

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd the curse [that I have set before you] if you do not listen to G-d's commandments, and you deviate from the path that I am commanding you today, to go after other deities, that are unknown to you" (Devarim 11:28). Because this verse begins by referring to "the commandments" (plural) and ends by referring to one specific commandment (worshipping other deities), Rashi spells out its underlying message: "You learn from this that whomever worships a foreign deity has turned away from the entire path that Israel was commanded. Based on this [our sages of blessed memory] said, 'whomever gives validity to foreign deities is as if he denied the validity of the entire Torah.'"

What exactly does this mean? Does it mean that any commandment fulfilled by someone who (also) worships other deities is meaningless? This is difficult to maintain, as Eisav was rewarded for honoring his father (see Rashi on Zecharya 2:12) despite having worshipped idols (see Bava Basra 16b), and King Achav, who was a notorious idolater (see Melachim I 21:25-26) was rewarded for fasting for three hours (see Ta'anis 25b). It can't mean that worshipping idols automatically means abandoning the entire Torah, as it was common to believe in G-d but think that He gave other beings (celestial or otherwise) autonomy, and therefore keep (some of) G-d's commandments yet attempt to win the favor of other deities. (This is why Eliyahu HaNavi told the nation at Mt. Carmel to stop worshipping both G-d and Baal and how Achav could blame Eliyahu for the drought.) The simplest, and most straightforward, approach to explain this concept would seem to be that of Rabbeinu Bachye (see also Sefer Ha'ikarim 1:14), that it doesn't mean worshipping idols or giving validity to them is literally the same as having denied the Torah, but that it is such a serious sin that it is tantamount to having done so. The rationale is quite simple; once a person turns away from G-d to worship other deities, it is but a small step to no longer keep any aspect of the Torah. The verse would then be telling us that G-d's "curse" will come upon us if we worship other deities because it will lead to abandoning G-d completely.

This approach has some very serious shortcomings. First of all, worshipping idols is enough to

bring G-d's curse even if we still keep the other commandments. Secondly, the whole concept is built on the "kof ha'dimyon," which tells us that it is only "as if" he denied the entire Torah. Although Rashi quotes the Sifre on our verse which includes the "kof" ("k'kofer" rather than just "kofer"), some Rishonim apparently didn't have this "kof" in their editions (see Raavad's commentary). When the Sifre teaches us the same concept on Bamidbar 15:23, it doesn't use the "kof." Likewise, when the Ramban codified the concept into law (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 2:4) he didn't include the "kof," although he is quoting the verbiage of both sources in the Sifre. Without this "kof," the statement reads "whomever gives validity to other deities denies the entire Torah," not that it is "as if" he denied the entire Torah.

The Sifre (on Devarim) includes a corollary, that "whomever denies the validity of other deities is acknowledging the validity of the entire Torah." We can understand why worshipping a being other than G-d can easily lead to no longer keeping the Torah, and how not believing in other deities can be the first step in believing in G-d and keeping His Torah. However, the movement from idol worship to abandoning the Torah is much more direct than from not believing in idols to keeping the Torah. Even if someone doesn't believe in any other religion, what makes it so obvious that he will start keeping our religion? This corollary is quoted by Rambam (ibid), is included in the first editions of Rashi's commentary, and is the only part quoted by the Talmud (Nedarim 25a and elsewhere) when illustrating how serious the sin of idol worship is. It would therefore seem that the key to understanding the concept of equating belief in the validity of other deities (just belief, even without actually worshipping them, see Mizrachi, Tzaidah LaDerech and Maskil L'Dovid) with denying the entire Torah, is understanding its corollary, that denying the validity of other deities is the same as accepting the validity of the entire Torah.

Avraham asked his visitors to wash their feet (Beraishis 18:4) because he thought they worshipped dust, and didn't want any false deities (the dust on their feet) to enter his home (see Rashi). This must have been a fairly common form of worship for Avraham to have been concerned that this was their belief. Yet, it sounds pretty outrageous that people would actually worship the pieces of dirt stuck between their toes. Mizrachi therefore says it wasn't that they thought each piece of dust was a deity, which they bowed down to.

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Rather, since dirt is one of the four basic elements that early philosophers thought everything was comprised of, and they believed that there was no "Director" causing them to combine into things but that that they did so on their own, this gave dirt (or at least the dirt attached to those with this outlook) the status of a deity, and Avraham didn't want such things in his home. Whether or not this is really why Avraham made them wash their feet is not relevant to our discussion. The concept Mizrachi puts forth, though, is a very valid one. "Idol worship," or believing in the validity of other deities, is not limited to worshipping or attributing divinity to a man-made sculpture, or to the sun or the stars, or to any human being. Conceptually, believing in "foreign deities" means attributing ability and autonomy to anything other than the One True Creator.

It's not a problem to believe that plant life grows through photosynthesis, nor to plant things in a way that the sun's rays will be more effective, as long as we acknowledge that G-d created the sun to do just that and that the sun is only doing what G-d "commanded" it to do. It is a problem to believe that the sun decides to help plants grow, or which plants to help grow and how much to help them. Similarly, it is not "idol worship" to believe in evolution, as long as the belief is that G-d caused things to evolve, directed the way things evolved, and oversaw (and oversees) the entire process of evolution. However, believing that matter can evolve on its own, with being directed ("commanded") to evolve by G-d means believing that matter has powers and abilities independent of G-d, and qualifies as "believing in foreign deities." There is no middle ground; either G-d created the world and set the laws of nature and makes sure these laws are followed ("constantly renewing the acts of creation, every day"), or these things happen on their own, without G-d. Even suggesting that there is a Prime Mover, or First Cause, that started the process but then left things to develop on their own qualifies as "believing in other deities," as it attributes their development to things other than G-d. Only those granted the special gift of "free will" (not the same thing as having the freedom to choose) have any measure of autonomy, which is why humans have such a special status. Everything else though, does exactly what G-d directs it to do.

Idol worshippers try to appease their deities because they believe that G-d allows those deities to

affect things. What about those who don't believe that their deities have any higher intelligence, only that they have the ability to do things independent of G-d? If there's no problem with planting things in a way to best take advantage of G-d's laws of nature (i.e. photosynthesis), is there a problem with doing so without believing that G-d made/maintains those laws? Is success determined by our ability to master the laws of nature or by our ability to forge a relationship with G-d, or both? We can (and should) do what we can (within legal limits, both secular and Jewish) to utilize the system G-d created (and maintains) to be successful, but ultimately that success is dependant on how strong our relationship with G-d is. Whether G-d intervenes (read: adjusts His laws of nature in a way that changes things) to help us be more successful than natural law would dictate, or to prevent us from being as successful as we otherwise would have been, depends on our connection with Him, a connection built and maintained through keeping and studying the Torah.

"Whoever denies the validity of foreign deities" and their ability to affect us independent of G-d's will, "acknowledges the validity of the entire Torah" and its unique ability to help us connect with the One True Source of everything. By the same token, "whoever gives foreign deities validity," and believes that anything can operate independently of G-d, "denies the entire Torah" and its unique ability to help us connect with the One who ultimately determines our success. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The first word in our portion re-eh is one of the most powerful terms found in the Torah. In fact, God is described as a ro-eh on three different levels. The first time the word is found in the Torah, the Torah states that after creating light or energy, "vayar Elokim ki tov, God saw it was good." (Genesis 1:4) Obviously an anthropomorphism. Still as God saw, so do we have the power to see.

On a deeper level, re-eh means to see in the sense of empathizing for the other. Note the description just prior to the deluge in the time of Noah. There the Torah states, "and the Lord saw (vayar Hashem) that the wickedness of man was great on the earth." (Genesis 6:5) This could mean that God saw with the sense of feeling the pain and horror which was unfolding-the wickedness of man whom he had created. As God felt the pain of humankind, so too should all people created in God's image empathize with the other.

There is yet another understanding of ra-ah. Ra-ah could have covenantal connotations-that is God seen with an eye on establishing and fulfilling His covenant with His people. Indeed, the first time ra-ah appears after Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah were

chosen, the Torah states "and the Lord appeared (veyera) to Avraham and said 'to your seed I will give this land.'" (Genesis 12:7)

Re-eh as used in our portion seems to echo the covenantal approach. Note that when God covenantally chooses Avraham, the Torah states, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." (Genesis 12:3) Similarly in our portion, the Torah states-"see (re-eh), I have placed before you a blessing and a curse." (Deuteronomy 11:26)

And just as Avraham first built an altar to God in Shechem-Elon Moreh (Genesis 12:6) and his rendezvous with God reaches a crescendo in Yerushalayim, (Genesis 12:9) so in our parsha is there discussion of how the blessing and curse would be put forth on Har Gerizim and Har Eyval which are in the area of Shechem. (Deuteronomy 11:29) Not coincidentally, the parsha proceeds to discuss our obligations once we enter the land and come to Yerushalayim. (Deuteronomy 12:1-19)

Thus, ra-ah has a threefold meaning. To see, to empathize, to covenantalize. However, when Avraham and Sarah were chosen, ra-ah was in the context of the promised covenant. God was the ro-eh. Here, in our portion, as the Jews prepare to enter Israel, it is in the context of the covenant for the first time soon being realized. Re-eh, therefore, refers to the Jewish people achieving their covenant mission.

With the establishment of the State of Israel we are all of us a bit closer to the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. The Torah's words concerning re'eh as covenant should be carefully considered.

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CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Listen to these stories. Behind them lies an extraordinary insight into the nature of Jewish ethics: Story 1. Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his scarf, sling it on his back, and place it at the disposal of the poor. [Ketubot 67b]

Story 2. Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighbourhood into whose door socket he used to throw four coins every day. Once the poor man thought, "I will

go and see who does me this kindness." That day Mar Ukba stayed late at the house of study and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as the poor man saw them moving the door [to leave the coins] he ran out after them, but they fled from him and hid. Why did they do this? Because it was taught: One should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly put his neighbour to shame. [Ketubot 67b]

Story 3. When Rabbi Jonah saw a man of good family who had lost his money and was ashamed to accept charity, he would go and say to him, "I have heard that an inheritance has come your way in a city across the sea. So here is an article of some value. Sell it and use the proceeds. When you are more affluent, you will repay me." As soon as the man took it, Rabbi Jonah would say, "It's yours is a gift." [Vayikra Rabbah 34:1]

These stories all have to do with the mitzvah of tzedakah whose source is in this week's parsha: If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need . . . Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. [Deut. 15: 7-8, 10-11]

What we have here is a unique and still remarkable programme for the elimination of poverty.

The first extraordinary fact about the laws of tzedakah as articulated in the Oral tradition is the concept itself. Tzedakah does not mean "charity". We see this immediately in the form of a law inconceivable in any other moral system: "Someone who does not wish to give tzedakah or to give less than is appropriate may be compelled to do so by a Jewish court of law" (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:10). Charity is always voluntary. Tzedakah is compulsory. Therefore tzedakah does not mean charity. The nearest English equivalent is social justice.

The second is the principle evident in the three stories above. Poverty in Judaism is conceived not merely in material terms: the poor lack the means of sustenance. It is also conceived in psychological terms. Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others - thus depriving them of independence which the Torah sees as essential to self-respect.

This deep psychological insight is eloquently expressed in the third paragraph of the Grace after Meals: Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation for ever and all time.

As a result, Jewish law focuses not only on how much we must give but also on the manner in which we do so. Ideally the donor should not know to whom he or she is giving (story 1), nor the recipient know from whom he or she is receiving (story 2). The third story exemplifies another principle: "If a poor person does not want to accept tzedakah, we should practice a form of [benign] deception and give it to him under the guise of a loan" (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7: 9).

Maimonides sums up the general principle thus: "Whoever gives charity to the poor with bad grace and averted eyes has lost all the merit of his action even though he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should give with good grace and with joy and should sympathise with them him in his plight, as it is said, 'Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?' [Job 30:25]" (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10: 4).

This is the logic behind two laws that are otherwise inexplicable. The first is "Even a poor person who is dependent on tzedakah is obliged to give tzedakah" (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7: 5). The law seems absurd. Why should we give money to the poor so that they may give to the poor? It makes sense only on this assumption, that giving is essential to human dignity and tzedakah is the obligation to ensure that everyone has that dignity.

The second is the famous ruling of Maimonides that "The highest degree of charity, exceeded by none, is when a person assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment - in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid" ((Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10: 7).

Giving someone a job or making him your partner would not normally be considered charity at all. It costs you nothing. But this further serves to show that tzedakah does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and any form of employment is more dignified, within the Jewish value system, than dependence.

We have in this ruling of Maimonides in the 12th century the principle that Muhammad Yunus rediscovered in our time, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize: the idea of micro-loans enabling poor people to start small businesses. It is a very powerful idea.

In contradistinction to many other religious systems, Judaism refused to romanticise poverty or anaesthetise its pain. Faith is not what Karl Marx called "the opium of the people." The rabbis refused to see poverty as a blessed state, an affliction to be born with acceptance and grace. Instead, the rabbis called it "a kind of death" and "worse than fifty plagues". They said, "Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the

curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all."

Maimonides went to the heart of the matter when he said (The Guide for the Perplexed 3:27) "The well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured." Poverty is not a noble state. You cannot reach spiritual heights if you have no food to eat or roof for your head, if you lack access to medical attention or are beset by financial worries.

I know of no saner approach to poverty, welfare and social justice than that of Judaism. Unsurpassed in its time, it remains the benchmark of a decent society to this day. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**B**ehold, I give before you this day a blessing and a curse..." (Deut. 11:26). This portion opens with the third Covenant that God establishes with the Israelites just as they are about to enter the Promised Land of Israel. This is a re-emphasis of the earlier national Covenant with Abraham whereby God committed to make his seed into a nation with a national homeland. It also re-emphasizes the religious Covenant expressed to all of Israel at Mount Sinai. The Almighty is defining the dual relationship He has with Israel, a unique nation as well as a unique religion.

On the one hand, herein lies a great strength: "Lapsed" and even atheist Jews with strong Jewish national ties and feelings remain Jews. In the words of the Sages of the Talmud, "A Jew even though he has sinned (wandered astray from Jewish religious practice and values) still remains a Jew." On the other hand, despite close to 2,000 years of exile from our national homeland, we continued to mourn its loss within our religious traditions, keeping alive our desire to return, and - against every rule of history and sociology - we managed to return to it.

However, this unique and hybrid dual role makes any clear-cut division between religion and state in Israel, similar to the church-state division in America, a virtual impossibility. While it is perfectly logical to forbid teaching the Christian Gospels in American public schools, it would be inconceivable not to teach the Bible - the matrix of our national culture - in Israeli secular schools.

Undoubtedly, the most knotty conundrum to emerge from this complex, hybrid status is "Who is a Jew?"

Traditional Jewish law considers one to be Jewish only if he has either been born to a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism before a religious court of three Orthodox rabbis. These three religious judges oversee a process comprising circumcision for males (entering into the Covenant of Abraham), a

general acceptance of the commandments (the religious covenant) and ritual immersion in a mikve (the national covenant) for both males and females.

Additionally, Israel's Law of Return, a fundamental statute of the Jewish state, grants automatic citizenship to any individual who would have been considered Jewish enough to be sent to Auschwitz under the Nazi regime: anyone who had one Jewish great-grandparent, even from a paternal line.

Miraculously 1.5 million people from the former Soviet Union were freed to seek haven in Israel, including more than 350,000 who are not halachically Jewish but whose children study in Jewish schools, and serve in the IDF, even risking their lives for the Jewish state.

If allowed to remain demographically as is, our intermarriage rate in Israel will rival the intermarriage rate in the Diaspora in only one more generation. As a result of Israel's coalition democracy, the religious high court of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel has been "taken over" by haredi religious judges. These judges are generally not "user-friendly" to would-be converts and many of them are strict constructionalists regarding the criterion of "acceptance of the commandments." As a result, only a paltry number of these Israeli citizens have succeeded in converting over the last five years.

Enter Rotem, last year, with a conversion bill which will enable every "city rabbi" to open religious courts of conversion and facilitate the marriage of the successful converts. Several of these city rabbis will be more user-friendly and more lenient in their interpretation of the law, and their conversions will not be subject to annulment by external courts. Indeed, the only grounds for annulment would be if it is proven that the conversion was made on the basis of fraudulent or deceptive information.

This bill certainly appears to open the door for a more sensitive and responsible conversion policy which will give a more welcoming face to the laws of conversion. So what caused the international storm of protest?

The Conservative and Reform leadership in America objected vociferously to the "Rotem Bill" because it would place within the corpus of Israeli law the fact that conversions within the State of Israel are to be conducted under the aegis of the Chief Rabbinate. Here, however, nothing has changed; the chief rabbinate has been the de-facto imprimatur for conversions since the founding of the state. This was done to ensure the ability of every Jew to marry any other Jew within the State of Israel.

David Rotem's conversion bill will ameliorate a tragic situation for the 350,000 Israelis from the FSU, without worsening the situation for Diaspora Jewry. I do not believe the objection of Diaspora Jewry is fair to those Israeli citizens whose situation will only be helped by the Rotem Bill. © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Hebrew word re'eih, which serves as the title of this week's Torah reading, has many layers of meaning attached to it. In its simplest understanding it means "see." There are English translations of the word that have expanded the definition of the word to mean "behold." In truth, the Torah demands of us more than simply eye vision. We are challenged to see the physically unseeable and to deal with abstractions of thought and policy and make them real.

So re'eih is as much a state of mind and contemplation as it is one of actual eyesight. That is why the Torah states that we should somehow see and behold possible blessings and curses in our future - successes and failures. The human eye cannot discern blessings or curses. What sometimes appears to be a wonderful idea, a great blessing, a most correct policy may, in fact, turn out to be a cursed disaster.

And the opposite is also true. An event or idea that appeared to be a negative may yet be most positive in the future. King David makes us aware of this in his famous verse, "The stone that was rejected by the builders initially has now become the corner stone itself."

So when the Torah bids us "re'eih" - see the future, so to speak, it cannot expect us to do so wisely and intelligently unless it supplies us with corrective lenses that will enable us to do so. And as the Torah itself reiterates time and again, it is the observance of Torah laws and a fealty to God that enables us to visualize the blessings that await us and the pitfalls that await those who deviate from tradition and Jewish values.

For a long period of its history the Jewish people had the advantage of having prophets who saw the future, the right and wrong, the good and the bad, for them. But we must note that the Jewish people frittered away this gift simply by ignoring what the prophets had to say. As the prophet states: "And I made your young men prophets but you ordered them to desist from prophesying."

It is common in human nature to stumble along sightless rather than to glimpse the future good. Truly seeing the future imposes obligation and a change in lifestyle and behavior patterns that one is loath to fulfill. And, since it is also very difficult for humans to admit past or present error, the chances for unpleasant happenings in the future because of improper present behavior and policies are omnipresent.

The entire book of Dvarim is essentially devoted to this issue - the sad consequences of bad behavior and how this affects future generations. Moshe's frustration is almost palpable in his warnings to

Israel. If there was ever anyone who could see and behold it was Moshe, the greatest of all prophets.

Every parent is aware of this sad frustration when one is aware of an erroneous decision by a child but is powerless to prevent its occurrence and its consequences. We can only hope that the eyesight of our generation will improve. © 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

The list of impure birds in this week's Torah portion includes the "rachama" [Devarim 14:17] - which is the same as the "racham" listed in the Torah portion of Shemini. The Talmud teaches us that the name of this bird is a hint of the mercy that will be awakened at the time of the redemption (Chulin 63a). When the rechem bird whistles, it is a sign that the Mashiach has arrived, as is written, "I will whistle for them and I will gather them together" [Zecharia 10:8]. But on the face of it this is problematic: Why should the harbinger of the Mashiach be an impure bird?

I heard from Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook that redemption in our time purposefully takes place through the efforts of people who we feel are not worthy of the task. The rabbi explained the matter of the whistling based on the words of the TUR (Orach Chaim 286) - that the prayer in Mussaf of Shabbat, "Tikanta Shabbat," is an acrostic in reverse alphabetical order, spelling the word "tashrak," to whistle, as a hint of the above verse from Zecharia. And the Beit Yosef adds that the redemption comes about because of the merits of Shabbat, as is written, "To the barren ones who observe My Shabbat... And I will bring them to My holy mountain" [Yeshayahu 56:4,7]. The fact that the alphabet is in reverse order in the prayer indicates that the sequence of the redemption will cause amazed reactions.

Such a process of redemption begins with the first spark of the revelation of the Mashiach: "I have found my servant David" [Tehillim 89:21]. Where did "I find" him? In Sedom, as is written, "and your two daughters who are here" [Bereishit 19:15]. This process, which is so hard to explain, continues with the encounter between Yehuda and Tamar, and then the meeting of Ruth and Boaz, leading to the birth of David (as is written in the Yalkut, this is what David meant when he said, "My mother conceived me in sin" [Tehillim 51:7]). It then continues with the story of David and Batsheva.

The redemption continues to appear before us in our generation in ways that are hard to understand.

Rav Kook said that just as the Almighty appeared at Mount Sinai through a thick cloud and fog, so will the redemption take place. Since the light of redemption is so great, it must be hidden from those who would denounce the process, and it therefore appears in a distorted way. The same idea appears in the book "Aim Habanim Semeichah" -

"As a great plan by the One who makes all the plans, a man rose up... who knew neither the right hand nor the left hand of Judaism... So that when the time came to build up Eretz Yisrael to be a country like all other nations, nobody became suspicious and interfered. The community of Yisrael asked a similar question in the past: 'Master of the Universe, look at all the miracles that You performed through Koresh - wouldn't it have been better to have a righteous man like Daniel do them?' [Shir Hashirim Rabba 5]."

It is said that the author of "Aim Habanim Semeichah," Rabbi Shlomo Teichtal, told a parable about a community whose shamash passed away. His former tasks in serving the community were divided among the people of the congregation. The widow was given the job of waking up the people early in the morning to join in the Selichot prayers. As it happened, the first house she came to was that of a well known "irreligious" man in the community. He had pity on the woman and promised to wake the people instead of her. But wherever he knocked, he was greeted with a refusal: "No sinner like you can wake me up for early morning prayers!" The man finished his rounds, but the result was that on that day not enough men appeared to make up a minyan of ten men. And Rabbi Teichtal scolded his people: "It is true that many Zionists do not observe such mitzvot as keeping Shabbat and others, but this time they have been crying out for a worthy purpose, to move to Eretz Yisrael. Let us hope that we will be able to improve the situation."

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reflects Zion's illustrious future during the Messianic era. The haftorah begins with a call to Yerushalayim to sing over the return of her masses. The prophet Yeshaya invites her to expand her borders to allow for the overwhelming influx of Jewish people who are returning home. Yeshaya tells Zion not to be embarrassed because no trace of her previous shame will remain. He assures her that Hashem's kindness is here to stay and that His peace will be with her forever.

Suddenly, Yeshaya takes a sharp turn and proclaims, "Afflicted stormy city who is not consoled." These words indicate a strong unwillingness of Zion to be comforted. Although the ingathering of the exiles has occurred and the land of Israel has been rebuilt, Zion cannot be consoled. Her two thousand years of ruins demand to be accounted for. In the past, she had

served as the focal point of the world, the apex of society. But for ages her respect, dignity and elevated status were taken from her. Instead of splendor and glory she constantly experienced shame, degradation and destruction. When reflecting upon her glorious past she cannot help but remember the shameful years that followed and cannot be consoled.

Hashem responds to Zion and says, "Behold I will lay your floors with precious stones and set your foundation with sapphires." (54:11) To begin, Hashem assures Zion that she will be restored to her previous glory. But Hashem expanded this kindness and pledged to render her more desirable than ever before. He promised that her splendor will be so magnificent that her floors and walls will actually be studded with jewels and precious stones. Her physical beauty will transcend every existing structure in the world and she will literally glisten from diamonds. Every moment spent in Zion will be an unforgettable experience which will irresistibly attract the masses to view her splendor.

This development addresses the physical dimensions of Yerushalayim but what about her spiritual heights? For two thousand years Zion has not been functioning as the Torah center of the world. How can she be comforted from this loss? In response to this, the prophet adds a major dimension and says, "And all of your children will be students of Hashem and much peace will be amongst them." (54:13) This means that Torah perspectives will be readily available to all the children of Zion who will now be students of Hashem. Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni 479) explain this reference to mean that peace and harmony will exist amongst Torah leadership. As Chazal view things, present day confusion and diversity result from human limitations found within Torah study. Until the era of Mashiach one must rely upon the finite human mind for the transmittal of Torah knowledge from teacher to student. Being that the teacher's intellect is limited it follows naturally that the student's absorption of Torah knowledge will have even greater limitations. Yeshaya reveals that in the time of Mashiach matters will drastically improve. Because, Zion will be privileged to study Torah from its original source, Hashem. One readily understands that because there are no limitations to Hashem few limitations will exist amongst His students. The clarity resulting from this study will produce unparalleled levels of peace and harmony with everyone basically following the same Torah path of observance.

The prophet expands this vision and opens this renaissance to the nations of the world as well. He addresses them and says, "All who are thirsty go and drink water, acquire without pay wine and milk." (55:1) Chazal (Yalkut ad loc.) explain that water refers to Torah knowledge and wine and milk refer to spiritual sustenance. Even the nations of the world will be invited to Torah study and unique spiritual experiences. Radak explains that Hashem's wondrous revelations will yield an unprecedented thirst for knowledge. The nations will

be so inspired by Hashem's miracles that they will flock to Zion to study His word. Zion will finally return to her previous spiritual greatness and serve as the Torah center of the world for the Jewish people. But in addition the Torah of Zion will be fully appreciated even by the nations of the world. Even they will see Torah as their true source of life and will flock to Zion to absorb Hashem's every word.

Yeshaya now completes the picture and says, "Behold nations that never knew you, will run to become your servants because the glory of Hashem will shine upon you." (55:5) The inhabitants of Zion will be held in such high esteem that nations from near and far will come to serve their every need. With this final detail, Zion will be totally healed. She has been promised her original splendor. In addition she will become the most desirable physical spot on earth. Her children will be privileged to study Torah directly from Hashem. She'll serve as the center of Torah for the entire world, nations of the world included. Finally, through her reflection of Hashem's glory, she'll attract untold nations who will display total subservience. Her lonely, forsaken past will be erased for eternity and she will forever enjoy her well earned status as the most desirable physical and spiritual site in the entire world. © 2001 Rabbi D. Siegel & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Daylight Time

In this week's portion, the Torah tells us to decimate any remnant of idolatry: "You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshiped their gods-on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars, you shall smash their pillars, and their sacred trees shall you burn in the fire. Their carved images shall you cut down, and you shall obliterate their names from that place." (Deuteronomy 12:2-3)

But then, the Torah adds a verse that seems to be so unnecessary, if not wounding. The Torah tells us "You shall not do the same to Hashem, your G-d"(ibid. v.4)

The Talmud explains that from this verse we derive a prohibition against destroying synagogue property and erasing the name of Hashem. Rashi, however, quotes the Sifri, which offers an amazing interpretation: R Ishmael asks, "Can even a thought enter in your mind that the Jewish nation would break the altars of Hashem?"

Thus Rabbi Yishmael gives an homiletic interpretation of the verse. He says that the verse is not necessarily an admonition against physically breaking the walls of the Sanctuary, but rather it is a warning to the nation not to sin, thereby causing the Sanctuary of (built by) your fathers to be destroyed.

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out an amazing anomaly. Rabbi Yishmael is bothered at the simple

connotation of the verse that he does not interpret it at face value. He can hardly fathom that there are Jews who need to be told not to break stones in the Altar, or the Temple. Therefore, he expounds that this refers to Jews who sin, and cause the destruction of the Temple. Yet when the Torah warns about idolatry, adultery, or murder, Rabbi Yishmael is mute. He does not ask, "Is it possible that a Jew would murder or commit idolatry? He is not shocked at the need to warn against adultery. He does not reinterpret those verses homiletically and explain them in a poetic fashion. He is quite content with the admonition in its purest and most simple form. Though he can accept Jews committing murder, but he cannot accept them smashing synagogues. What is the difference?

(Recently I heard this amazing story. However, I have changed the names of the parties involved and the location.) Velvel was infamous in his native Tarnograd. A notorious gangster, he not only transgressed the mitzvos, but mocked those who observed them. He really did not have much to do with the members of the community, if not to lure someone into a promising business deal, only to rob him of his ill-invested monies.

Velvel rarely visited the inside of the shul, save every few years on the *yahrzeit* of his pious father when the cobwebs of time were dusted off by the winds of guilt. Yes, Velvel was different than most of the villagers.

Except for early 1940, when he was no different than anyone else. The Nazis had overrun the town. They herded the community into the shul, and unfurled the Torah scrolls on the floor. Then they lined the people up and told them to march on the Torah, forcing them to spit on it as they past. And Velvel was right there amongst them. Velvel was a Jew and no different from anyone else.

Everyone lined up to obey and Velvel pushed to be first in line. And then he showed how special, how different he was. As he approached the Torah he stopped short, not even letting the tips of his soles touch the sacred parchment. Then he turned to the SS officer. "I don't tread on my Torah and I will never spit on it." They shot him on the spot, and like the rest of the villagers who followed suit, Velvel became a holy martyr.

Rav Feinstein explains that there are icons of Judaism that are virtually impregnable. And so, Rabbi Yishmael can understand that one can be completely detached from Judaism, to the extent that he disregards all the mitzvos, and transgresses the most awful of its prohibitions. However, that Jew, no matter how low he has sunk, will never destroy even one brick of a synagogue! That is why Rabbi Yishmael must explain the verse not through its simple meaning, but through a pastoral interpretation.

The love of Judaism transcends performance of any single command. And no Jew who heeds some Torah warning, needs admonition against destroying all

that his soul embodies. In this era of shattered icons and crumbling values, it is important to build on the embers of Yiddishkeit that are still glowing in the heart of every Jew. © 2000 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

ADAM LIEBERMAN

G-d is Watching

In this week's Torah portion, Moses tells the Jewish people additional commandments they need to follow. And then he implores upon them to: "...do what is good and right in the eyes of God." (Deuteronomy 12:28)

It seems rather obvious for Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, to tell his followers to do what is right in the eyes of God. But this really isn't as much of a rhetorical statement as one might think.

We live in a society where we care enormously about what other people think about us. Whether you're aware of it or not, the things you say, the clothes you wear, and the places you shop are influenced largely by the perception you want to give to others. This is precisely why in public we might act one way towards someone, but in private - outside the watchful eyes of those we so much want to impress - we will act in a completely different way.

When Moses told the Jews to do what is good and right in the eyes of God, he was teaching us all a life-changing insight: God is everywhere. He's right next to you as you're reading this. And He "follows" you when you walk to your car, and He sits right next to you at work. There isn't a cubic foot of space in which God is not completely and totally present and aware of everything this is being said and done. Remember, when it comes to God's presence, there's no such thing as privacy. God is always right there.

In New York City's Time Square there exists a massive television screen called the JumboTron. Thousands of people - some as far as 20 city blocks away - can see whatever images are displayed on this screen. What if you lived your life as though it was being shown live on the JumboTron? How much different would you act if everything you did was being broadcast in real-time on this giant screen?

But that's exactly the powerful message that God's teaching us. We are on this screen and God is observing everything.

So instead of doing what looks right in the eyes of your co-workers and friends, listen to the words of Moses.

Concern yourself with impressing the One who truly wants you to become great and strive to do what is good and right in the eyes of God. © 2007 A. Lieberman & torah.org



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