei, describes the journeys of the Jewish people during their 40 years in the desert. These wanderings from place to place are as a lesson about the transience and temporality of life in this world. According to the Degel Machaneh Ephraim (based on the Baal Shem Tov), the 42 places that the Jews encamped in the desert represent the 42 phases within each person's life.

This idea seems to follow the statement of the Nachmanides (Genesis 12:6, citing Tanchuma 9) that "the actions of the forefathers are repeated by their descendants." In other words, just as the Jewish people in the desert were transient wanderers, constantly moving from place to place, so, too, is our existence in this world temporary.

A hint to this idea is found in this week's parsha, yet in order to understand it, we must first go back to the beginning of Creation. The second verse of the Torah (Genesis 1:2) reads, "And the earth was EMPTINESS and VOID, and DARKNESS was on the face of the DEPTHS, and THE SPIRIT OF G-d hovered over the face of the waters."

The Midrash (Bereishis Raba 2:4, in the name of Reish Lakish) interprets this verse as a prophecy about the future exiles of the Jewish people. EMPTINESS symbolizes the Babylonian exile; VOID refers to the Persian-Medean exile;

DARKNESS represents the Syrian-Greek exile; and the DEPTHS refers to the current Roman exile. THE SPIRIT OF G-d alludes to the spirit of the Messiah, who will ultimately redeem the Jewish people from exile. (See the Midrash for numerous verses that support these correlations.)

This Midrash shows that G-d, in addition to creating the laws of nature, made the exiles of the Jewish people an integral part of Creation. This idea is very difficult to understand. Why would G-d decree the exiles before creating the world? At the outset of Creation, there weren't even any Jews! Why would G-d punish the Jewish people before they did anything wrong-and even before He created them? For although G-d knows from the beginning what the outcome will be in any given situation, He still relates to us on our own terms.

We could suggest that the purpose of exile is not to punish us for misbehavior. Rather, the purpose of exile is to remind us that this world is a transient,

temporary place. The many upheavals and expulsions throughout Jewish history have forcibly prevented us from ever feeling a sense of permanence.

According to the commentator Nachal Kadumim, this idea is hinted to in the first verse of Parshat Masei, Eleh Masei B'nei Yisrael-"These are the journeys of the Jewish people" (Numbers 33:1). The initials of these four Hebrew words stand for the four exiles that the Jewish people have experienced throughout the ages: Edom (Rome), Madai (Persia-Medea), Bavel (Babylon), and Yavan (Syria-Greece). The exiles are hinted to in this parsha because they convey the same message as the 42 places that the Jews encamped in the desert. Both teach us about the transience and impermanence of the physical world.

Let's give some examples of this idea. Imagine taking an elevator to the top of the Empire State Building. Would it ever occur to you to vacuum the carpet or polish the mirrors in the elevator? You'd never bother, because you know you're going to get off any minute. This world is like an elevator (and we hope we're all going to get off at the top floor)! What is the use of getting overly involved in material pleasures? As our Sages say, "This world is like a lobby compared to the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the lobby so you will be able to enter the banquet hall!" (Avot 4:21)

A related story is told about a man who was traveling across Europe about a hundred years ago. When he reached Poland, he decided to visit the town of Radin, where the great sage the Chafetz Chaim lived. He took his luggage from the train station and went straight to the Chafetz Chaim's house, where he was graciously ushered in. Once inside, the traveler couldn't believe his eyes: the home of this great rabbi was practically bare! No pictures hung on the walls, and overturned milk crates sufficed for a table and chairs. Incredulous, the traveler asked him, "Where is your furniture?"

The Chafetz Chaim replied, "Where's yours?" The traveler was surprised by this strange question. "Me?" he asked. "I'm just passing through!" "So am I," responded the Chafetz Chaim. "I am also just passing through."

One more example should make the point abundantly clear. Imagine that you've won the grand prize on a game show: a shopping spree at Macy's. For 15 minutes, you will have the entire store to yourself, during which time whatever merchandise you collect will be yours for the rest of your life. Try to picture what you would look like during those 15 minutes.

Now, imagine how you would react if, in the course of your frenzied shopping, a friend were to tap you on the shoulder and say, "I'd love to chat with you, just for two minutes. Can we go get a cup of coffee?" Most likely, you wouldn't even take the time to respond or perhaps you'd just shout, "No time-I'll explain later," as you dashed off to the next department.

This imaginary shopping spree is comparable to our experience in this world. We each have an individual expiration date, but until that date arrives, we are in a candy store of Torah and mitzvot, and whatever we collect is ours for eternity. If we truly lived with this awareness, we would have to be reminded to eat, drink and sleep. Our physical considerations would pale in comparison to the importance of stashing away goods for eternity, and we would be constantly on the lookout for opportunities to accumulate more spiritual "merchandise." I have yet to hear anyone on their deathbed say, "If only I'd spent a few more hours at the office..."

May we be blessed, as we move from place to place on our journeys through life, to focus on what is truly important and not get distracted by fleeting temptations. In this merit, may G-d soon redeem us from our exile and afford us the opportunity to be involved in purposeful, meaningful, spiritual endeavors forever. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg and aish.com

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah continues the theme of the three weeks and introduces the month of Av. The prophet Yirmiyahu reprimands the Jewish people and reminds them, in the name of Hashem, of all of the favors they have received over the years. Hashem asks, "What wrong did your fathers find in Me that distanced them from Me and resulted in their following the empty practices of idolatry diminishing the Jews to nothingness? They didn't turn to Hashem who brought them up from Egypt and led them through the desolate dangerous desert." Hashem continues, "And I brought them to the fertile land of Israel to partake of its fruits and goodness. But they defiled My land and disgraced My inheritance." (Yirmiyahu 2:5) Hashem faults the Jewish nation for presently rejecting Him and resorting to the shameful ways of idolatry.

Hashem says, "They forsook Me, the source of the waters of life; to dig empty cisterns." But the blame wasn't limited to the common folk, it even extended to their leaders and prophets. Hashem describes their spiritual decline in the following terms, "The Kohanim didn't revere Me and the upholders of Torah didn't publicize My name, the kings rebelled against Me and the prophets delivered false prophecy." (2: 8) This bleak picture of the Jewish people was certainly not a comforting one and almost promised immediate retribution and destruction.

Yet, we discover that Hashem's response to all the above was one of concern and compassion. Hashem surprisingly responded, "Therefore I will continue to quarrel with you and even with your grandchildren." Hashem vowed to send more prophets and continue showing them and their descendents the proper path. Although every attempt thus far had been

unsuccessful Hashem remained determined to help His people. Hashem refused to reject them even after the numerous rejections they showed him. The present leaders were not loyal to Hashem and didn't inspire the nation to repent and follow the proper path. Perhaps the next group of leaders would be more loyal and could successfully leave their imprint on the Jewish people. Although the Jews had reduced themselves to the point of emptiness and nothingness Hashem still cared about them with deep compassion. He wouldn't leave His people until every last avenue had been exhausted and it had been determined that there was literally no more hope for them.

This unbelievable degree of compassion is explained in the verses immediately preceding this week's haftora. Hashem says, "I remember you for the kindness of your youth, the love of our initial relationship when you blindly followed Me in the desert." Even after all the offenses the Jewish people committed against Him, Hashem still remembered His initial relationship with His people. Hashem never forgets those precious years wherein He enjoyed a perfect relationship with His people. Hashem actually longs for the opportunity of returning to that relationship and will do virtually anything to restore things to their original perfection. This explains Hashem's persistence in sending prophets to the Jewish people attempting to persuade them to return. In truth, Hashem views the Jewish people from an entirely different perspective than their present rebellious state. Hashem sees them through the visions of the past. True, they have presently gone totally astray but Hashem sees in them their perfect past as the devout people whose intimate relationship with Him directed them to follow blindly wherever they were led. Hashem therefore expresses His sincere desire that the present Jewish nation live up to His perfect vision of them, the glorious vision of the past. Through this perspective the Jewish people deserve every last chance they can to return to their glorious era.

With this insight in mind we can truly appreciate the words of Chazal in Midrash Tehilim (137) which reveal Hashem's indescribable love and compassion for His people. The Midrash relates that the Prophet Yirmiyahu accompanied the Jewish people into their exile until the Euphrates River, the doorstep of Babylonia. He then informed them that he would be leaving and returning to the segment of Jewish people left behind in the land of Israel. Suddenly there was an outburst of uncontrollable weeping from the Jewish people who realized that they were being abandoned by Yirmiyahu. He responded with the following words, "I testify in the name of Hashem that if this sincere cry would have transpired moments ago, when we were still in our homeland, the exile would never have come about." So great is Hashem's love for His people that even after all the atrocities they committed, rebelling against Hashem and intentionally spiting Him, one

sincere gesture from the Jewish people was all that was needed. Even one emotional outburst, sensing Hashem's rejection would have sufficed to hold back the terrible calamity they now faced. Hashem loves His people so deeply that even at the last moments He still awaited their return to Him and was prepared to call off their imminent exile. In Hashem's eyes we will always be seen through the perspective of our past, a perfect devout people ready to serve Him unconditionally. And Hashem is therefore always prepared to do anything He can to restore us to that glorious position, His perfect nation. © 2011 Rabbi D. Sigel and torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

While introducing Parshat Maasei, which recounts the travels and trials of the Jews in the desert the Passuk informs us that Moshe "wrote their goings according to their journeys, and these were their journeys according to their goings"(33:2). Why does the introduction reverse its terminology, and why does it repeat itself? Rav Bachya explains that the first part refers to the past, while the second part refers to the future redemption. That helps, but maybe the first one refers to the future and the SECOND to the past? How do we know, and what does it teach us today?

The missing clue is that the Hebrew word that means "goings" (Motze'hem) comes from the root word that means, "find". What the Torah could be alluding to here is that when things are bad it seems like you find faults in everything you do and everywhere you go. But the Torah then urges us not to despair, for your journeys will one day bring you findings. In the world of psychology it is known that depression breeds more depression and it's easy to feel despair when nothing goes your way. The solution for then, and anytime we feel down, is to live our "journeys" with an eye for the "findings" that will find us in the future. Rather than looking back with regret, look forward with hope. © 2008 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

