

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the great stories of all time, and Moses foresaw it three thousand years before it happened. Here he is speaking in this week's parsha:

"See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my G-d commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'... What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:5-8)

Moses believed that there would come a time when the idea of a nation founded on a covenant with G-d would inspire other nations with its vision of a society based not on a hierarchy of power but on the equal dignity of all under the sovereignty and in the image of G-d; and on the rule of justice and compassion. "The nations" would appreciate the wisdom of the Torah and its "righteous decrees and laws". It happened. As I have argued many times, we see this most clearly in the political culture and language of the United States.

To this day American politics is based on the biblical idea of covenant. American presidents almost always invoke this idea in their Inaugural Addresses in language that owes its cadences and concepts to the book of Devarim. So, for instance, in 1985 Ronald Reagan spoke of America as "one people under G-d, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world."

In his Inaugural in 1989, George Bush prayed: "There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us to remember it, Lord. Amen." In 1997 Bill Clinton said: "The promise we sought in a new land we will find again in a land of new promise."

George W Bush in 2001 said, "We are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image." In 2005 he declared, "From the day of

our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth."

In 2009 Barack Obama ended his speech with these words: "Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and G-d's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations."

This is explicitly religious language, without parallel in any other democratic society in the world, and it reads like a sustained midrash on Deuteronomy.

How did it happen? It began with the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz in 1439, followed in England in 1476 by William Caxton. Books became less expensive and more accessible. Literacy spread.

Then in 1517 came the Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual rather than the Church, and on sola Scriptura, the authority of "Scripture alone."

Then came the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. We tend to forget that the Hebrew Bible is a subversive work. It is not a book that preaches submission. It speaks of prophets unafraid to challenge kings, and of Saul who lost his throne because he disobeyed the word of G-d. So the authorities had good reason for the Bible not to be available in language people could understand. Translating it into the vernacular was forbidden in the sixteenth century. In the 1530s the great Tyndale translation appeared. Tyndale paid for this with his life: he was arrested, found guilty of heresy, strangled and burned at the stake in 1536.

However, as contemporary tyrannies have discovered, it is hard to stop the spread of information that new technologies make possible. English Bibles continued to be printed and sold in massive numbers, most notably the Geneva translation of 1560 that was read by Shakespeare, Cromwell, Milton, and John Donne, as well as by the early English settlers of America.

The Geneva Bible contained a commentary in the margin. Its comments were brief but sometimes explosive. This applied in particular to the story of the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, in Exodus ch. 1 -- the first recorded instance of civil disobedience, the refusal to obey an immoral order. Pharaoh had instructed them to kill every male Israelite child, but they

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for a refuah shelaima

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did not. Commenting on this, the Geneva Bible says "their disobedience in this was lawful." When Pharaoh then commands the Egyptians to drown male Israelite children, the Geneva Bible comments: "When tyrants cannot prevail by deceit, they burst into open rage." This was nothing short of a justification for rebellion against a tyrannical and unjust king.

The Tyndale and Geneva Bibles led to a group of thinkers known as the Christian Hebraists, of whom the most famous-he has been called Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi-was John Selden (1584-1654). Selden and his contemporaries studied not only Tanakh, but also the Babylonian Talmud, especially tractate Sanhedrin, and Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, and applied Judaic principles to the politics of their day. Their work has been described in a fine recent study, *The Hebrew Republic*, by Harvard political philosopher Eric Nelson. Nelson argues that the Hebrew Bible influenced European and American politics in three ways.

First, the Christian Hebraists tended to be republican rather than royalist. They took the view-held in Judaism by Abrabanel-that the appointment of a king in Israel in the days of Samuel was a (tolerated) sin rather than the fulfilment of a mitzvah. Second, they placed at the heart of their politics the idea that one of the tasks of government is to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, an idea alien to Roman law.

Third, they used the Hebrew Bible-especially the separation of powers between the king and the High Priest-to argue for the principle of religious toleration.

It was this historic encounter between Christians and the Hebrew Bible in the seventeenth century that led to the birth of liberty in both England and America. The Calvinists and Puritans who led both the English and American revolutions were saturated in the politics of the Hebrew Bible, especially of the book of Devarim.

In fact, the modern world offers as near as history comes to a controlled experiment in liberty. Of the four revolutions that mark modernity, two, the English (1640s) and American (1776), were based on the Hebrew Bible, and two, the French and the Russian, were based on secular philosophy, Rousseau and Marx respectively. The first two led to liberty. The second two ended in the suppression of liberty: in France in the

Reign of Terror (1793-94), in Russia in the form of Stalinist Communism.

Appreciating the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to liberty, John Adams, second President of the United States, wrote: "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations."

The irony is, of course, that there is nothing like this in the political discourse of the contemporary state of Israel. The politics of Israel is secular in its language and ideas. Its founders were driven by high ideals, but they owed more to Marx, Tolstoy or Nietzsche than to Moses. Meanwhile religion in Israel remains sectarian rather than society-building.

To be sure, there are those who fully realise the significance of Sefer Devarim and the politics of covenant for the present State. The pioneer was the late Professor Daniel Elazar, who devoted a lifetime to rehabilitating Judaic political theory. His work is continued today, by among others, the scholars of the Shalem Center.

The significance of this cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Whenever in the past Jews lost their religious vision, or when religion became a divisive rather than a uniting force, eventually they lost their sovereignty also. In four thousand years of history there has never been, in Israel or outside, a sustained secular Jewish survival.

How ironic that the political culture of the United States should be more Judaic than that of the Jewish state. But Moses warned that it would be so. Keep the Torah's laws carefully, Moses said, "for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." Moses knew that Gentiles would see what Jews sometimes do not see: the wisdom of G-d's law when it comes to sustaining a free society.

Israeli politics needs to recover the vision of social justice, compassion, human dignity and love of the stranger, set forth by Moses and never, in all the intervening centuries, surpassed. ©2011 *Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

“**A**nd we dwelt in the valley, opposite the Temple of Peor” (Deuteronomy 3:29).

The contents of the final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, are almost sandwiched between two curious references to a detestable idol: Baal Peor. At the conclusion of the first part of Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites, the text informs us that when Moses relinquished the baton of Jewish leadership to Joshua, "the Israelites had settled in the valley, opposite the Temple of Peor" (Deuteronomy 3:29). Then at the closing of the book, in a poignant

passage summarizing Moses's life, the text reads: "And He [G-d] buried [Moses] in the valley in the Land of Moab opposite the Temple of Peor; no human being knows his burial place until this day" (Deut. 34:6). Is it not strange that the only real landmark by which to identify Moses's grave is "opposite the Temple of Peor"? What makes these references especially startling is the disgusting manner in which this idol was served; by defecating in front of it! What kind of idolatry is this? And what type of repulsive individuals would it be likely to attract?

Furthermore, the Sages of the Talmud (B.T. Sanhedrin 106a) suggest that when Balaam advised the Moabites on how to vanquish the Israelites, he suggested that they bring Moabite women to entice the Israelites and then assimilate them into their culture. In effect, Balaam was explaining that, although no external soothsayer or prophet could get the Almighty to curse Israel, the Israelites could in fact curse themselves out of existence through sexual licentiousness with gentile women. And so, "the Israelites dwelt in Shittim, and began to engage in harlotry with the daughters of Moab" - but G-d was not angry at them. It was only when "they became attached to Baal Peor that the wrath of G-d flared up against them" (Numbers 25:1-3). Sexual immorality led to idolatrous worship of Peor - and it was this idolatry that would ultimately ruin Israel. What is it about Peor that is not only abominable but also so dangerous?

Balaam's advice causes the Israelites to degenerate to lower and lower depths and the sexual debauchery becomes interchanged and intermingled with the worship and joining "together" with Peor. At this point, G-d tells Moses to take all the leaders of the nation and to slay them under the rays of the sun; but no sooner does Moses give this command than an Israelite (Zimri ben Salou, a prince of the tribe of Simeon) cohabits (joins together with) the Midianite princess Cosbi bat Zur - a flagrant and disgustingly public act of rebellion against Moses, his teaching and his authority. It appears as though Jewish history was about to conclude even before it had a chance to begin - when Phinehas steps in and saves the day. Phinehas seems to have been the antidote to Balaam, who, as we know from our text, was the son of Beor, strikingly similar to Peor (and in Semitic languages "b" and "p" can be interchangeable). It clearly emerges from the Talmudic discussion (B.T. Sanhedrin 64a) that Peor is the nadir - the lowest depth - of idolatrous practice. Is defecating before an idol the worst expression of idolatrous behavior?

The first two chapters of the Book of Genesis begin with two stories of the creation of the human being. Rav Soloveitchik describes these as two ways of looking at human personality: the first he calls homo natura, natural man, the human being as an inextricable part of the physical and animal world. This is mechanistic man, scientifically predetermined and pre-

programmed, devoid of freedom and so (ironically) freed from responsibility. The second aspect of the human personality is introduced in the second chapter of Genesis with G-d's breathing the breath of life, a portion of His very essential self (as it were), His soul, into the clay body He has just formed. This results in homo persona, a vitalistic and free human being, responsible for his actions and charged with the obligation to perfect, or complete, G-d's imperfect and incomplete world. And G-d created homo persona! Homo persona is given the command to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit, to control his physical drives and impulses, to recreate himself as well as the world around him. Peor says that man must give back to G-d his animal and physical excretions, that man cannot be expected to rise above his nature and become G-d's partner.

Moses taught, on the other hand, that man can and must enable, uplift and sanctify his material being until he can truly see himself as "only a little lower than G-d, crowned with honor and glory." Moses and Phinehas are the antithesis of Balaam and Peor, and so Moses is buried opposite Peor © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### **Taking a Closer Look**

“**T**here were no better days for Israel than the 15th of Av and Yom HaKippurim, for on [those days] the daughters of Yerushalayim went out with white clothing-borrowed in order not to embarrass whomever didn't have (expensive clothing), [necessitating that] all the clothing be ritually cleansed-and the daughters of Yerushalayim went out and danced in the vineyards. And what did they say? 'Young man, raise your eyes and see what you choose for yourself; do not [focus] on beauty, [focus] on the family' (Ta'anis 26b). The 15th of Av (this coming Monday) is still celebrated, as we don't say Tachanun (Shulchan Aruch Oh"C 131:6).

Not saying Tachanun on "Tu B'Av" is not universally accepted, and the rationale put forth by those Rishonim (early commentators) that maintain we should say it is rather straightforward; the source of this "holiday" is Megilas Ta'anis, a list of Jewish holidays that were celebrated during the Second Temple era, and most of these holidays were no longer celebrated after the Temple was destroyed. However, the Talmud (Ta'anis 30b) provides six separate reasons why the 15th of Av is such a joyous occasion, and none of them are the reason provided by Megilas Ta'anis. It could therefore be suggested that even though most holidays listed there no longer apply, since there are additional reasons to celebrate Tu B'Av, we still celebrate it today. Just as Chanukah and Purim, which are discussed in the Talmud, are still celebrated even though they are included in Megilas Ta'anis, Tu B'Av is celebrated even

though it is mentioned in Megilas Ta'anis since it is discussed in the Talmud as well.

The celebration of Tu B'Av manifested itself in a way that helped those who were unmarried find their spouse. There has been much discussion recently about the so-called "shidduch crisis," and I would like to take this opportunity to further the conversation.

There are several points that can be gleaned from the Tu B'Av singles events described in the Talmud, including the effectiveness of seeing/meeting potential spouses before the dating process starts, and making "shidduchim" during times of happiness and celebration. It would seem that the environment most conducive to successful matchmaking is one of happiness, where those looking to find their life-partner are in a positive state of mind. On the other hand, it would be unfortunate if times and situations that had been a positive experience were now dreaded because the focus shifted from celebration to spouse-hunting. Therefore, even though it might be tempting to suggest that even in circles where mixed-seating is discouraged (older) singles should be seated together at weddings, it should not be imposed on them. Rather, as part of the wedding planning, the engaged couple could speak to their single friends, finding out which ones prefer to sit separately and which would welcome the opportunity to meet friends of their friend's new spouse. If there is enough interest for a table of singles, a newly-married couple (or two) could be asked to sit with them, as facilitators, including following up afterwards (with those interested in getting to know someone better). Even if singles are reluctant to shift their focus from celebrating their friend's wedding (or are worried about their appearance after lively dancing), instead of having separate tables for single women and for married women, and for single men and married men, mixing those who are married (and interested in helping others get married) with singles (of the same gender) would allow them to get to know people who might be appropriate for a spouse's friend.

Another aspect that is tempting to emulate is the "borrowed clothing," i.e. keeping the financial situation irrelevant to the shidduch process. However, the stated purpose is not to hide the finances from potential suitors, but to prevent those who do not have fancy clothes from being embarrassed. Nevertheless, there are few things more embarrassing than not getting any calls from shadchanim (matchmakers) because parents can't afford to support a young couple. Additionally, the Tu B'Av event described in the Talmud may have been limited to older singles (see Elya Rabba 580:10, although Kol Bo's contention that it was limited to poor families is hard to reconcile with the Talmud saying that the king's daughter borrowed clothing from the Kohain Gadol's daughter). It therefore might be worthwhile to consider not including finances in any "shidduch conversation" once a single reaches a certain age (perhaps 25). [It should be noted that most of these

suggestions are intended only for "older singles."] The expense of dating can also take its toll on some, and it would be great if restaurants offered a discount (18%?) for those on dates. Some might want to offer to go "dutch" to minimize the possibility of cost being a factor in turning down a shadchan's suggestion.

The shidduch conversation itself can be a point of contention, with shadchanim complaining about singles being too picky and singles resenting the perceived lack of discrimination regarding who is suggested for them. (I won't get into my disdain for fudging ages and how distasteful it is that relationships often start with a lack of trust, especially since it is now relatively easy to verify someone's real age.) It is hard for a single to get motivated for a date when the sense they get from the shadchan is that the match was suggested because "he's a boy, she's a girl, it could work." Some singles might be too picky, but unless they think there's a reason it might work, a lack of excitement is understandable. Asking what type of boy or girl they are looking for (and referring to singles who are past young adulthood as "boys" and "girls" is inappropriate in and of itself), bases the reason to go out on the type of person they think they want, necessitating any perspective date to match the stated description. Instead, singles should be asked what their life-goals are. What kind of home do they want to build? What kind of community do they want to live in? What kind of schools do they think their children should attend? How much time will be set aside for Torah study? If the goal is finding the most appropriate life partner, explaining why a specific person can help them attain their aspirations is a lot more enticing than asking them to try it because "hey, you never know."

In the "frum" (religious) world, there has been much romanticization of the concept of "bashert," understood in a dating context to refer to one's soul-mate, the person they were intended to marry since before they were born. This concept is based on the Talmud (Sotah 2a), which states that 40 days before an infant is formed a heavenly voice proclaims who will marry whom. This Talmudic passage also includes the often-quoted statement that "it is as difficult to match people up as it was to split the Sea of Reeds." However, a closer look at the Talmud reveals some interesting details. First of all, the Talmud discusses two types of matches, those based on "mazal" (see Rashi), which refers to matches based on the starting point of the individuals (their personalities, background and genetic makeup), and those based on the choices made by each of the individuals. As Meiri explains, once a person reaches the age where the choices made shape who they are, he or she (or both) may have changed so much that the person who had been the most appropriate match is no longer the most appropriate person for them. Although this doesn't usually happen for the first marriage, it can apply to those who get married later in life. (Meiri doesn't give a specific age,

but being that the heavenly court doesn't punish until a person reaches the age of 20, it makes sense for this to be the age he refers to.) Obviously, the point at which a person's choices changes their "mazal" is different for each individual, and some (most?) never move beyond their starting point (and where it naturally leads). Nevertheless, the older a person gets, the more "defined" their personality becomes and the greater the likelihood that their choices have shaped who they are. Even if the most appropriate match is still their original "bashert," the changes each have undergone often causes there to be less "overlap." Whereas they might have grown together had they started their lives together at 18, each has grown separately, and has to work with someone who developed a bit differently than they did. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect two individuals who meet in their late twenties to be as similar as those who meet in their early twenties. It is those who have moved past their "mazal," who are matched based on their actions, that the Talmud describes as being "as difficult to match up as the splitting of the sea."

What can a community do to help those who are not yet married? If we are to follow the Talmud's Tu B'Av recipe, we need to find a way to get them to meet in a comfortable (and kosher) way. One possibility is for each community to have a luncheon on every "Shabbos Mevarchin," the Shabbos before each Rosh Chodesh. Singles who attend would pay for the cost of the meal, so it wouldn't drain the community's finances. A community leader and his/her family would eat with them, and help facilitate conversation. Once it catches on, many singles will make plans for these Shabbosos based on in which community (and with which friends) they want to spend Shabbos. In conjunction with this (or, for some, in place of it) could be mini-luncheons, where families host 4 singles at their Shabbos meal (2x2), allowing each single, accompanied by a friend, to meet two new people at each meal. A committee of committed couples would research like-minded singles to invite to the community, perhaps with the help of some of the community's singles. Having a committee of local singles organize these types of events (with the help of a local community leader/board member) provides additional opportunities for singles to meet, as they work together for a shared cause. Young leadership committees of Jewish organizations is another vehicle to get to people to learn about each other without having a forced conversation at a restaurant or in a lounge while getting them more involved in the Jewish community. Singles should volunteer their time for organizations and causes they believe in, as aside from helping out a worthy cause, it's a great opportunity to meet others with similar values.

Historically, Tu B'Av has been a time of great celebration. With Hashem's help, we can celebrate many more things together—as individuals, as couples, and as a community. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**W**ithout the world, what would G-d be? The answer is simply, G-d. On the other hand, without G-d, the world would cease to exist.

G-d is so powerful that without the world He would not be reduced one iota. In the same breath, G-d's immanence is such that without Him the world would be nothing.

Rashi enhances this idea through his interpretation of the famous sentence found in this week's portion, Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Ehad. "Hear O Israel the Lord is our G-d the Lord is One." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

In the words of Rashi, the verse comes to tell us that "Hashem, the Lord, who is our G-d, now...He will be in the future One Lord, as it is stated... 'in that day shall the Lord be One and His name One.'" (Zekhariah 14:9)

The implication is clear: G-d in the world today is not fully One in the sense that he has not been accepted by all of humankind. It is up to us, who know of G-d's greatness, to spread the name of G-d so that He will be received as One throughout the world.

The second paragraph of the well known Aleinu prayer makes this very point. There we yearn for the time when "the world will be perfected under the reign of the Almighty, le-takein olam be-malkhut Shakai" and all humankind will express allegiance to G-d.. "On that day," the paragraph continues, quoting the sentence from Zekhariah which Rashi understands as an

explanation of Shema, "G-d will be One, and His name One." Note that the whole paragraph is in the future, implying that in the present G-d is not One in the sense that He has not been embraced by all.

This idea is also echoed in the text about Amalek where G-d swears by His name and throne that He will forever war against Amalek. G-d's name and throne are written uniquely as they are incomplete in the text -keis, Kah. (Exodus 17:16) Indeed, Rashi writes: "The Holy One blessed be He swears that His name and throne will not be whole and One until Amalek will be utterly blotted out."

Once again it is up to the human being, with G-d's help, to eradicate Amalek or the forces of Amalek. In this sense, while G-d does not need the human being—as He is, of course, independent and self-existent—we have a strong and important role in His future. For only through the efforts of humankind will His name be One and His throne be complete.

In one word: while the existence of G-d does not at all depend upon humankind, the manifestation of G-d and the proliferation of the Divine message in this world very much depends on each and every one of us.

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### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## **Wein Online**

**T**he Torah as we all well know is multilayered. The rabbis have taught us that there are seventy facets to every piece of the written Torah. We are also aware that no written word can adequately convey to us all of the nuances and possible meanings that lie embedded in the written word. Therefore the Torah requires elucidation, commentary and explanation in order for any proper understanding of its message to be gained.

The entire book of Dvarim is an elucidation and explanation of the first four books of Moshe. As such, by the inherent nature of explanation and commentary, different words and phrases will be employed to describe events and commandments that were previously mentioned in the Torah.

A prime example of this appears in this week's parsha where the Torah repeats for us the Ten Commandments revealed to Israel at Sinai. The wording here in Dvarim differs slightly from the wording recorded for us in Shemot. The Talmud in its rendition of the Oral Law states that these discrepancies-such as the use of the word shamor instead of the original zachor regarding the observance of the Shabat-indicate that these words were stated simultaneously by G-d, so to speak, a feat that is beyond human comprehension and ability.

The Talmud means to indicate to us with this statement that all of the possible interpretations and layers of meaning in the Torah were given to us simultaneously and at once at Sinai. Only the Oral Law and the work of the commentators to the Torah over all of the ages has revealed to us these original layers of meaning and interpretation for our study and practice.

By using different words to explain what was already written, the Torah guides our understanding of the Torah only by way of the Oral Law and the great commentators of Israel over the ages.

In the final commandment of the Ten Commandments, the Torah here in Dvarim uses the word titaveh whereas in Shemot it used the word tachmode. The Torah points out to us that there are different forms of desire and wanting something. One is an impulsive, spur of the moment desire that arises out of seemingly chance circumstance-an advertisement in the media or a chance meeting or sighting. Such a desire is not planned and stems from the inherent human weakness within all of us to want to possess what we do not yet have. But there is another type of desire. It is long planned and had been part of our lives for years and decades. It borders on being an obsession or an addiction within our makeup.

Both of these types of desire can destroy a person. The Torah cautions us against these symptoms of self-destructive behavior. And by the use of these different Hebrew verbs, the Torah indicates to us that there are different types of desires and that one must be defensive against all of them.

The Talmud tells us that the eyes see and the heart thereupon desires. Guarding one's eyes guards one's heart as well. This example of the Torah's self elucidation of the matter makes the lesson clear to all and challenges us to apply it wisely in one's own life. © 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)

### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

## **Haftorah**

**T**his week's haftorah introduces a special series of haftorah readings related to our final redemption. In this opening one the prophet Yeshaya delivers the Jewish people warm words of comfort from Hashem. After over one thousand years of exile the time will finally arrive for the Jewish nation to return to Hashem and His Promised Land. But, as Chazal explain (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, 445) the painful scars of exile, persecution, and rejection will remain fresh in their minds and it will be difficult to approach Hashem and rebuild a relationship. In addition, they will remember vividly all their acts of defiance and will be embarrassed to return to Hashem. Hashem therefore turns to His nation and expresses to them warm words of comfort and console.

Hashem instructs the prophet Yeshaya, "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call her because her long term has been served and her sin has been forgiven." (40:2) After all of this time, the Jewish people will find it difficult to accept that Hashem is truly interested in them. Although, the time for redemption has arrived they have not thoroughly cleansed themselves from all of their wrongdoings. They question how they could entertain establishing a perfect relationship with Hashem without having even perfected their ways. Hashem responds, "Her sins have been forgiven because she suffered an abundant and full measure for them." (ibid.) The Malbim (ad loc.) explains this to mean that the harsh severity of their sufferings will compensate for their incomplete steps of repentance. The Jewish people deserve their redemption after enduring and outliving the most horrifying and tragic experiences with steadfast faith in Hashem. During their painful exile they consistently demonstrated unwavering commitment to Hashem and an inseparable attachment to Him.

Our Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, Beraishis 162) share with us an additional dimension about Yeshaya's words of comfort. They quote a

passage in Shir Hashirim referring to the era of the final redemption and the profound statement the Jewish people will make then. They plead to Hashem, "If only, You could be like a brother to me." (Shir Hashirim 8:1) Chazal see this brotherly relationship as a reference to the indescribable compassion that Yosef Hatzadik showed his brothers. After the atrocious behavior the tribes displayed towards Yosef they could never forgive themselves for those misguided actions. They therefore delivered a message to Yosef beseeching Him to forgive them without harboring any ill feelings towards them. In response to their plea, the Torah states "And Yosef comforted them and spoke to their hearts." (Breishis 50:21)

Chazal explain that mere words of comfort and assurance were not sufficient to allay their fears. Yosef therefore saw it appropriate to appeal to their hearts and redirect their thinking. He convinced his brothers how meaningful they were to him and how their safety and prominence served as key factors in his attaining and maintaining his position of glory.

The Jewish people express their wish that Hashem act in this same manner with them. They find it impossible to forgive themselves for all the wrong they have done to Hashem. However, as Yosef appealed to his brothers' hearts and redirected their thinking, Hashem can certainly do the same. They plead with Hashem to remove any trace of ill feelings for all their years of unfairness to Him. Chazal conclude that as Yosef allayed his brothers' fears Hashem will do the same for His people. Therefore, when instructing Yeshaya to comfort the Jewish people, Hashem states, "Comfort them and speak to their hearts." Yeshaya, as Yosef, is charged with a mission of conveying to the Jewish people how significant each and every one of them is to Hashem.

Yeshaya faithfully says to the Jews, "Hashem will lead you like a shepherd tends his flock, gathers them in his arm, carries them in his bosom and gently leads young ones." (40: 11) Yeshaya informs them that Hashem does care about every Jewish soul as a shepherd cares for each of his sheep. Although the Jewish people had previously strayed and suffered so much for their wrongdoing Hashem still cares about them in indescribable measures. Yeshaya beckons the Jews not to be hesitant or embarrassed to return. Hashem cares so much for each one of them that He will personally escort them back to Him.

Yeshaya continues, " Who measured the depths of the water by his fists, the span of the heavens by his hand, the width of the land by the measure of three fingers or the weight of mountains and hills on a scale? Behold the nations are but a remaining drop in a bucket, the rust of a scale." (40:12,15)

Although in our eyes, the entire world and its inhabitants are of enormous proportions, in the eyes of Hashem they are but tiny miniscule dots. They all serve a general purpose but the concern and focus of

Hashem is not specifically upon them. Yeshaya concludes, "Lift your eyes heavenward and see who created these, He who brings out the myriads by number and to each He calls by name. (40: 26) The prophet is referring to the millions of stars found in the heaven. Each of them serves a specific purpose and is identified by name at all times. Each star is significant and every one occupies a prominent position in the master plan of Hashem.

In view of all the above we can suggest the following interpretation to the final words of the haftarah. Dovid Hamelech in Sefer Tehillim (Psalm 147) makes a similar reference to the stars in the heavens. He says, "Hashem is the builder of Yerushalayim; He will gather in the dispersed of Israel. He counts the stars by number, to all He calls by name. (147: 2,4) The Ibn Ezra interprets Dovid Hamelech's profound verses in the following manner. The Jewish people have been scattered all over the world which should be indicative of their insignificance. To this Dovid Hamelech responds and reminds us that the stars are also scattered over the vast span of the horizon. However, Hashem knows every one of them and identifies him by name and purpose. In this same vein Hashem knows every Jewish person and identifies with him by his individual name and purpose. Following this thought we can appreciate Yeshaya's words in this same manner. At the time of redemption Hashem will display His appreciation for each and every Jewish soul and personally escort him back to Eretz Yisroel. Every Jewish person counts because he occupies an important role in the scheme of the glory of Hashem. To Hashem every Jewish soul is greatly significant because his personal role adds a unique and distinct dimension to the majesty of Hashem. May we merit soon the realization of these comforting words with the coming of Mashiach and the ingathering of the exiles.

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### RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

## The Timeless Rav Hirsch

**“**You shall greatly beware for your souls, for you did not see any likeness on the day Hashem spoke to you at Chorev from within the fire. Lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image, a likeness of any shape...”

How easy is it to believe in G-d? As easy as it is to believe in one's self! Do not expect to find support here for the modern mantra of "if you look deeply within yourself you will find the truth." That is not what our pesukim tell us. Moreover, it is not a Torah position. We do not mean that one's inner voice will lead him or her to determine what is right and what is wrong. We mean holding on to the belief that our inner voice is real and significant, more real to us than anything else. (See Rav Hirsch's development of the exchange between the nachash and Chavah. Briefly, he argues that unlike the

"truths" that Hashem made inherent in the behavior of every animal, humans are an exception. For them, looking into themselves and their natures will not uncover the truth. Humans can only discover what they need to know by listening to an external voice- the voice of Hashem's commandments.)

Our pesukim exhort us not to make fatal errors about Divinity, based on our experience at Sinai. We are first tempted to think of this as yet another of the many warnings in Chumash Devarim against falling into the ways of idolatry. This does not really work in the text, however.

The object of "be greatly beware" is usually "you," either in the singular (See above, 4:9) or plural. In those cases, the implication is that you must guard yourself against any false influence that you may encounter. In so doing, you guard and protect your role in staying faithful to the Torah. Our pasuk is the only one in the Torah (and one of only two in Tanach) in which the object changes to "your souls." This subtle difference points to a danger not to our lives or activities, but to the stuff that nourishes our souls: clarity about our relationship with G-d.

The Torah warns us not to make any material representation of G-d. When we do, we endanger and distort our conception of G-d as an invisible, supernatural, intangible Being. The danger is not that we will abandon the true G-d for another power, real or imagined. The danger is that we will alter the way we look at G-d; at stake are our souls, not our selves. Getting G-d wrong affects the quality of our neshamos. Moreover, our belief in G-d is related to and intertwined with our understanding of our souls as the true locus of our individuality and existence.

An ardent materialist has no room for the soul. He has no room in his world view for anything that is not tangible, measurable and manipulable. He therefore has no tolerance and no patience for a G-d concept. Neither, for that matter, can he relate to some invisible, supernatural, intangible part of himself that others call the soul. His own consciousness and identity are phenomena that are poorly understood, but he is sure that they are simply by-products of brain function. (Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher wrote, "There is nothing so inconceivable as that matter should be conscious of itself.")

Most of the rest of us take a position completely antipodal to this. Not only do we reject the materialist point of view, but we have confidence that the most personal, real and essential part of ourselves is the soul. Despite our trust of things we can see and manipulate, nothing is more real to us than our own inner experience. We call that experience and consciousness the soul. Once we believe in it, we do not have so hard a time in accepting a Being outside of our selves Who shares many of the same properties.

The gemara (Berachos 10A) fleshes out this thought by finding parallels between G-d and our souls.

Just as G-d fills the world, our souls fill our bodies. G-d sees but is not seen; the same holds true for the soul. G-d nourishes the world; the soul nourishes the body; both G-d and the soul are pure.

Pointing out these parallels is important, because through them, belief in Hashem becomes accessible and certain. When our pesukim tell us to "beware for our souls," they mean that we should hold firm to our belief that in some areas, our senses cannot be the final determinants of truth for us. We know, trust and value our consciousness, despite it being a poorly understood intangible. It is the most real part of our existence, identical with our individuality. We call it the soul, and believe in it more than the sensory data with which we negotiate most other issues in life. Believing that our senses are not the end-all of knowledge and reality, we can trust our belief in a personal G-d as well.

What does this have to do with Sinai? Many others also profess belief in G-d. Moreover, they look to Sinai as the ultimate reason for that belief. They trust the Biblical record of a moment in history in which G-d reached out to Man, and Man directly apprehended Divinity. They find it impossible, however, to escape the tendency to place all knowledge on the doorstep of sensory experience. We Jews understand that it was not our eyes and ears that were important, but our souls that participated in the great event at Sinai. Others, however, cannot escape their dependence upon eyes and ears of flesh. In doing so, they shift their understanding of G-d to something that can and must be known by the senses. Thereby, they horribly change G-d into something smaller, more limited, more earthly and human.

It is not then any competing god that the Torah warns us against here, but a corruption of G-d's Essence. If we turn ma'amad Har Sinai into something sensory and physical, we will do the same to G-d. We escape this tendency by reminding ourselves about a non-physical part of ourselves that we value above all physical existence.

We have only to look inside ourselves to find a model for belief. (Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim, 4:15-16) © 2011 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

