

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The 26th chapter of Vayikra sets out with stunning clarity the terms of Jewish life under the covenant.

On the one hand, there is an idyllic picture of the blessing of divine favour. If Israel follows G-d's decrees and keeps His commands, there will be rain, the earth will yield its fruit, there will be peace, the people will flourish, they will have children, and the Divine presence will be in their midst. G-d will make them free. "I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high."

The other side of the equation, though, is terrifying: the curses that will befall the nation should the Israelites fail to honour their mission as a holy nation: "But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands ... I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it ... If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze ... I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled ... As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them. (Lev. 26: 14-36)

Read in its entirety, this passage is more like Holocaust literature than anything else. The repeated phrases – "If after all this . . . If despite this . . . If despite everything" – come like hammer-blows of fate. It is a passage shattering in its impact, all the more so since so much of it came true at various times in Jewish history. Yet the curses end with the most profound promise of ultimate consolation. Despite everything G-d will not break His covenant with the Jewish people. Collectively they will be eternal. They may suffer, but

**Please keep in mind
Binyomin Simcha ben Adina Minya
for a refuah shelaima**

they will never be destroyed. They will undergo exile but eventually they will return.

Stated with the utmost drama, this is the logic of covenant. Unlike other conceptions of history or politics, covenant sees nothing inevitable or even natural about the fate of a people. Israel will not follow the usual laws of the rise and fall of civilizations. The Jewish people were not to see their national existence in terms of cosmology, written into the structure of the universe, immutable and fixed for all time, as did the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians. Nor were they to see their history as cyclical, a matter of growth and decline. Instead, it would be utterly dependent on moral considerations. If Israel stayed true to its mission, it would flourish. If it drifted from its vocation, it would suffer defeat after defeat.

Only one other nation in history has consistently seen its fate in similar terms, namely the United States. The influence of the Hebrew Bible on American history – carried by the Pilgrim Fathers and reiterated in presidential rhetoric ever since – was decisive. Here is how one writer described the faith of Abraham Lincoln: We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world. Those principles and commitments are the core of American identity, the soul of the body politic. They make the American nation unique, and uniquely valuable, among and to the other nations. But the other side of the conception contains a warning very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.¹

Covenantal politics is moral politics, driving an elemental connection between the fate of a nation and its vocation. This is statehood as a matter not of power but of ethical responsibility.

One might have thought that this kind of politics robbed a nation of its freedom. Spinoza argued just this. "This, then, was the object of the ceremonial law," he wrote, "that men should do nothing of their own free will, but should always act under external authority, and should continually confess by their actions and thoughts that they were not their own masters."²

¹ John Schaar, *Legitimacy and the Modern State*, 291.

² Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ch. 5.

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

However, in this respect, Spinoza was wrong. Covenant theology is emphatically a politics of liberty.

What is happening in Vayikra 26 is an application to a nation as a whole of the proposition G-d spelled out to individuals at the beginning of human history: Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen. 4:6-7)

The choice – G-d is saying – is in your hands. You are free to do what you choose. But actions have consequences. You cannot overeat and take no exercise, and at the same time stay healthy. You cannot act selfishly and win the respect of other people. You cannot allow injustices to prevail and sustain a cohesive society. You cannot let rulers use power for their own ends without destroying the basis of a free and gracious social order. There is nothing mystical about these ideas. They are eminently intelligible. But they are also, and inescapably, moral.

I brought you from slavery to freedom – says G-d – and I empower you to be free. But I cannot and will not abandon you. I will not intervene in your choices, but I will instruct you on what choices you ought to make. I will teach you the constitution of liberty.

The first and most important principle is this: A nation cannot worship itself and survive. Sooner or later, power will corrupt those who wield it. If fortune favours it and it grows rich, it will become self-indulgent and eventually decadent. Its citizens will no longer have the courage to fight for their liberty, and it will fall to another, more Spartan power.

If there are gross inequalities, the people will lack a sense of the common good. If government is high-handed and non-accountable, it will fail to command the loyalty of the people. None of this takes away your freedom. It is simply the landscape within which freedom is to be exercised. You may choose this way or that, but not all paths lead to the same destination.

To stay free, a nation must worship something greater than itself, nothing less than G-d, together with the belief that all human beings are created in His

image. Self-worship on a national scale leads to totalitarianism and the extinction of liberty. It took the loss of more than 100 million lives in the twentieth century to remind us of this truth.

In the face of suffering and loss, there are two fundamentally different questions an individual or nation can ask, and they lead to quite different outcomes. The first is, "What did I, or we, do wrong?" The second is, "Who did this to us?" It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the fundamental choice governing the destinies of people.

The latter leads inescapably to what is today known as the victim culture. It locates the source of evil outside oneself. Someone else is to blame. It is not I or we who are at fault, but some external cause. The attraction of this logic can be overpowering. It generates sympathy. It calls for, and often evokes, compassion. It is, however, deeply destructive. It leads people to see themselves as objects, not subjects. They are done to, not doers; passive, not active. The results are anger, resentment, rage and a burning sense of injustice. None of these, however, ever leads to freedom, since by its very logic this mindset abdicates responsibility for the current circumstances in which one finds oneself. Blaming others is the suicide of liberty.

Blaming oneself, by contrast, is difficult. It means living with constant self-criticism. It is not a route to peace of mind. Yet it is profoundly empowering. It implies that, precisely because we accept responsibility for the bad things that have happened, we also have the ability to chart a different course in the future. Within the terms set by covenant, the outcome depends on us. That is the logical geography of hope, and it rests on the choice Moses was later to define in these words:

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30: 19)

One of the most profound contributions Torah made to the civilization of the West is this: that the destiny of nations lies not in the externalities of wealth or power, fate or circumstance, but in moral responsibility: the responsibility for creating and sustaining a society that honours the image of G-d within each of its citizens, rich and poor, powerful or powerless alike.

The politics of responsibility is not easy. The curses of Vayikra 26 are the very reverse of comforting. Yet the profound consolations with which they end are not accidental, nor are they wishful thinking. They are testimony to the power of the human spirit when summoned to the highest vocation. A nation that sees itself as responsible for the evils that befall it, is also a nation that has an inextinguishable power of recovery and return. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And you shall count for yourselves seven cycles of Sabbatical years, seven years, seven times... forty-nine years... you shall sanctify the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants; it shall be the Jubilee year for you." (Leviticus 25:8-10) This commandment to count seven cycles of Sabbatical years leading up to the 50th Jubilee year of proclaiming freedom throughout the land, is clearly reminiscent of the biblical commands we read last week (Parshat Emor): "Count for yourselves [from the day of your bringing the barley 'omer wave offering] seven complete weeks... you shall count fifty days..." from the day after our exodus from Egypt until the Festival of the first fruits (bikkurim), the festival commemorating the Revelation of G-d's Torah at Sinai (Lev. 23:15-17).

What is the significance of this striking parallelism between the counting of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot and the counting of the seven sabbatical years leading up to the Jubilee year? What is the true message behind the daily count of sefirat ha'omer, the period which we are currently marking?

There are three words which express the concept of freedom: hofesh, dror and herut. Hofesh appears in the Book of Exodus (21:2) in the context of the Hebrew slave leaving the homestead of his owner; at the end of his sixth year of employ he becomes (hofshi hinam), "completely free," without any obligation whatsoever to his former master.

The second word, dror, has just been cited in our present reading of Behar, in which "freedom" (dror) is to be proclaimed throughout the land on the advent of the Jubilee year.

But the Festival of Passover, which celebrates our exodus from Egyptian servitude, is referred to by our Sages as zman herutenu, the time of our herut – a non-biblical word with Aramaic roots that connotes freedom. Why do our Sages pass over the two biblical Hebrew words hofesh and dror in describing our Festival of Freedom in favor of herut?

In his illuminating study *Escape from Freedom*, the philosopher and political theorist Erich Fromm (1900-1980) distinguishes between freedom from something and freedom for something. The former—the mere ridding oneself of duties and obligations—will, at best, produce a monotonous existence of boredom, aimlessness, and sometimes even depression; at worst, it will lead to alcohol and drug addiction, wild licentiousness and even criminal acts of depravity. Many societies would rather succumb to a totalitarian regime of enslavement rather than risk the challenges of the responsibility of freedom.

It is from this vantage point that Viktor Frankl

(1905-1997), author of *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* and founder of the branch of psychoanalysis which he calls "logotherapy," insists that the most essential human drive is not a search for pleasure, as Freud would maintain, or a search for power, as Adler and Jung suggest. Rather, it is the search for meaning, the human need to carve out a life of significance and worthwhile purpose. Freedom from enslavement must be linked indelibly with the belief of the individual that he/she is empowered to forge for him/herself a life dedicated to an important goal and purpose.

Hence, our Bible begins with the creation of the world, positing that every human being is created "in the image of G-d," with a portion of the Lord on High within the very essence of his/her being," so that he/she becomes commanded (and thereby empowered) to "develop the earth and preserve it," to "perfect the imperfect world in the Kingship of the Divine" (Gen. 1:27; 2:7, 15 and the Aleinu prayer).

By reliving G-d's primordial week of creation during our human weekly cycle of "working the world" for six days and resting in G-d's presence on the seventh, we hopefully rekindle our task to perfect the world as G-d's partners every single week! And hofesh is our freedom of choice not to do whatever we wish but rather to choose good over evil, G-d over Satan, creation over destruction.

Hence the word dror is used to express the period of human perfection, redemption (ge'ula), described in our Jubilee year, when all slaves will be freed, when everyone's land will provide sufficient produce for all, when all debts will be rescinded, when everyone will be returned to their ancestral homestead, when all the needy of the world will be sustained by their communities. Dror is the purpose for which Israel and humanity was created; the society and world which Israel and humanity must recreate.

Our Sages refer to the time of our liberation from Egyptian enslavement as herut, which derives from the Hebrew ahrayut, responsibility: the responsibility of freedom for, the responsibility of accepting the formidable task of partnership with the Divine, the responsibility of protecting our brothers (ahim), the responsibility of protecting every stranger (aher) who is also our brother under G-d, the responsibility of going first and saying "aharai" (after me), and the responsibility of bringing the world to its aharit hayamim, the final stage of redemption, the Messianic Age.

And so, as soon as we became free, we started to count; only for a free person does every day count, only for a free person is every day fraught with infinite possibilities of productivity and meaning. We count until we receive our Torah, which is our blueprint for the creation of a perfected world. ©2015 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The blessings in the portion of Behukotai reach toward their crescendo with the words "and I will walk among you and will be your G-d, and you shall be My people." (Leviticus 26:13) This penultimate gift that is promised is not a material one, it is rather a spiritual one that has extraordinary benefits.

Having G-d among us is a necessary prerequisite for the world to be ethical. After all, in bringing G-d back into the world, one makes a commitment to the ethical laws - the seven Noahide laws and their offshoots. (See Nachmanides, Genesis 34: 13) No doubt, even without G-d, there can be individuals who live very ethical lives. Yet, for the world at large to be ethical, G-d's presence is critical. Without G-d, ethics would be based on human reason which can be relative. Philosophies borne out of human reason can often emerge that declare ethical, what we certainly know to be unethical. But an ethical system based on G-d's laws is inviolate and can never be altered.

G-d's presence is also a crucial antidote to personal suffering. The price of living is that all of us, at one time or another, must suffer. The question is not why do we hurt; rather the question is, when feeling pain, do we sense the presence of G-d, a presence which makes even the difficult moments livable.

As we all know, sickness is part of the fabric of life. This world is not made up of the sick and the well, but of the sick and the not yet sick. The worst part of sickness is being alone in sickness. How I remember being wheeled into the hospital room for bypass surgery. At a particular moment, my loving family had no choice but to leave my side. As I was placed on the surgical table, I felt alone, so deeply alone. But right then I sensed the closeness of G-d. If you feel G-d, then even in difficult times, when it might seem that G-d is acting kindly, you still sense the closeness of the Divine.

From a mystical perspective, connecting with G-d makes G-d fully one. The masters of Kabbalah argue that G-d above is separated from the part of G-d which is in each of us. In this approach, the inner G-dliness we all possess intrinsically yearns to reunite with G-d above, like a lover seeking out the beloved. The Kabbalists argue that only when the image of G-d in all of humankind fuses with the G-d above, does G-d, as He is manifest in this world, become one. In the words of the prophet Zachariah, "on that day, the Lord will be one and his name will be one." (14:9) The implication is that until that point, G-d, as He is present in the world, is not yet one.

Too often it is the case that we measure blessings by material benefits. What the Torah suggests is that the highest blessing is Divine

accompaniment, an accompaniment that guides us with a sense of our ethical mission and a feeling of love and spiritual comfort. ©2012 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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The emphasis that the Torah places on the location – Mount Sinai – where Moshe received the Torah and its commandments, and the particular commandment regarding the observance of a sabbatical year, has been an issue of much interest to the commentators on the Torah over the ages. Rashi, quoting the famous rabbinic dictum, states that the words "Mount Sinai" indicate to us that just as this particular commandment of the sabbatical year was taught to Moshe on Mount Sinai so too are we to understand that all of the commandments of Judaism emanate from the revelation at Mount Sinai.

But perhaps there is another nuanced lesson here in the mentioning of Mount Sinai, as being the location where this commandment regarding the sabbatical year was first uttered and delivered. The Sinai desert is one of the most barren and inhospitable geographic areas on our globe. The Torah itself describes it as a great, awesome and frightening place, parched of water and short of sustenance, a place of snakes and scorpions.

To speak of a sabbatical year in this context, where and when fields and crops are not to be tended to, seems at first glance to be incongruous, to say the least. We could understand the statement of such a commandment when the Jewish people stood on the brink of entering the Land of Israel or, even more so, when they actually entered the land.

Hearing the command of letting one's fields lie fallow for a year while living in a trackless and arid desert certainly seems to be strange. But the Torah, which is eternal and not bound by time or place, comes to teach us an important lesson regarding life generally and Jewish life particularly.

I had a friend and congregant of mine during my years as a rabbi in Miami Beach fifty years ago. He was a Holocaust survivor, a man of material wealth and clever intellect. He once told me that he was a very wealthy man in Hungary before World War II. In the very late 1930s he visited the Land of Israel and on a whim purchased an apartment here in Jerusalem.

In late summer 1944, together with hundreds of thousands of other Hungarian Jews, he and his family were deported to Auschwitz His family could not survive the ordeal, though somehow he did remain alive, and eventually he rebuilt his life and once again created a family and material success in America.

He told me that every night in the barracks of

the labor camp, to which he was assigned, lying on the wooden pallet that served as his bed, in his mind he furnished the apartment that he purchased in Jerusalem. In his mind, he bought the finest furniture and wall coverings and arranged them so that the apartment shone in splendor, good taste and elegance.

He said it was this imaginary scene of the better tomorrow that kept him alive and gave him the spiritual and mental fortitude not to give up completely and just pass away, as unfortunately so many others did. To survive the desert of Sinai the Jewish people had to imagine the lush fields of the Land of Israel and a sabbatical year that would bring blessing and prosperity upon those fields and their owners.

The Torah emphasizes to us that the sabbatical year was commanded to Israel in a forbidding and dark place because of the fact that it would give hope, optimism and vision for the great blessings of the Land of Israel that they would yet live to experience. ©2015 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

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

There are four types of people [regarding how they view possessions]. One who says, 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours,' this is the in-between characteristic, and some say this is the characteristic of S'dom (who were punished because of their cruelty). [One who says,] 'what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine' is a peasant. [One who says,] 'what's mine is yours and what's yours is yours' is pious. [One who says,] 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine' is wicked." This Mishnah (Avos 5:10) may seem rather straightforward, but leaves us with one glaring question; if treating one's own possessions as their own is S'dom-like (treating the possessions of others as belonging to those others would seem to be fine, as that is also how one who is "pious" treats them), and treating one's own possessions as if it belongs to others is considered piety, what would be considered "normal," neither wicked nor pious?

Meiri, without posing this question, provides two separate answers. First, he tells us that there aren't really two separate opinions about one who says "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours," as each refers to different circumstances. If letting others have/use one's things causes a loss, then it is not considered "S'dom-like." In circumstances where letting others use them will not bring about any loss, on the other hand, not letting them use them is a form of cruelty. Although this answers our original question, as piety could refer to letting others have/use things even if there will be a loss whereas the non-wicked-but-not-

pious-either are unwilling to sustain a loss, it raises other issues.

For one thing, the wording of "and some say it is the characteristic of S'dom" indicates that both "opinions" are referring to the exact same circumstances (otherwise, it should have said "and if there is no loss involved, it is the characteristic of S'dom"). Secondly, it is not clear that the people of S'dom denied others of things even though it didn't adversely affect them. True, they would have had enough to eat even if they allowed passers-by to eat from their bountiful land, but wasn't their fear that if they allowed some to eat, then many, many others would follow, which would impact how much they would have left? How much money (that is not currently needed) can one have in the bank for it to still be considered a loss if it is given to others instead? Wouldn't feeding visitors, or letting passers-by eat from their land, automatically mean incurring some kind of loss? Is allowing the demand to increase without increasing the supply proportionally, thereby causing prices to rise, considered a loss? When the men of S'dom attacked Lot for having visitors, wasn't Lot feeding them from his own food, thereby incurring a loss rather than just allowing others to benefit from his possessions without being left with less after they benefited? Was there sin not allowing Lot to feed his visitors even though it wouldn't affect anyone's bottom line except Lot? Circling back, weren't they afraid that it would also affect their bottom line if visitors started coming to town? In other words, we can understand what their wickedness was if (conceptually) it extends to not being willing to suffer a loss, or to risk suffering a loss, to help others. But by differentiating between having a loss (saying that in such circumstances keeping your own things to yourself is not "S'dom-like") and not having less because of it, the wickedness of S'dom becomes harder to pinpoint (practically, not theoretically) unless it refers to their unwillingness to have less, or to risk having less, at some point in the future -- which then requires parameters for how much we are allowed to save for the future and/or what financial risks we must take before being guilty of acting cruelly. [It should be noted that this issue is not limited to Meiri's approach, as several other commentators also understand S'dom's wickedness as refusing to let others benefit even though no loss is incurred. Nevertheless, since we are discussing whether Meiri's approach provides a satisfactory answer to the issue raised, any issue with this approach must be raised here as well.]

Whereas other commentators understand the piety of one who says "what's mine is yours and what's yours is yours" to be based on his treating his own things as if it belongs to others (since the "what's yours is yours" part is shared by the non-pious first category), Meiri has the piety more closely tied to the "what's yours is yours" part. This is because he understands

the second category ("what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine) as being the norm, i.e. the way most people look at things, since most realize that we are all dependent on others. If the contrast between "piousness" and being "regular" is between accepting help from others or not accepting any help rather than between helping others and not helping others (with not helping others being cruel), then our question has been answered. However, the overwhelming majority of commentators understand the term "am ha'aretz" to be a derogatory one (denoting an unlearned peasant), and treating the possessions of others as if they are yours and yours as if they belong to others to be misguided rather than the "middle road" between being pious or wicked.

[Although we are much closer to Shavuot than to Purim, it could be suggested that the answer to our question can be based on whether one is a capitalist or a socialist. More specifically, the opinion that "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" is "the average characteristic" can be attributed to those who support capitalism and the opinion that it is "S'dom-like" to those who support socialism. Capitalists see the "norm" as having clearly defined "owners," so pious capitalists will honor those boundaries by not taking or using anything that belongs to someone else yet will offer what belongs to them to others. Socialists see the "norm" as everybody sharing everything equally ("what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine"), with the pious ones offering what's theirs to others without using what had, or would have, belonged to others. (Bartenura and Rabbeinu Yonah seem to understand the perspective of the "am ha'aretz" as something close to socialism, with the term being a derogatory one.)]

The assumption the question I posed is based on is that there must be a "middle ground," a path one can take to avoid doing what's wrong without having to go beyond what's required. And this would seem to be the way the first opinion of "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" understands it, as a "middle ground." The second opinion, though, that having this attitude is "S'dom-like," disagrees, and the question is therefore what the "middle ground" is according to this opinion. However, several commentators (e.g. Bartenura) don't explain this second opinion as having such an attitude being "S'dom-like," but that having such an attitude can easily lead one to develop a "S'dom-like" attitude, i.e. being unwilling to help others when they need it. Since the need to give charity is not what's under discussion (see Midrash Sh'muel), as that will be discussed in a later Mishnah (5:13), and not giving charity to those who need it would be classified (by all) as being wicked, the kind of sharing being discussed here is with those who have the wherewithal to provide for themselves. Therefore, not providing from one's own resources is not problematic, just not pious. However, because such an attitude can morph into also

not providing for those who cannot provide for themselves, this "middle ground" is not recommended.

Whether there are really two opinions (one that is okay with this "middle ground" and one that isn't), or, (as some explain it), it is really one opinion that fleshes things out, the bottom line is that even according to the opinion that having such an attitude can lead to being "S'dom-like" (as opposed to the attitude itself being S'dom-like) there is a "middle ground." Nevertheless, since this middle ground is wrought with danger, developing a more pious attitude is highly recommended, if not necessary. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"**A**nd I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you." (Vayikra 26:33) Parashas Ki Savo in Sefer Devarim is read just in advance of Rosh Hashanah to remind us that there is a Judge in Heaven Who judges man on earth. It reminds us of the cause-and-effect relationship built into Creation, of our responsibility to uphold it, and of our culpability when we fail. Bechukosai, the other "fire-and-brimstone" parshah, is read in advance of the holiday of Shavuot to remind us where we received the responsibility for which we are judged on Rosh Hashanah.

It's complicated. Punishment is not only in response to the sins that are performed, but also for how punishment is carried out. It seems, from the Talmud, that Heaven is also concerned about appearances: "Rebi Yossi ben Chanina said: [The verse says,] 'Like the flame that goes forth from between the potsherds, I looked, and behold a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud with a fire flashing up, so that a brightness was round about it; and out of the midst thereof as the color of Chashmal, out of the midst of the fire' (Yechezkel 1:4). Where did it go? Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: 'It went to subdue the whole world under the wicked Nebuchadnetzar.' For what reason? So that the peoples of the world should not say, 'The Holy One, Blessed is He, delivered His children into the hand of a lowly people.' ' The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, 'Who caused Me to be a servant to idol worshippers? The sins of the Jewish people caused Me.'" (Chagigah 13b)

The verse is part of the vision of "Ma'aseh Merkavah" that Yechezkel had and described. The fire, of course, was spiritual and very Kabbalistic, but its impact on history was to assist Nebuchadnetzar in his takeover of the known world of that time. This is what G-d meant when He referred to Himself as "servant to idol worshippers."

What compelled G-d to act in this seemingly peculiar manner? The fact that the Jewish people were on their way to exile in Bavel -- Babylonia -- over which Nebuchadnetzar was king and ruler. It would have

looked "bad" for G-d and the Jewish people had they been exiled to Bavel and Nebuchadnetzar not become the feared conquerer that he became. If they were going to be exiled, it had to be to a place "worthy" of conquering G-d's people.

You would think that it wouldn't even make a difference at that point. If the Jewish nation reached a level where they became in need of exile, didn't they also reach a point where G-d should have turn His back on them? Yosef HaTzaddik may have gone into his exile in style, but it was just the opposite case for his descendants, especially those who were taken in chains to Bavel.

Is the idea literal? If yes, does it always apply? It would explain why the Greeks conquered their world before exiling the Jews of their time, and the Roman Empire spread vast and wide before doing the same. Is it the reason for Hitler's, ysv"z, unprecedented and "miraculous" takeover of Europe as he prepared the way for the Holocaust? If yes, then this would lend new and frightful meaning to the following: "All punishment comes to the world because of the Jewish people." (Yevamos 63a)

We might have thought that the "chicken" came before the "egg," but in this case, the opposite appears to be true. We watched nations become more powerful and then assumed that they just "happened" to overrun the Jewish people along their way to domination. The assumption has been that the Jewish people just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Apparently not. Apparently we should be able to predict history by the extent to which we, as a nation, backslide. If it is only a little then we can expect peace and international cooperation. If it is a lot and even catastrophic then we can expect some nation to emerge on the international scene in a block buster kind of way and have crazy success at subduing its enemies and increasing its reach of terror.

The relationship between what we do spiritually and what our enemies accomplish militarily, the Talmud is saying, is direct: "Onkelos the son of Kolonikos was the son of Titus's sister. He wanted to convert to Judaism, and went and raised Titus from the dead by magical arts and asked him, 'Who is most in repute in the [other] world?'

"He replied, 'The Jewish people.'

"What about joining them?' he asked.

"He answered, 'Their observances are burdensome and you will not be able to carry them out. Go and attack them in that world and you will be at the top, as it is written, 'Her adversaries have become the head, etc.' (Eichah 1:5). [This means that] whoever harasses the Jewish people becomes the most powerful nation." (Gittin 56b)

So direct is the correlation that we ought to pay serious attention to the rise of evil powers, especially the ones which are "gunning" for us. It should inspires

to do some serious teshuvah, and quickly:

"An official close to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei asserted that his government has a godly ordained right to annihilate Israel, Al Arabiya reported on Tuesday. The 'government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has divine permission to destroy Israel,' said Mojtaba Zolnour, a Khamenei representative in the elite Revolutionary Guards. According to semi-official state news agency Fars, Zolnour said that, 'the Noble Koran permits the Islamic Republic of Iran to destroy Israel.' He added that, 'Even if Iran gives up its nuclear program, it will not weaken this country's determination to destroy Israel.'" (The Algemeiner, May 13, 2015)

As the article says, such threats are nothing new coming from Iran. They have spewed forth from the mouths of Iranian leaders ever since the Shah was deposed and replaced by the ayatollahs. They have never made any secret of their dreams and plans to eradicate the Jewish state. This is why PM Netanyahu takes them at their word and is fighting to move the world to as well.

What is different today is President Obama. Just as he did a 180 regarding the Arab world when he first came into office, he has done one now with respect to Iran and its nuclear program. The Western world in the late 1930s could not deal with the Nazi threat, and were not prepared to fight against it, so they pursued a path of appeasement. Rogue nations are causing the same problem today and once again, appeasement is becoming the accepted means to maintaining world peace.

President Obama's approach to Iran and Islam in general is so off-base in so many obvious ways that it becomes credible, for many, because it is just too incredible otherwise. The world had Iran where it wanted, at least on the ropes, when the American government decided to capitulate and pursue a path of peace. Perhaps, just as 9/11 made the current Administration think that improving relations with the Arabs while distancing itself from the Israelis would make a more secure America, it thinks the same about Iran as well.

I think this is also the reason why the President had a tough time using the "G" word with respect to the Armenian massacre by the Ottoman Empire starting in 1915. The Armenians are big on this, and it really matters a lot to them for current leaders to acknowledge the genocidal part of their past. Instead, President Obama talked around it and refused to state the simple and obvious fact.

Why? Because the Ottoman Empire in that part of the world evolved into the Republic of Turkey, an American and Nato ally. It is also an Islamic state, though a secular one. Obama can't use the "G" word because, as always, he is terrified of offending the "A" world. In true liberal fashion, he appeases the enemy while shunning the ally.

But that's not the main point here. In this discussion it matters less why the American President is empowering the Iranians than it does that he is. The fact that it is against logic makes it even more important, applying the verse, "This is from G-d, that which is wondrous in our eyes" (Tehillim 118:23). The wondrousness of a historical event is what makes it appear more like overt Divine Providence.

Ironically, it was unusual circumstances that put another Democrat, President Truman, into Office just at the time the Jewish people needed an advocate in the White House back in 1948. It is a Democrat as well who has also come to Office as a result of unusual and even questionable circumstances, just at a time that the Jewish people, apparently, require an antagonist in the White House.

This is not to absolve the US President of any blame for what he has done and plans to do. This is to shift the focus to the real issue at hand. Though it is the American President who is empowering a Jewish enemy, it is the Jewish people who are empowering the American President, and Kabbalah explains how.

It is a long and complex discussion, but this is the long and short of it.

Though gas fuels cars, what fuels gas? Though electricity moves heavy things, what moves electricity? Energy. What is energy? Well, it's... it's... something we find in gas and electricity and in people as well that gives things life and lets them move. We don't know exactly what it is, but we are well acquainted with what it can do.

The reason why science cannot adequately define energy is because they are trying to understand it in physical terms. Energy is not physical but spiritual, holy sparks of Divine light to be exact. They are in everything that exists and animate all that lives.

Including evil, because just as gasoline fuels a car that is used to help others in need, likewise does gasoline fuel getaway cars used for robbing banks. One source of fuel with both a good and potentially bad application. One source of life, but it can be used to do good or to do evil.

To maintain free will, evil has to exist. To maintain evil, holy sparks have to be shared. This is something G-d has established and oversees, to make sure that evil gets only as many sparks as it needs to do its part to help man exercise free will, and not more. Evil exists, but it can be kept in check and used as a vehicle to earn reward in the World-to-Come.

If evil becomes overly dominant in society it is because it has gained access to additional holy sparks, more than its Divinely-allotted amount. Somehow the Divinely-established balance has been lost, and history has shown us what happens to the world and man when that occurs.

How can that happen? Kabbalah explains that the additional holy sparks feeding evil can only come

from the Jewish people, from the sins they commit. Either they are doing things they shouldn't, or not doing things they should. Even doing the right thing at the wrong time or in the wrong place feeds holiness to evil.

How do we know when this is happening? We first learn this lesson from Ya'akov Avinu: "He heard Lavan's sons saying, 'Ya'akov has taken everything that belonged to our father; from our father he has gained so much.' Ya'akov saw Lavan's face, and it wasn't the same as before." (Bereishis 31:1-2)

Anti-Semitism is the key. When dislike of Jews increases it is a sign that evil is getting stronger in the world, and that it is getting more than its due of holy sparks. That is when it is time to do some serious national introspection, and to find ways to stem the flow of holy sparks to the side of evil before it overcomes the side of good. ©2015 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And when you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another" (Leviticus 25:14). The Sforno (to verse 17) comments that the Almighty is G-d of the buyer and G-d of the seller and He does not want anyone to cheat a buyer or a seller.

When selling something to another person or when buying from someone, if you keep in mind that the Creator is also that person's G-d you will be very careful not to deceive him in any manner. If the son of an emperor or of a president of a powerful nation would purchase something from you or sell you something, you would be extremely careful not to cheat him. Either you would have respect for his father and out of that respect you would be honest with him or you would fear retribution if you would deceive him -- and his father found out!

This should be our attitude in our monetary dealings with other people. The Almighty is their Heavenly Father and He commands you to be honest with them. Either out of respect for the Almighty or out of fear of Him, you should be meticulously careful not to cheat another person in any way. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin. ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

