

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

It would be reasonable to assume that a language that contains the verb "to command" must also contain the verb "to obey." The one implies the other, just as the concept of a question implies the possibility of an answer. We would, however, be wrong. There are 613 commandments in the Torah, but there is no word in biblical Hebrew that means "to obey." When Hebrew was revived as a language of everyday speech in the nineteenth century, a word, *letsayet*, had to be borrowed from Aramaic. Until then there was no Hebrew word for "to obey."

This is an astonishing fact and not everyone was aware of it. It led some Christians (and secularists) to misunderstand the nature of Judaism: very few Christian thinkers fully appreciated the concept of *mitzvah* and the idea that G-d might choose to reveal Himself in the form of laws. It also led some Jews to think about *mitzvot* in a way more appropriate to Islam (the word *Islam* means "submitting" to G-d's law) than to Judaism. What word does the Torah use as the appropriate response to a *mitzvah*? *Shema*.

The root *sh-m-a* is a keyword in the book of Deuteronomy, where it occurs 92 times, usually in the sense of what G-d wants from us in response to the commandments. But the verb *sh-m-a* means many things. Here are some of the meanings it has in Genesis:

[1] "To hear" as in "Abram heard that his relative [Lot] had been taken captive" (14:14).

[2] "To listen, pay attention, heed" as in "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree" (3:17) and "Then Rachel said: G-d has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son" (30:7).

[3] "To understand" as in "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (11:7). This is how tradition understood the later phrase *Naaseh ve-nishma* (Ex. 24:7) to mean, "first we will do, then understand."

[4] "To be willing to obey" as the angel's words to Abraham after the binding of Isaac: "Through your

offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you were willing to obey me" (22:18). Abraham was about to obey G-d's command but at the last moment an angel said Stop.

[5] "To respond in deed, to do what someone else wants" as in "Do whatever Sarah tells you" (*sh'ma bekolah*, 21:12). It is in this last sense that it comes closest in meaning to "obey."

The fact that *sh-m-a* means all these things suggests that in the Torah there is no concept of blind obedience. In general, a commander orders and a soldier

obeys. A slave-owner orders and the slave obeys. There is no active thought process involved. The connection between the word of the commander and the deed of the commanded is one of action-and-reaction, stimulus-and-response. For practical purposes, the soldier or slave has no mind of his own. As Tennyson described the attitude of the soldiers before the Charge of the Light Brigade: "Ours not to reason why; ours but to do or die."

That is not how the Torah conceives the relationship between G-d and us. G-d, who created us in His image, giving us freedom and the power to think, wants us to understand His commands. Ralbag (Gersonides, 1288-1344) argues that it is precisely this that makes the Torah different:

"Behold our Torah is unique among all the other doctrines and religions that other nations have had, in that our Torah contains nothing that does not originate in equity and reason. Therefore this Divine Law attracts people in virtue of its essence, so that they behave in accordance with it. The laws and religions of other nations are not like this: they do not conform to equity and wisdom, but are foreign to the nature of man, and people obey them because of compulsion, out of fear of the threat of punishment but not because of their essence." (Gersonides, Commentary to *Va-etchanan*, par. 14)

Along similar lines the modern scholar David Weiss Halivni speaks of "the Jewish predilection for justified law," and contrasts this with other cultures in the ancient world:

"Ancient law in general is apodictic, without justification and without persuasion. Its style is categorical, demanding, and commanding... Ancient Near Eastern law in particular is devoid of any trace of desire to convince or to win hearts. It enjoins, prescribes, and orders, expecting to be heeded solely

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Chana bas Itka  
for a *refuah shelaima*

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on the strength of being an official decree. It solicits no consent (through justification) from those to whom it is directed." (David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara: the Jewish predilection for justified law*, Harvard University Press, 1986, 5)

The Torah uses at least three devices to show that Jewish law is not arbitrary, a mere decree. First, especially evident throughout the book of Devarim, is the giving of reasons for the commands. Often, though not always, the reason has to do with the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. They know what it feels like to be oppressed, to be a stranger, an outsider. I want you to create a different kind of society, says G-d through Moses, where slavery is more limited, where everyone is free one day a week, where the poor do not go hungry, and the powerless are not denied justice.

The second, most notably in the book of Bemidbar, is the juxtaposition of narrative and law, as if to say, the law is best understood against the backdrop of history and the experience of the Israelites in their formative years. So the law of the red heifer-purification from contact with the dead-occurs just before the death of Miriam and Aaron, as if to say, bereavement and grief interfere with our contact with G-d but this does not last for ever. We can become pure again. The law of tsitsit occurs after the story of the spies because (as I explained in an earlier Covenant and Conversation) both have to do with ways of seeing: the difference between seeing-with-fear and seeing-with-faith.

The third is the connection between law and metaphysics. There is a strong connection between Genesis 1, the story of creation, and the laws of kedushah, holiness. Both belong to torat cohanim, the priestly voice, and both are about order and the maintenance of boundaries. The laws against mixing meat and milk, wool and linen, and so on, are about respecting the deep structure of nature as described in the opening chapter of the Torah.

Throughout Devarim, as Moses reaches the summit of his leadership, he becomes an educator, explaining to the new generation who will eventually conquer and inhabit the land, that the laws G-d has given them are not just Divine decrees. They make sense in human terms. They constitute the architectonics of a free and just society. They respect human dignity. They honour the integrity of nature. They give the land the chance to rest and recuperate. They

protect Israel against the otherwise inexorable laws of the decline and fall of nations.

Only by recognizing G-d as their sovereign will they guard against overbearing kings and the corruptions of power. Time and again Moses tells the people that if they follow G-d's laws they will prosper. If they fail to do so they will suffer defeat and exile. All this can be understood in supernatural terms, but it can be understood in natural ways also.

That is why Moses, consistently throughout Devarim, uses the verb sh-m-a. He wants the Israelites to obey G-d, but not blindly or through fear alone. G-d is not an autocrat. The Israelites should know this through their own direct experience. They had seen how G-d, creator of heaven and earth, had chosen this people as His own, brought them from slavery to freedom, fed, sustained and protected them through the wilderness, and led them to victory against their enemies. G-d had not given the Torah to Israel for His sake but for theirs. As Weiss Halivni puts it: the Torah "invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity upon him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law." (*Ibid.*, 14)

That is the meaning of Moses' great words in this week's parsha: "Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the Lord your G-d. Listen to the Lord your G-d and follow His commands and decrees that I give you today" (Deut. 27:9-10). Keeping the commands involves an act of listening, not just submission and blind obedience-listening in all its multiple senses of attending, meditating and reflecting of the nature of G-d through creation, revelation and redemption. It means trying to understand our limits and imperfections as human beings. It means remembering what it felt like to be a slave in Egypt. It involves humility and memory and gratitude. But it does not involve abdication of the intellect or silencing of the questioning mind.

G-d is not a tyrant (Avodah Zarah 3a) but a teacher. (Tamhuma (Buber), Yitro, 16) He seeks not just our obedience but also our understanding. All nations have laws, and laws are there to be obeyed. But few nations other than Israel set it as their highest task to understand why the law is as it is. That is what the Torah means by the word Shema. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house... I have not transgressed any of your commandments; and I have not forgotten" (Deut 26:13).

This week's Biblical portion is filled with crucial ritual and social commandments, the blessings and the curses which comprise our third Covenant with the Lord, and a concluding crescendo of promise that if we

keep G-d's commandments, we will inherit our land and succeed in all of our undertakings.

Ki Tavo opens, however, in a rather unusual way. Throughout the Five Books of our Torah, G-d and Moses are the "speakers," as it were, whereas the Israelites must hearken and do, carry out and obey. Our portion uniquely begins with two speeches to be made by the householders themselves: the first is a quintessential thanksgiving - history recited by the individual bringing his first fruits to the Holy Temple, and the second is a declaration made by the householder, when he has discharged his tithing obligations due to the Kohen - Levite ministers as well as to the poor of Israel.

Let us begin with the second of these speeches: "You shall declare before the Lord your G-d: 'I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house (and the fields; the percentage of the harvest which is "holy" unto G-d, which - although I may have planted, nurtured and reaped - nevertheless belongs not to me, but rather to those to whom G-d wants me to give gifts) and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in accordance with all Your commandments which You commanded me; I have not transgressed any of your commandments, and I have not forgotten'" (Deut 26:13).

Why does the householder conclude, "I have not forgotten"? If he has fulfilled all of his commitments, then clearly he has not forgotten the commandments of the tithes! Moreover, there is no parallel to such a declaration associated with any other group of commandments.

Rashi interprets, "I have not forgotten to make the proper blessings" on the various tithes (ad loc). A blessing before a ritual commandment certifies that this ritual is an act of service and devotion to G-d. In the performance of a social commandment, however, the act "for the sake of heaven" is only secondary; giving the tithe to the poor is salutary whatever my true intent may be. Moreover, the generally accepted halakic rule is that "the lack of a blessing - even when performing a ritual act - does not vitiate or detract from the act itself". Hence it would be strange for the Bible to be so concerned about the utterance of the blessing.

I believe that the words "I have not forgotten" in this context carry a different meaning. You will remember that the previous Biblical portion, Ki Tetze, concludes with the command: "Remember what Amalek did to you on the road after you left Egypt; he chanced upon you on the road, attacking from behind all of the straggling, weaker people lingering in the back, those of you who were weak and weary; he did not fear G-d. Therefore, when the Lord your G-d grants you secure rest from all your enemies roundabout, in the land that the Lord your G-d is giving you as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; do not forget" (Deut 25:17-19).

Amalek is the arch-enemy of Israel; my revered teacher and mentor, Rav Joseph B Soloveitchik, would

often cite his renowned grandfather, Rav Hayim of Brisk, who taught that Amalek is not to be seen as a specific nation. Amalek is the prototype of any nation in any generation and in any part of the world who - for no reason and without provocation attacks the weakest and most unprotected group; in particular, it singles out the people of Israel as the target of its destructive plans. Amalekism is the philosophy and *raison d'être* of Haman, Hitler, Stalin and Ahmadinejad. If the earth is to be home for free peoples created in the Image of G-d to live in security, then Amalekism and all that it stands for must be wiped off the face of the earth.

"Remember... Do not forget" is the Biblical message which concludes Ki Tetze. Ki Tavo opens with the farmer bringing his first fruits to the Temple and giving a first person account of Jewish history: "My father was a fugitive, almost destroyed, by the Aramean (his uncle, Laban). He went down to Egypt...where we were afflicted and given heavy labor....The Lord took us out of Egypt and brought us to this land, flowing with milk and honey..." (Deut 26:5-10). We recite and explicate these words every Passover Seder, the evening when we celebrate our freedom. Although it is now almost 4,000 years since these events took place, we still recite it in the first person, as it is Biblically written. The Egyptian experience is a seminal one for the Jews; we dare not forget it and we must re-live it every day of our lives: "You must love the stranger (the other), because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19).

Jewish ritual turns our history into a contemporary, personal experience - which cannot and dare not be forgotten. Likewise, regarding the declaration after giving the tithes to the priests and the poor, the householder declares that we are now living in Israel, we are sharing with those who teach us morality, we are sharing with those who are weaker and poorer than us.

We remember Amalek - and we remember that we must destroy Amalekism. We have not forgotten!  
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**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd I led you for forty years in the desert; your clothes did not wear out from upon you and your shoe did not become worn out from upon your foot" (D'varim 29:4). The word "you" or "your" appears five times in this verse; although you can't tell from the translation, it is in the plural form three times and the singular form twice. The plural "you" were led in the desert for forty years, and the clothes of the plural "you" did not wear out, but it was the singular "you" whose shoe did not wear out either. Why does the Torah switch between the plural "you" and the singular "you" in the same verse, let alone in the same paragraph?

Midrash Lekach Tov says that it is the norm for the Nation of Israel to sometimes be referred to in the singular (as one entity) and sometimes in the plural (made up of many individuals), presenting it as if there is no need to try to understand why sometimes the singular form is used and other times the plural form is used. It is certainly true that both forms are used, and, especially in Sefer D'varim, it is not unusual for verses to switch back and forth between the plural and singular without any obvious reason for changing from one to the other. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to try finding a possible reason for each and every instance why one form was chosen over the other, particularly when there is a change from one to the other in the same communication.

This isn't the only time Moshe reminded the nation that G-d had taken care of them throughout their stay in the desert; their clothing not wearing out is mentioned earlier in Sefer D'varim (8:4), along with their feet not becoming swollen despite how much they traveled. Although in that verse both "your" clothing and "your" foot are singular, the commentators discuss a different discrepancy. The first description includes their feet not being swollen, without any mention of their shoes, implying that they were walking barefoot (see Rashi), while the second description mentions their shoes, implying that they were not walking barefoot. Which one was it? Did they walk barefoot, without wearing shoes that needed G-d's involvement so that they wouldn't wear out (although He did protect their feet with His "cloud cushions," which they walked on instead of the desert sand), or did they wear shoes that G-d made sure stayed useful throughout their travels in the desert?

Maharai and Taz suggest that their shoes had no bottoms, only sides and a top. After all, they didn't need any protection on the bottom, since they were walking on (or being transported by) one of G-d's "clouds of glory." It might even be disrespectful to wear shoes with bottoms while atop a "cloud of glory," so not only did G-d have no need to prevent their shoe bottoms from wearing out, but He might have preferred if they did wear out. If their shoes had no bottoms, both descriptions become necessary; their bare-bottomed feet didn't become swollen, and the upper parts of the shoe didn't become worn. However, the only reasons to mention shoes separately from the rest of their clothing would seem to be because they would wear out more quickly because of all the walking and/or because of the extreme discomfort of walking in worn shoes. If they weren't walking on their shoes, why aren't the shoes included with the rest of their clothing? The fact that shoes are given a separate mention indicates that they weren't just covering their shins, ankles and the tops/sides of their feet, but were used the way shoes are normally used, to protect the bottom of their feet as well.

Several commentators (e.g. Gur Aryeh, Bartenura) point out that if their shoes wore out, they would have had to walk barefoot. G-d therefore prevented their shoes from wearing out, making both statements true; He didn't let their feet swell by not letting their shoes become worn. (Targum Unkoles and Targum Yonasan seems to be using this approach as well.) Although this explains the need for both descriptions nicely, it doesn't address how their feet would have become swollen without shoes if they were literally walking on clouds.

Rabbeinu Bachye makes three suggestions to explain why G-d had to prevent their feet from swelling and their shoes from becoming worn. His first approach, referencing Unkoles, seems to be the same as the one discussed in the previous paragraph. His first approach is that people who travel get swollen feet even if they are wearing shoes. Therefore, both aspects are mentioned; G-d protected them from getting swollen feet (which was necessary even though they had shoes), and He prevented their shoes from becoming worn out (apparently because without shoes, an even bigger miracle would have been necessary to keep their feet healthy).

Rabbeinu Bachye's second approach is that even though most wore shoes, those who carried the Aron HaKodesh, the Ark within which the Luchos were kept, did not. Although he doesn't explain why, I would assume it is similar to Moshe having to remove his shoes when G-d spoke to him at the burning bush (Sh'mos 3:5), as it is inappropriate to wear shoes, which often have mud and/or other icky stuff on them, in the presence of the divine (see B'rachos 54a and Rambam, Hilchos Bais HaB'chira 7:2, that shoes must be removed before entering Har HaBayis; based on this, I'm not sure why the need to be barefoot was limited to those carrying the Aron rather than including anyone who carried any of the holy vessels). If some people traveled while wearing shoes while others traveled barefoot, it is easy to understand why both miracles are mentioned and how they are not contradictory.

Sifsay Chachamim and B'er Heitiv quote an approach, possibly Imray Shefer's, possibly Devek Tov's, suggesting that those who came out of Egypt had shoes while those born in the desert did not. Although B'er Heitiv takes issue with this approach, I don't quite understand what his issue is. One possible issue (not the one B'er Heitiv raises) is that since there were almost 2,000 fewer people counted in the census taken in the 40th year (Bamidbar 26:51) than there were in the census taken in the 2nd year (Bamidbar 2:32), enough shoes came out of Egypt (and hadn't worn out) to go around. Besides, there were traveling merchants from nearby countries who would have gladly sold shoes to a nation with plenty of riches and nowhere to spend it. It therefore seems unlikely that the reason some didn't wear shoes was because only those who left Egypt had any to wear. Maharik (in his second approach) suggests

that there were poor people who couldn't afford shoes and had to walk barefoot. I would have thought, though, that anyone who didn't have shoes would have borrowed them from the Egyptians before leaving, and/or that they would have bought shoes after gathering the spoils by the Red Sea. Nevertheless, if some wore shoes and others walked barefoot (and Rabbeinu Bachye's explanation as to why seems to fit best), not only was it necessary for G-d to prevent shoes from wearing out and feet from swelling, it may explain why the Torah switched from the plural "you" to the singular one.

When Moshe addressed the nation after warning them about the consequences for not keeping the Torah, he referred to them as the plural "you" in all but two cases. One of them was the "you" whose shoes did not wear out, while the other was the "you" who saw the miracles in Egypt with "your own eyes" (D'varim 29:2), miracles that not everyone Moshe was addressing had actually seen (as they hadn't all been born at the time of the exodus). It would therefore seem that, at least in this paragraph, the plural "you" refers to everyone, while the singular "you" refers to those to whom it was relevant. [Even though the plural "you" is used in 29:1 to refer to seeing things in Egypt too, a limiter is employed; "you have seen all that G-d did to Egypt before your eyes," i.e. not that everyone present in 2488 saw everything that happened in 2448, but that those who were there to see it ("before their eyes") did actually see it.] Since not everyone wore shoes while they traveled, when Moshe referred to shoes not being worn out by the travel, he used the singular "you." (Netziv says explicitly that the reason the singular "you" was used regarding shoes was because not everyone wore them, without explaining why some didn't; baruch she'kivanti.) © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he explicit descriptions of the disasters, personal and national, that make up a large portion of this week's parsha raise certain issues. Why do Moshe and the Torah paint such a harsh and unforgiving picture of the Jewish future before the people? And if we expect people to glory in their Jewishness, is this the way to sell the product, so to speak? We all support the concept of truth in advertising but isn't this over and above the necessary requirement?

The fact that the description of much of Jewish history and its calamitous events related in this parsha is completely accurate, prophecy fulfilled to the nth degree, only compounds the difficulties mentioned above. But in truth, there is clear reason for these descriptions of the difficulties inherent in being Jewish to be made apparent.

We read in this book of Devarim that G-d poses the stark choices before the Jewish people-life or death,

uniqueness or conformity, holiness or mendacity. Life is made up of choices and most of them are difficult and fateful. Sugar coating the consequences of life's choices hardly makes for wisdom. Worse still, it erodes any true belief or sense of commitment in the choice that actually is made.

Without the necessary commitment, the choice itself over time becomes meaningless. The Torah tells us that being a Jew requires courage, commitment, a great sense of vision and eternity and deep self-worth. So the Torah must spell out the down side, so to speak, of the choice in being Jewish. The folk saying always was: "It is difficult to be a Jew." But, in the long run it is even more difficult and painful, eventually, for a Jew not to be a Jew in practice, thought and commitment.

According to Jewish tradition and Halacha, a potential convert to Judaism is warned by the rabbinic court of the dangers of becoming Jewish. He or she is told that Jews are a small minority, persecuted by many and reviled by others. But the potential convert also sees the vision and grandeur of Judaism, the inheritance of our father Avraham and our mother Sarah and of the sheltering wings of the G-d of Israel that guarantee our survival and influence. The potential convert is then asked to choose whether he or she is willing to truly commit to the project.

Without that commitment the entire conversion process is a sham and spiritually meaningless. And the commitment is not really valid if the downside, so to speak, of being Jewish is not explained and detailed. Judaism is not for fair-weather friends or soldiers on parade. The new phrase in the sporting world is that the players have to "grind it out." Well, that is what being Jewish means-to grind it out, daily, for an entire lifetime.

The positive can only outweigh the negative if the negative is known and defined. Those who look for an easy faith, a religion that demands nothing, who commit to empty phrases but are never willing to pay the price of practice, adherence and discipline will not pass the test of time and survival that being Jewish has always required. © 2012 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 SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

**T**oday. It's a powerful word. It is used by doctors to define the exact moment their patients are to stop over-indulging, smoking, and drinking. It is used by account receivables to exact when they want their bills paid. Most importantly, it's used by the Torah in describing what it wants from our attitudes. This week the Torah portion tells us: "Today Hashem commands you to perform these decrees and statutes." (26:16) There is obviously a deeper connotation. The

commandments were not given on the day that Moshe read this week's portion. They were given forty years prior. Also, at the end of the Parsha, Moshe calls the nation together and reminds them of the miraculous events that transpired during the exodus from Egypt. He discusses "the great wonders, signs, and miracles that your eyes beheld." (29:1-3) Then he adds something shocking: "But Hashem did not give you a heart to understand or eyes to see until today." What can the word "today" mean in this context? Did the Jewish nation not have the heart to appreciate the value of splitting the Red Sea forty years back? Did they not revel in the miracle of Manna from its first earthly descent decades previously? How can Moshe say that they did not have eyes to understand until today?

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky explains that perhaps Moshe is telling his nation the secret of eternal inspiration. One may experience miraculous events. He may even have the vision of a lifetime. However he "will not have the heart to understand or the eyes to see" until that vision is today. Unless the inspiration lives with him daily, as it did upon the moment of impact. Whether tragedy or blessing, too often an impact becomes as dull as the movement of time itself. The promises, pledges, and commitments begin to travel slowly, hand-in-hand down a memory lane paved with long-forgotten inspiration. This week Moshe tells us that even after experiencing a most memorable wonder, we still may, "not have the heart to discern nor the eyes to see." Until we add one major ingredient. Today. © Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**s the Jews prepare to enter Israel after 40 years of desert migration, Moshe (Moses) reminds them of the miracles they have seen. He then proclaims "But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear until this day." (Deuteronomy 29:3) What is the meaning of "until this day?" Can it be that prior to that moment, the Jews did not believe?

Rashi quotes the classic Midrash that on that day, Moshe gave the actual scroll of the Torah to the Levites. The rest of the Jewish people felt excluded and protested. Impressed by their love of the Torah, Moshe proclaims that it was on that day that the Jews showed how deeply they believe.

Other thoughts come to mind related to the upcoming High Holidays.

Perhaps only after living through the miracles of the Egyptian exodus and the desert wanderings, could the Jewish people finally look back and recognize the magnitude of what they had experienced. It often occurs that one can only appreciate a miraculous moment long after it happens. So too, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur teach us all to look back over the year and with

the distance of time, recognize what G-d has done for us.

A contrary thought can be suggested. Rather than emphasizing miracles as the key to faith, it is the everyday that leads to true belief. In fact, the test of people is not how they believe when experiencing a supernatural moment, but how they commit themselves when living a normal everyday existence. Only now, after 40 years, when miracles were no longer as overt, would the Jews really show their faith in G-d. One can similarly argue that it is easy to make a commitment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when one is experiencing the awesome power of the spirit of the holiday. The test is one's preparedness to follow through; remaining committed even after the dust has settled.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his *Meshekh Hohmah* offers an alternative idea. He suggests that throughout Moshe's life, the Jews may have blurred his role, sensing that Moshe was more than an emissary of G-d - believing perhaps that he was G-d Himself. This is a common mistake made in many other religions-the turning of the lead prophet into a G-d. Only on the day that Moshe died, would the Jews unequivocally declare their absolute belief that no human can be G-d. This, in fact, is a central message of the Days of Awe. Hence, the morning service on Rosh Hashanah begins with the coronation of G-d alone as we emphatically cry out "Ha-Melekh-The King." Yom Kippur brings this thought to a crescendo as we conclude the service with the refrain, "Hashem hu Ha-Elokim - The Lord is The G-d."

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, much like this week's portion, are a renewal of that final day in the desert, when we reflect on the miracles in our lives, find the Divine in the everyday and assert the rulership of G-d alone. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

#### **RABBI YISROEL CINER**

### **Parsha Insights**

**T**his week's parsha, Ki Tavo, contains the Tochacha-the terrible curses that will befall Bnei Yisroel {the Children of Israel} if the will of Hashem is not followed. This past century has seen the fulfillment of many of these passukim {verses}. A colleague of mine pointed out a passuk {verse} that chillingly applies to the events of the past months.

"And you will be driven mad by the sight that your eyes will see. [28:34]"

The N'tziv in his classic *Haamek Davar* explains in the following way: You will be astonished, how can it be that a few gangsters have done so much (to you) and your hand that has been strong has been unable to save you. This is what will drive you mad.

A clearer depiction of the maddening frustration felt during the present situation would be hard to find.

But how are we supposed to view the terror and tragedy that has become the daily fare?

Verber and Wechsler were certainly of the most famous escapees from the Nazi concentration camps. They even managed to take out of Auschwitz papers that documented the horrific killing apparatus that the Nazis had organized.

Auschwitz had an electrified fence that surrounded the inner camp with guard-towers every ten meters. These towers were only manned during the night. During the day, most inmates would work in the area outside the inner camp. This outer area was surrounded by a non-electrified fence and its guard towers were only manned during the day.

At the end of the day's work, the inmates would be marched into the inner camp and roll call would be taken. If all were accounted for, the gate of the inner fence would be locked and the guards manning the outer towers would move in to man the towers along the inner fence.

If anyone would be missing, a siren would sound and the search would begin. For the next three days, the outer fence would be manned continuously and hundreds of men—all SS men and their bloodhounds, the Ukrainian workers and the German common criminals who were also incarcerated in Auschwitz—would comb through every possible hiding place in both the inner and outer areas of the camp. If the escapees were not found after three days, a siren would signal the end of the search and the guards would resume their usual schedule, only manning the outer fence during the day.

At that time, Auschwitz was in the process of adding on additional bunkers. Neat and orderly piles of lumber were lined up in the outer area. The underground arranged that their people would be in charge of unloading and arranging the lumber that was delivered and they piled it up in a way that there was a small crawl space under the top three layers. Verber and Wechsler crawled into that area, had the top layers placed above them and covered themselves with Russian tobacco and kerosene in order to mask their scent from the dogs.

That night at roll call the siren sounded and the search began. The pile of lumber where Verber and Wechsler were hiding was passed tens of times but since the dogs ignored it, so did the searchers. Two and a half days went by and the hungry, frightened, exhausted escapees began to think that they would actually get away.

On the last day with just a few hours left, they heard two Germans approach the lumber pile. "Maybe they are in there?" they heard one say. "Impossible," the other retorted, "the dogs would have sniffed them out." They decided to check anyway. One layer was lifted off and then a second. They were about to begin lifting off the third layer when they heard shouts coming for the camp. Thinking that the escapees had been found, they

ran to join the 'festivities,' never to continue their search of the woodpile.

A few hours later, the siren signaled the end of the search. When night fell, Verber and Wechsler began the arduous task of getting out of their hiding place. The three days of hunger, stiffness and terror had taken their toll. The lumber had become so heavy. It took hours to push a few pieces over enough to allow them to crawl out. They then made their way under the unmanned, non-electrified fence to freedom.

Imagine the terror they felt as the first two layers were removed. Imagine the despair of those moments when the freedom that was so close seemed to be suddenly moving out of reach. Imagine how they must have been cursing the moment.

However, that which caused that terror, that torment and that despair was actually their salvation. They never would have had the strength to remove three layers of wood. Their hiding place would have become their burial place were it not for that close call.

Perhaps, that is how the events we're experiencing need to be viewed. Each act of terror, each close call is peeling away layer after layer, bringing the redemption that much closer.

We live in a time of opposites and extremes. I wanted to somewhat balance the difficult time we are going through with a letter I received that shows a very different aspect. As per her wishes, I have left out her name and the country she's from in order to protect her.

Dear Rabbi Ciner, I found this particular parsha very insightful and made me do some real soul searching. I have written recently to you; I am a believing gentile and Noahide with my two sons aged 25 and 23.

I have been studying in this website and other sites like the Chabad for about 9 years since the Internet came to my country. My sons and I left Christianity about 13 years ago. My husband is a strong Hindu, but does not interfere with our beliefs.

I have to learn very low profile as has Islam as its national faith and though there are 35% Chinese and 2% Indians of various faiths which is allowed, the hatred for Hashem's Chosen is beyond ones wildest imaginations. All man made faiths are allowed except the True One. HaShem has blessed me with an Artscroll Tanakh Stone Edition which I bought by airmail from Australia. Now, today that's impossible as Taleban activities have started here for the first time through our univ students and life is slowly becoming fearful. So my sons and I are praying for peace for you all as HaShem's Chosen, the eternal physical and spiritual caretakers of the Holy Land which would be a House of Prayer for the whole world. We know salvation would come to us through you all. We have a Noahide site run by a moderator and your articles appear there often. We see the prophecies of Isaiah coming to life as gentiles turn to orthodox rabbis to teach them about HaShem.

G-d protect and bless your Homeland, home and you always. Amazing times we are living through...  
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### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg  
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

In a letter, Rabbi Akiva Eiger asked about the phrase from the prayers, "Light up our eyes with Your Torah" [blessing before Shema]. He noted that some ignorant people do not even know how to read and write. "How can they approach the holy Throne of Honor and ask G-d to light up their eyes so that they will be able to see the wonders of the Divine Torah?" His reply is that the phrase "our eyes" refers to the "eyes of the community" -- that is, the rabbis and the leaders. This is as Moshe said to Yitro, "you will act as our eyes" [Bamidbar 10:31], and as the sages interpreted the phrase, "his eyes are like a dove" [Shir Hashirim 5:12], as a reference to the Sanhedrin. Rabbi Akiva Eiger continues, "That is the prayer by all of Yisrael-that the Holy One, Blessed be He, should light up the eyes of the community with His Torah... to prevent any harm from their teaching." He also interprets the verse, "What your eyes see will make you insane" [Bamidbar 28:34] as referring to the rabbis who lead the community. We therefore pray to G-d that he should "bring us back our judges as in the beginning" [daily prayer]. (The editor of Rabbi Eiger's letters noted that he was referring to rabbis who abandoned the yoke of the mitzvot.)

Others have interpreted this verse as referring to some people within Yisrael who "go crazy from what they see" and become enthusiastic about what they see among the other nations and try to emulate them without checking if this is suitable for us. In this way, we forget our unique character and our mission on this earth.

The Natziv looks at this verse together with the verse, "They are a solitary nation, who do not consider themselves as part of the other nations" [Bamidbar 23:9]. We as a nation should be alone, and when our people want to intermingle with the other nations, the Holy One, Blessed be He, causes them to hate us and not to consider us as human beings. According to the Midrash, what caused Bnei Yisrael to be so widely distributed among all the other nations? It was the fact that they wanted to be close to the others. When they were in Egypt they refrained from circumcision, saying that they would become like the Egyptians. What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do? "He gave the Egyptians a change of heart, so that they hated Yisrael."

"And there you will serve other gods... And you will be an amazement, a parable, and an example among all the nations where G-d sends you" [Devarim 28:36,37]. Ibn Ezra comments, "it will not be to your advantage, you will be remarkable, everybody who sees

you will be amazed." This is explained by the commentary Avi Ezri: "The people will replace the Divine honor in the lands of the other nations in order to find favor with them... And those who try to find favor will claim that to do so will help them, but you will remain desolate and shamed forever. And this is what Ibn Ezra means by the phrase, 'it will not be to your advantage.'"

A hundred and ten years ago, Theodor Herzl told a royal commission in England, "I would have thought the Jews are anxious to assimilate. And now the most appropriate moment to do so is here, but at this very moment anti-Semitism has appeared. All of history teaches us that the Jews were never in a happier state than they were in Spain before the Inquisition and the expulsion during the fifteenth century."

There is only one path open to Yisrael. "We have a young sister who has no breasts. What will we do for our sister on the day she is spoken for?" [Shir Hashirim 8:8]. Rashi explains that this refers to when the Gentiles make a plan to destroy us. "I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers" [8:10]. This refers to the synagogues and study halls which provide the words of Torah to Yisrael. "Then I will be seen in His eyes as one who provides peace" [ibid]. © 2012 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

“The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and they placed hard work upon us.” (26:6)

R' Yehoshua z"l (1819-1873; the "Ostrova Rebbe"; known as the "Toldot Adam") explains that this verse alludes to both the physical and spiritual oppressions which the Egyptians oppressed our ancestors. "The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us"-physically. "And they placed hard avodah/work upon us"- they caused our avodah/service to Hashem to be difficult. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Admorei Biala-Ostrova) © 2001 S. Katz and Project Genesis, Inc.



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