

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and G-d.

Their parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, "We will do and obey all that G-d has declared" (Ex. 24:7). But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation and all future generations will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, "G-d made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound." That is why Moses says: It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our G-d, and with whoever is not here with us today. (Deut. 29:13-14)

"Whoever is not here" cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means "generations not yet born." That is why the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai*, "foresworn from Sinai."¹

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat* or *bar mitzvah* is not a "confirmation." It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today," meaning all future generations.

But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you

can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today's parsha. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born.² However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since G-d's covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to G-d?³

But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us can we give our consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: why be Jewish? What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before? Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, "Why be Jewish?" did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

² Shavuot 39a.

³ Isaac Arama, *Akedat Yitzhak*, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim.

¹ Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a.

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
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In fifteenth century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its Kristallnacht in 1391, and from then on until the expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*.⁴ But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19).

Choose life. No religion, no civilization, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.⁵ We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients with their belief in fate, fortune, moira, ananke, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature, did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says No. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct – what Freud took to be the mark of civilization? Can you practise self-control – according to the

"marshmallow test", the surest sign of future success in life?⁶ To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with G-d, become co-authors of our lives. "We have to be free", said Isaac Bashevis Singer, "we have no choice!"

Choose life. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with G-d, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find G-d down here on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks, not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

It does not deny pleasure. Judaism is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find G-d not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study and acts of kindness, in community, hospitality and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on whom G-d has set his image and likeness. We are the people G-d has chosen to be his partners in the work of creation. We are the nation G-d married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people G-d called on to be his witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth.

We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because G-d values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods

⁴ Published in Britain as *Radical then, Radical now*.

⁵ *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5:2.

⁶ Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, Bantam Press, 2014.

they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that "Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath ... but also with those who are not with us today." His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much greater than ourselves we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Behold, I give before you this day the life and the good, the death and the evil... blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your seed..." (Deut. 30:15, 19) What does it mean, to "choose life"? Is it an individual choice as to whether one lives or dies? I believe it worthy of note to raise another linguistic curiosity within this context: the Hebrew word hayyim (life) is a plural noun, ending in the two Hebrew letters yod and mem to signal the plural case. I do not know of any other language in which the word for "life" is a plural form: Why here? The Hassidim have a cute play on words which provides an interesting insight explaining the composition of the Hebrew word for "life"- on an occasion of joy (engagement, marriage, birth), it is only when drinking wine or liquor that we cry out, le'hayyim, "to life." Why not also say le'hayyim when drinking water, which is so basic to the formation of life (remember the amniotic fluids which "break" before an impending birth) and to its continuity?

They answer that the Hebrew word for wine, yayin, has two yods, as does the Hebrew word for liquor, yash (literally, yayin saraf, "fiery wine"). The Hebrew letter yod is phonetically and homiletically tied to Yid (Yehudi), or "Jew"- a toast usually being invoked to celebrate two Jews coming together in marriage, in joining for a birth celebration, or generally within the familial context of kiddush on Friday evening. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, has only one yod, and G-d Himself has declared that "it is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Hence, say the Hassidim, the Hebrew word for life consists of four letters, the exterior letters being het and mem, spelling hom; warmth, love - surrounding two yods completely together and not separated by any other letter. And the beverages which go along with the

toast also require two yods together, as in the Hebrew words yayin and yash.

Despite the sweetness of this explanation, allow me to present an alternative interpretation, which proves a profound theological truth at the same time. In attempting to pictorially describe the creation of the human being, the Bible states: "And the Lord G-d had formed the human being [Adam] of dust from the ground, and He exhaled into his nostrils the soul [breath] of life, making the human a living being" (Gen. 2:7) Apparently the Bible is here explaining in more graphic language the difficult term tzelem Elokim, image of G-d, used in the first creation chapter, "And G-d created the human being [Adam] in His image, in the image of G-d created He him..." (Gen. 1:27). The Sacred Zohar adds a crucial dimension to the imagery of G-d's exhalation into the nostrils of the clay-dust form: "Whoever exhales, exhales from within himself," from the innermost "stuff" of his essential being.

What this teaches us is arguably the most important insight into the essence of the human being defined by the Bible, the one element which qualitatively separates the human from all other creatures of the earth: a "portion" of G-d from on High resides within every human being, to which the Tanya (written by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, late 18th century, known as the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement) adds: mamash, really, palpably, within the very physical human being "resides" the spiritual essence of the Divine, the eternal and transcendent soul.

This idea has enormous ramifications as to how we see the human being, as to how we look upon ourselves. The human being is indeed a composite creature; homo natura and homo persona (see R. Soloveitchik, Family Redeemed), a part of the natural world with many of the instincts and limitations of the other physical creatures, but at the same time apart from the natural world, endowed with a portion of Divinity which enables him to create, to change, to love, to transcend both himself as well as the physical world into which he was created; the portion of G-d within the human being lives eternally just as the G-d without and beyond is eternal, and empowers the human being to perfect G-d's world and redeem G-d's world.

The challenge facing each of us is which aspect of our beings we choose to develop, the bestial or the celestial. Idolatry idealized the physical, the bestial: power (Jupiter), speed (Mercury), physical beauty (Venus), a golden calf; Judaism commands that we idealize the spiritual, the celestial: love, compassion, loving kindness, truth... The good news is that to help us in this existential struggle within ourselves is that very portion of G-d from on High who dwells within us, and that the human being is never alone, that G-d is always with us, within us, the still small voice which we must listen for and hearken to.

That is why the Hebrew word for life, hayyim, is a plural noun; the "soul of life" is the G-d who resides within each of us, the essence of our personalities to whom we must return and with whom we must live if we are to realize our truest human potential, if we are to truly live eternally, together with our progeny in a perfecting world. ©2015 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the more obvious lessons taught to us by the book of Dvarim is the eternity and immutability of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. There are all sorts of difficulties and tragedies forecast for the Jewish people from the time of Moshe forward. And, unfortunately, these sad events have all come to pass.

Nevertheless, nowhere is it indicated that the covenant between G-d and Israel will be broken or ended. There will be punishment galore for violating the covenant but the covenant itself remains untouched, viable and binding for all eternity. It is this understanding of the covenant that makes the situation and history of the Jewish people so unique and singular.

Deep down in our inner souls we are all aware that we are bound to one another and to our Creator by this unchanging and unbreakable covenant. It haunts us in our daily and national lives. It is the unseen hand of our diplomatic and foreign policy. It alone explains the survival of the Jewish people throughout all of the vicissitudes of our long and painful history.

It alone explains why there are currently well over six million Jews living in the State of Israel in spite of all the inherent superficial problems and dangers that this poses. We may, in weak moments, not live up to our obligations under the covenant, but we have never truly forsaken it nor believed that it could somehow be annulled or canceled.

The reinforcement of this idea by Moshe in his final oration to the Jewish people is meant to reassert the timelessness and effectiveness of this covenant. This message reverberates in our ears and hearts to this very day.

Usually, covenants and contracts are mutually dependent. A breach of the covenant by one of the parties almost automatically frees the other party from its obligations. However G-d's covenant with Israel is an exception to this rule. We have breached the covenant many times but we are all aware that somehow the Lord is still bound on His end of the deal.

This is implicit in the words of the prophet Malachi that "I, the Lord, have not changed, and you, the people of Israel have not been destroyed." G-d, so to speak, will not backtrack on His end of the covenant. Therefore it should be apparent that we cannot avoid

the consequences of that covenant.

We are bound to the covenant because the Lord G-d, the other party, will not allow us to withdraw from its obligations and consequences. It is interesting to note that in spite of centuries of denial by Christianity and Islam, much of the world still believes that there is a covenant between G-d and the Jewish people.

This belief reflects itself in many different ways and attitudes (not all of them positive) of the non-Jewish world to the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Nevertheless, the instinct of humanity reaffirms that the covenant referred to in this week's Torah reading is binding and effective, demanding and challenging. We should also be aware of this truth. ©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

More than any other time of year, the Chazzan (cantor) takes a primary role in the services during the High Holidays. (I can still vividly, and fondly, remember my grandfather, a"h, Oscar Goldman, leading the services at the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills, even joining him at times on the Bimah.) Nevertheless, since there is a "Sh'liyach Tzibbur" all year long, the laws pertaining to who is qualified to lead the services are included in the laws of the daily services (O"C 53). Granted, as the decisors discuss, there might be a higher set of standards at certain times of the year (such as Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur), but the basic guidelines and preferences are listed there. Included is the requirement that the person who leads the services be appropriate, i.e. not a sinner. One of the discussions that stems from these guidelines is about which is more preferable, a Chazzan who is not only righteous himself, but whose parents were also righteous, or one who is righteous despite his parents not being righteous. (For the record, not only did my grandfather have to find a new job every week because he refused to work on Saturdays, but his father, a"h, Nissan Yitzchok, lost a lot of money because he closed a new restaurant he had just opened when he found out that his partner had secretly started to prepare foods to be served Saturday night before Shabbos was over.)

Mishneh B'rurah (53:13), Aruch HaShulchan (53:9) and Magen Avraham (53:8) are among the decisors who say it is preferable for someone who is "righteous the son of someone who is righteous" to lead the services. The basis for this preference is quite straightforward, as we find that even though both Yitzchok and Rivkah beseeched G-d to have children, Yitzchok's prayers were the ones G-d responded to

because his parents were righteous whereas hers were not (see Rashi on B'reishis 25:21). [As a side note, this is clear evidence that Aggadic interpretations have an impact on Jewish law.] Others, e.g. Taz (53:3), Elyah Rabbah (53:16, see also Elyah Zuta 53:11) and Maharshal (Responso 20, Chulin 7:17) say it is preferable for this righteous person to be the son of parents who aren't righteous. Even though only Yitzchok was answered, a differentiation is made between asking for personal needs, where having righteous parents makes it more likely to be answered (due to their merits), and asking on behalf of the community, where the fact that he abandoned the inappropriate lifestyle of his parents is more advantageous. Let's take a closer look at how these factors can make a difference.

It should be noted that, to a large extent, the discussion as to which is preferable is based on how the words of the Rosh, quoted by the Tur, are understood, and how the text reads (whether or not a certain verse is included in the Rosh's reason for discounting it being preferable to come from a distinguished family). Although it seems to me that the Rosh treats the two (having righteous parents and coming from a distinguished family) as two separate things, (so discounting the family's status does not automatically affect the impact of his parents being righteous), some commentators/decisors equate the two, which leads them to prefer a righteous cantor whose parents were not righteous. Nevertheless, despite the necessity of relying on what the Rosh wrote (since following the precedents set forth by earlier decisors is of primary importance when it comes to Jewish law), there must be a rationale behind the different ways the Rosh can be understood.

Is the person who leads the services praying on behalf of the community, or helping the community offer their prayers. Is his role to inspire them, so that their prayers can be more effective, or to represent them before G-d? When Moshe davened on behalf of the nation after the sin of the golden calf, he was answered in his own merit (because of how he would have been impacted had G-d wiped them out, see Ralbag). Since his prayers were answered because of how he was affected by the situation, it follows that the merits of his parents could have played a role as well. Although Moshe likely had enough merits on his own, if a Chazzan is praying for the community, since it becomes -- at least to some extent -- a personal prayer, having righteous parents would be beneficial. This is especially true since some of the prayers are about the community as a whole, which he is a part of; having his prayers answered is also personally beneficial to him, so the merits of his righteous parents will help them be answered -- which in turn benefits the entire community. If, on the other hand, the Chazzan's role is to help the community offer more heartfelt prayers, the

righteousness of his parents is only relevant insofar as it impacts the quality of the prayers of the community. Since knowing that he has become a community leader despite his weaker background may inspire the community to improve more than if his parents were also righteous, a Chazzan with a weaker background is preferred.

[Although I referenced the Maharshal as being of the opinion that it would be preferable to have a Chazzan who was righteous even though his parents weren't, and he does say this in two places, elsewhere (Chullin 1:48) he says that all things being equal (i.e. the level of righteousness of the candidates to lead the services being the same; see Shulchan Aruch HaRav for a more nuanced formula), it's better to hire someone whose parents were also righteous. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Maharshal distinguishes between situations where the Chazzan's main role is to inspire the congregation (such as during the High Holidays), in which case it is better to have someone who overcame a weaker background lead the services, and when his role is to help those who can't pray on their own, and is therefore praying on their behalf, in which case having the extra merits of his parents' righteousness is better.]

To be sure, both aspects are true, as the Chazzan not only represents the community with his prayers, but is also supposed to inspire the community and help raise the quality of their prayers. The question would then be which role takes precedence; if representing the community and praying on their behalf is primary, it would be more beneficial if his parents were righteous too, whereas if inspiring them is primary, being righteous despite his parents not having been is more advantageous. We can add to the mix Shulchan Aruch HaRav's suggestion (53:7) that one whose parents were not righteous is likely to be more humble and offer more heartfelt prayers than one who (thinks he) can rely on his parents' righteousness for his prayers to be answered.

There may be another factor as to why a righteous Chazzan whose parents weren't righteous might be preferred despite the fact that Yitzchok was answered because his parents were also righteous while Rivka wasn't because her parents were not.

Saying that it is preferable to hire one over the other makes it seem as if both are viable options, just that one is better than the other (with the question being which one is preferable). However, in the case of Yitzchok and Rivka, the implication of G-d listening to him and not her is that her prayers weren't answered at all. Not that both offered great prayers, and the prayers of both helped Rivka become pregnant with Yitzchok's accomplishing more because his parents were righteous, but that only his prayers worked, not hers. Previously (<http://tinyurl.com/nblqfs>), I suggested, based on B'reishis Rabbah (60:13), that the reason the

prayers of the righteous whose parents were not righteous are ignored is so that no one will mistakenly attribute the success to the actions or prayers of the wicked parents. [This is especially true in Rivka's case, as her family gave her a blessing for success which included having much offspring (B'reishis 24:60).] It therefore had to be made obvious to all that despite Rivka's constant prayers, she wasn't answered until Yitzchok prayed on her behalf too; her parents had nothing to do with it.

When it comes to leading the services, though, since the prayers made are on behalf of the community, there is little concern that being answered when led by a Chazzan whose parents aren't righteous will be attributed to those unrighteous parents. Therefore, all else being equal, the only factor involved is whether the added merits of the Chazzan's parents helping the Chazzan personally, which by extension helps the congregation, outweighs the benefit of the added inspiration of the Chazzan being righteous despite his weaker background (or vice versa). ©2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Thoughts to Ponder Before Rosh Hashana:

Thought 1: There is a Midrash (a commentary on the Five Books of Moses in the form of a parable) about a successful businessman who meets a former colleague down on his luck. The colleague begs the successful business man for a substantial loan to turn around his circumstances. Eventually, the businessman agrees to a 6 month loan and gives his former colleague the money. At the end of the 6 months, the businessman goes to collect his loan. The former colleague gives him every last penny. However, the businessman notices that the money is the exact same coins he loaned the man. He was furious! "How dare you borrow such a huge amount and not even use it? I gave this to you to better your life!" The man was speechless.

Likewise, the Almighty gives each of us a soul. He doesn't want us to return it to Him at the end of our days in the same condition that we received it. He wants us to better ourselves, to enhance our souls by doing the mitzvot (613 commandments). It is up to us to sit down before Rosh Hashana and make a list of what we need to correct in our lives between us and our fellow beings, us and G-d and us and ourselves!

Thought 2: The story is told of an elderly sage named Reb Zusia who lay on his deathbed surrounded by his students and disciples. He was crying and no one could comfort him.

One student asked his Rebbe, "Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham." Reb Zusia answered, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they

won't ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham,' rather, they will ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential, why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine."

On Rosh Hashana we confront our potential as human beings, but even more so, as Jews. Let each of us use the opportunity to reevaluate our lives, our potentials, and our commitment to our G-d, our Torah, our People and ourselves. A sweet year to you and yours! ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion Nitzavim is replete with urgings to return to G-d. A term which jumps from the text, is one describing G-d's hope that we, the Jewish people, would hearken to His voice "li-shmoah be-kolo." (Deuteronomy 30:20) The word kol, voice, resonates with deep meaning.

The key to understanding a Biblical word is to assess its meaning the first time it appears in the Torah. Kol first presents itself in the Garden of Eden's story, where the Torah states that Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord. (Genesis 3:8) Kol is, therefore, not a surface voice, rather it is the voice of G-d. An important reminder to all of us that even as we busily prepare ourselves for the observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that we not forget that the ultimate goal of these days - is to reconnect with G-d, to feel His presence, to hear His voice.

Kol also prominently appears in the Revelation story. Once again, the Torah states that the Jews heard the voice of G-d. (Exodus 19:19) This time, however, the voice of G-d was a call to commit to Torah practice as revealed at Sinai. Kol here speaks to the voice of G-d as expressed through observing G-d's laws, an idea worth remembering on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur.

And, of course, kol is found again in the prophetic descriptions of the Messianic era. (Isaiah 40:3) In the liturgy we echo this prophecy with the words, kol me-vaser, the voice that announces the coming of the Messiah. Thus, kol, especially during this time of year, speaks to the challenge of not only hearing the voice of G-d and His commandments, but of harnessing the energy of these messages into repairing the world-the Messianic period - the time when G-d's voice will be heard by all.

These three different messages of kol are echoed in the mitzvah of shofar. Shofar is the call that reenacts the moment of creation. Shofar is the call that brings us back to Sinai when the Torah was given. And shofar is the call that will ring out when the Messiah comes.

It ought be noted that the blessing preceding the shofar ritual does not state "to blow the shofar (li-

tkoah)" it rather reads, "to listen (li-shmoah)" to the shofar. Yet, it goes one step further. The blessing teaches us to go beyond, to listen to the inner voice of G-d, His law and the yearning for redemption. It does this by declaring that we "listen to the voice, the kol, of the shofar." If only. © 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 ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

Closeness to Hashem is a primary theme of the upcoming Aseres Yemei Teshuva. The navi Yeshayahu describes a time when Hashem is especially close and Chazal have the tradition that this is referring specifically to this time of the year. In Parshas Nitzavim Moshe beseeches the Jewish people not to view "this mitzvah " as being far away but rather it is very near to us. According to the Ramban "this mitzva " is teshuva and thus these pesukim are especially appropriate to read right before Aseres Yemei Teshuva.

How does one attain closeness to Hashem? When a person is distant from a geographic location he desires to reach he must travel on the road that will take him there. Similarly, there is a road to travel to reach Hashem. In addition, just as there are impediments that prevent one from reaching a physical destination, so too there are factors that prevent one from achieving spiritual goals.

In Sefer Melachim we learn that Yeravam, the king of the northern kingdom, was concerned that his position would be weakened if the Jews under his rule would travel to Yerushalayim which was located in the southern kingdom. He therefore implemented a two pronged system to prevent the people from being influenced by Yerushalayim: he set up physical roadblocks to turn back those who wished to travel to Yerushalayim and he also set up an idolatrous temple that would serve as an alternative for those seeking the religious experience of visiting the Beis Hamikdash.

When traveling on a physical journey there are two things that can prevent us from reaching our destination: there are "roadblocks", such as traffic or construction which we often encounter on today's roads, and there is also the possibility of getting lost. A wrong turn can take us miles in the wrong direction.

As we travel on a spiritual journey we are faced with similar challenges. First, there are "roadblocks" of different types on the way. When we feel we are not accomplishing our goals we often want to turn around and go back; frustrated by the "traffic and construction" we question whether we will ever reach our desired destination. Second, there are also wrong turns -- thinking we are heading to "Yerushalayim" we may end up in a very different place. One small detour can lead

us in the opposite direction from the one we want to reach.

When traveling today many of us avail ourselves of technology that addresses these two potential obstacles on our course. We are no longer as concerned about traffic since Waze weaves us around the most difficult traffic jams and also gives such precise directions that we no longer fear making a wrong turn and getting lost for miles. Even if we miss a turn, we are immediately rerouted to enable us to reach our correct destination.

As we travel down the road of spirituality there is a time-tested system that will enable us to reach our final destination and avoid any roadblocks or wrong turns: closeness to Hashem. The mitzvah we read about in Parshas Nitzvaim which is described as being so close to us and was understood by the Ramban to refer to teshuva is understood by Rashi to refer to Talmud Torah. These two views are not contradictory, but rather complimentary. Teshuva to attain the desired closeness to Hashem can only come through Torah. Studying Torah will prevent us from getting stuck in the obstacles along the way or getting lost.

Especially at this time of the year let us be certain we are traveling in the right direction and not getting delayed by obstacles along the way. Let us listen carefully to the directions the Torah gives us as we are guided to our destination. Only the Torah will enable us to reach our desired goal of closeness to Hashem. May we all merit attaining that closeness during the days ahead and may we remain inspired to maintain that closeness throughout our lives. ©2015 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and TorahWeb.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Nitzavim starts by proclaiming that "you are all standing here today" (29:9), and then proceeds to use the words "this day" two more times in the next three verses, none of which were actually needed for their corresponding sentences to be complete. What significance is the Torah placing on "this day"?

As Rabbi Abraham Twerski points out, there are two natural roadblocks placed before us as we endeavor to become better people and better Jews, and both of these roadblocks can be overcome by focusing on "this day": The first natural roadblock is our inclination to look ahead at temptations and hurdles we WILL encounter, and our feelings of frustration and helplessness in overcoming those collective obstacles. The Torah therapeutically empowers us to focus on one day at a time, and leave tomorrow's worries for another day. The second natural roadblock we face is the guilt of our past, which can sometimes make us feel depressed and unworthy. We have today to repent for those things we shouldn't have done.

With the past behind us, and a whole new year

ahead of us, it's nice to know that we don't have to wait to become better people... the time is right now, and "this day" is just right. (*From Love Thy Neighbor*) ©2015 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

"You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d. The heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers, all the men of Israel...from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water, for you to pass into the covenant of Hashem..." Be'er Mayim Chaim: "The Zohar (Pinchas 231a) observes that elsewhere in Tanach, the term hayom / today points to Rosh Hashanah, and it does as well here. It is not immediately apparent, however, how Rosh Hashanah ties in with the sense of these pesukim."

A quirk in the calendar offers us a breakthrough idea that will explain this passage in the Zohar. We call the Shabbos before Pesach Shabbos HaGadol / the great Shabbos, in commemoration of a great, miraculous event in the early history of our people. On the tenth of the month of Nisan, our ancestors responded to Moshe's instructions regarding the korban Pesach which would be offered a few days from that day. Fearlessly, they set out to take a lamb for each household, effectively announcing their intention to commit mass sacrilege. They were intent on slaughtering the Egyptian god and devouring it! Miraculously, an enraged Egyptian populace watched the drama unfold, but did nothing to protect the honor of their deity.

That year, the tenth of Nisan fell on a Shabbos. We mark the occasion by calling it the Great Shabbos, and reading a haftorah that speaks of another great day that will be the harbinger of Moshiach.

It is a lovely thought, disturbed only by the realization that the tenth of Nissan does not always fall on Shabbos, and the Shabbos before Pesach does not always coincide with the tenth of Nisan! Why do we mark the day of the week of the original event, rather than the calendar date, as we do on other occasions?

A different passage from the Zohar (2 88a) contains a clue. "And Hashem blessed the seventh day." (Bereishis 2:3) This blessing took place not once, at the time of Creation, but every Shabbos. All the blessing of all days of the week derives from what Hashem bestows upon Shabbos. Hashem provides all the berachah that He intends to give on Shabbos, and from there it flows to the week that follows. There is no difference between blessings meant for the community as a whole, and those sent for the individual. It all happens on the Shabbos before.

Shabbos Hagadol distinguished itself, then, in that regard. All the great miracles associated with the Exodus had already flowed from Heaven on that day,

placing them in position for the fifteenth of Nisan when they would become manifest.

Each Rosh Hashanah is awesome -- literally -- albeit in a different way. The detailed fate of everything in Creation is determined on Rosh Hashanah. All kinds of blessings, their form and their quantity, are fixed by the judgment of Rosh Hashanah.

Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 428:4) specifies that the parshah of Nitzavim should always be read on the Shabbos preceding it. Now we know why. All those blessings are set into motion and fixed into the earthly scheme of things on the Shabbos before. The first verse of the parshah is dead-on. "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem." Hayom -- on the day of Rosh Hashanah all things stand before Hashem -- but what they will receive in their judgment has already taken up residence in the lower worlds on the Shabbos before.

The pasuk addresses everyone, but stresses those who heard Moshe's words. Everyone and everything is judged on the great Hayom -- but the overall nature of the judgment is determined by the position of Klal Yisrael, to whom is entrusted Hashem's strategy for the future. The pesukim convey some of the seriousness of the day. It reminds us that everyone is scrutinized. Everyone's life hangs in the balance, beginning with the greatest and most important. They continue the inventory of the community, ending with the wood-choppers and water -- drawers. They are called out not to imply that they are less important or more menial than other vocations. Great tzadikim worked at these jobs, and became giants of Torah. Rather, the Torah wishes to convey that all the service industries ultimately are important for how they tie into the progress of the Jewish people, which remain at the center of His judgment.

In the final analysis, the judgment on Rosh Hashanah is meant to determine who the individual can "pass into the covenant of Hashem." We are here for a purpose; our lives are contingent. We are in covenant with G-d. Part of our responsibility is to accomplish particular tasks He has assigned to us. Each Rosh Hashanah we stand before Him, and He determines what set of circumstances are most suitable for us to achieve what He expects of us. For some, a life of plenty will facilitate maximum efficiency. Others will be spoiled by it, and their efforts hampered. They will do better under pressure or even deprivation. If that be the case, their judgment will reflect it.

In effect, what we have made of ourselves, especially the refinement of our personalities, will determine on Rosh Hashanah the parameters of the coming year. We are assigned the conditions that are best suited to our pursuing our main careers as servants of Hashem and His mission. (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Devarim 29:9-11) ©2015 Rav Y. Adlerstein & torah.org