

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**W**hen I was a student at university in the late 1960s – the era of student protests, psychedelic drugs, and the Beatles meditating with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – a story went the rounds. An American Jewish woman in her sixties travelled to north India to see a celebrated guru. There were huge crowds waiting to see the holy man, but she pushed through, saying that she needed to see him urgently. Eventually, after weaving through the swaying throng, she entered the tent and stood in the presence of the master himself. What she said that day has entered the realm of legend. She said, “Marvin, listen to your mother. Enough already. Come home.”

Starting in the sixties Jews made their way into many religions and cultures with one notable exception: their own. Yet Judaism has historically had its mystics and meditators, its poets and philosophers, its holy men and women, its visionaries and prophets. It has often seemed as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity. We prefer the far to the near.

I used to think that this was unique to our strange age, but in fact Moses already foresaw this possibility: Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will climb to heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and let us hear it so that we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Moses had an intimation that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It’s anywhere but here. And so it was for much of Israel’s history during the First and Second Temple periods. First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon. Later, in Second Temple times, they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. It is a strange phenomenon, best expressed in the memorable line of Groucho Marx: “I refuse to belong to a club that would

accept me as a member.” Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who don’t love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism, Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. And this tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Devarim. It occurs in ages of affluence not poverty, in eras of freedom not slavery. When we seem to have little to thank G-d for, we thank G-d. When we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end Anti-Semitism; it inflamed it. Hence the power of Moses’ insistence: to find truth, beauty and spirituality, you don’t have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a chazzan, wrote “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas.” Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the first “enlightened” Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach’s long neglected St Matthew Passion. Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, described by Albert Camus as “the only great spirit of our times” was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a

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Jew. And so on.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism's failure to confront the challenge? The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers. But we are still spiritually underachieving. The deepest roots of spirituality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism, G-d is close. You don't need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine presence. It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the challot, in the praise of the Eishet chayil and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying, the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, G-d is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha be-Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah and the contrition of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

G-d is near. That is the overwhelming feeling I get from a lifetime of engaging with the faith of our ancestors. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstruse theologies, no metaphysical ingenuities, beautiful though all these are, because for

us G-d is the G-d of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.

I am a rabbi. For twenty-two years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that our ancestors knew so well and loved so much. We were afraid. Of the intellectual challenges of an increasingly secular culture. Of the social challenges of being in, yet not entirely of, the world. Of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the state of Israel criticised and condemned. So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful (See Rashi to Num. 13:18). The only thing that makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, "It is not up in heaven ...nor is it beyond the sea," was: "Kinderlech, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of G-d at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So G-d found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes He is creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is Shekhinah, from shakhen, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world. When you can't see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there behind the door, but you have to open it.

Don't treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"Not with you alone do I establish this covenant and this oath, but with those who are here with us standing today before the Lord our G-d and with those who are not here with us today." (Deuteronomy 29:13-14) The Syrian refugee crisis has prompted public debate worldwide, especially in the U.S. presidential campaign, over the issue of immigration. Should a nation's top priority be to meet

the humanitarian needs of people attempting to flee a war zone? Or should it be to emphasize national security concerns stemming from the terroristic affiliations of a portion of those seeking refuge?

Given that most of the people whose fate hangs in the balance are Muslims, the critical question underlying this debate is, what is the nature of Islam? Are we speaking of a religion of prayer, charity, and belief in one G-d? Or are we dealing with a cult of death, conquest and jihad? The fact that both of these definitions contain an element of truth is the source of our dilemma. Islam is at war with itself, as Muslims on both sides of these two irreconcilable aspects of the religion's identity vie for supremacy. And unfortunately, institutional Islam – Wahhabism, Sunni, Shia, and ISIS – believes strongly in Jihad and world conquest.

Does Judaism have a role to play in this debate? The answer to this question will explain several important questions on this week's Biblical portion, and, more broadly, will teach a critical lesson about our moral responsibilities to the world.

The covenant referenced in this week's biblical portion of Nitzavim is usually read on the Sabbath prior to Rosh Hashana (Talmud, Megilla 31b). To which covenant does the Torah refer? To whom does G-d refer when He includes in this covenant "those who are not here with us today"? And what is the connection between this covenant and Rosh Hashana?

This covenant, in contrast to the two prior covenants (at Sinai and Arvot Moab), features the writing of the universal laws of morality on twelve stones (Talmud, Sota 35b), to be translated in all seventy languages of the world (ibid, 32a), and to be erected at the points of entrance into and exit from Israel. For what reason would the Bible have its laws translated into all seventy languages, if not to teach this morality to the world precisely in the place from which foreigners would travel?

Israel must bear G-d's message of morality and peace to the world and G-d, in turn, will guarantee Israel's eternity. It is our task as a people to educate the world towards recognition of a G-d of morality, love, and peace. This is the content of the Third Covenant.

Everyone need not become Jewish or worship G-d in the way we do. But everyone must be moral and ethical, and must not violate any other innocent human being, if the world is to endure. In the words of the prophet Micah (4:5), "Let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our G-d for ever and ever." We believe in moral absolutism and ritual pluralism!

Regrettably, this is not the belief of institutional Islam today (see Bernard Lewis' *Islam: The Religion and the People*), which divides the world between "Dar al-Islam" (states controlled by Muslims) and "Dar al-Harb" (states controlled by non-Muslims, to be conquered by the sword).

Fortunately, there is a precedent for a religion to alter its moral trajectory. For nearly 2,000 years, Christianity exploited its power to persecute non-Christians, especially Jews. Rivers of Jewish blood can testify to that ugly history. However, over the past 50 years, a change of historic proportions has taken place in the way Christianity has come to view Judaism, symbolized by 1965's "Nostra Aetate", the Papal Encyclical publication that affirmed the legitimacy of the Jewish covenant with G-d.

In contrast, a very different trend is taking place within Islam. Certainly there are millions of peace-loving Muslims who find the hijacking of their religion to be abhorrent. However, this silent majority has failed to prevent its co-religionists from co-opting Islam.

Judaism has a role to play in this debate. Our covenant of moral absolutism requires that we call upon Muslims to draft their own "Nostra Aetate", a theological shift that would accept the legitimacy of other religions. Muslim spiritual and political leaders must declare – and then demonstrate – clearly and unambiguously, that Allah is a G-d of love, not of power, and that Islam is a religion of peace, not of jihad. This is an internal Muslim dispute, but it has global ramifications, and we have a vested interest in its outcome.

We now see the vital need for those who did not stand at Sinai and Arvot Moab – the seventy nations of the world – to stand with us when G-d's revelation, this Third Covenant, becomes universally accepted and realized. G-d's covenant must encompass Jew and Gentile alike. And this is why it is appropriate that this biblical reading precedes Rosh Hashana, when Jews must realize our true mission: to turn the wicked of the world towards a G-d of morality, to perfect the world under the Kingship of the Divine.  
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#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**I**n emphasizing once again the eternal validity of G-d's covenant with the Jewish people, Moshe addresses his words to the entire nation. All classes of society are included in the covenant – the heads of the people, the judges, the wealthy and powerful, the poor, menial and manual laborer, those that chop the wood and draw the water. No one is excluded from the terms of the covenant and no one is allowed the luxury of assuring one's self that Jewish destiny will not apply to him or her.

Judaism does not have two sets of rules, one for the elite and the other for the masses. It is an equal opportunity faith. Its leaders, be they temporal or spiritual, are bound to the same code of behavior as are the woodchoppers and the drawers of water. There may be exceptional people in every generation but there are no exceptions to the efficacy of the covenant on all of Israel.

Unlike other faiths that have different rules and mores for their clergy than they do for the lay population, Judaism does not even recognize the existence of a clergy class. There is no separate Shulchan Aruch for rabbis. The covenant binds and governs us all equally.

We see throughout Tanach that kings and prophets were held to the same standards and requirements of the covenant that applied to the ordinary citizen as well. The power of the covenant is all encompassing and embraces all generations – those that have gone before us, those that are currently present and those that will yet come after us. This is the key to understanding the Jewish story from the time of Moshe until today.

The Torah recognizes the nature of human beings. It knows that we all procrastinate and make rational excuses for our shortcomings. Therefore, the concept of the covenant is a necessary facet of all human existence and especially so for the Jewish people.

The covenant of the rainbow exists to remind us of the wonders of the natural world in which we are temporary guests. The covenant of history, of which the Jewish people is the primary example in the human story of events and national development, reminds us of the Creator's involvement in human affairs, unseen but omnipresent.

The covenant is the great net which encloses us all, even those who somehow have convinced themselves that they swim freely in the waters of life. The binding, and many times, tragic effects of the covenant are part of the Torah readings of this week's parsha and that of last week as well. The events that befell the Jewish people over the last century amply show that the dread engendered by the force of the covenant is justified and real. But the covenant has an optimistic and hopeful side to it, in its promise of redemption and restitution to greatness and tranquility.

We are a covenantal people. And though we each possess freedom of will and action, the terms of the covenant nevertheless control our national destiny and our personal lives as well. ©2016 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 AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**P**arshat Netzavim is replete with the message of teshuvah (repentance). Teshuvah is most often associated with our return to G-d. This portion also speaks of a different form of teshuvah—the return of G-d.

Note the sentence “V’shav Hashem...et

shevutkhah” which is often translated “then the Lord your G-d will bring back your captivity.” (Deuteronomy 30:3) The term used here is not “ve-heishiv” which means G-d will “bring back” your captivity, rather it is “ve-shav” which literally means that G-d “will return with” your captivity. The message according to the Midrash is clear. When we are in captivity G-d is in exile with us. (Rashi, Deuteronomy 30:3) Thus, when we return, G-d returns with us as He, too, has been exiled.

Similarly, G-d first appears to Moshe in a burning bush telling him to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:2) The Midrash points out that G-d purposely appears in the lowly bush to teach that He felt the pain of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt. As we were lowly, so did G-d feel that lowliness. G-d is one in our suffering, empathizing with our despair. (Rashi, Exodus 3:2)

This idea teaches an important message. G-d is a G-d of love who cares deeply for His people. Hence, when we are cast aside, G-d suffers with us and is cast aside as well.

This concept finds expression in the mourning process. When leaving someone sitting shiva, we recite the formula of “ha-Makom yenahem etkhem - may G-d comfort you.” But suppose there is only one mourner? Should we use the word etkhem (you, plural) rather than otkha or otakh (you, singular).

Many rabbis insist that we still use the plural form. According to this view, it can be suggested that even when one mourns alone, one is not alone. G-d feels our loss to the extent that He is sitting shiva with us, hence etkhem. From this perspective, G-d is the comforter and the comforted. And so we recite, may G-d comfort you-with “you” including G-d.

No wonder then, when reciting kaddish, we begin with “Yitgadel, ve-yitkadesh” which means “may G-d become great, and may G-d become holy.” With the death of a human being, with a family in bereavement, G-d, as it were, is not fully great and holy as He suffers with us. Thus, these words are in the future tense. Indeed, the kaddish may be interpreted as our words of comfort to G-d Himself.

As we participate in the teshuvah process on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this idea teaches that G-d is one with us, caring, leading and carrying us from step to step, higher and higher. As we return to G-d, G-d returns to us. ©2016 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical



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## ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

# The Mitzvah of Hakhel

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit  
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**"G**ather your nation, the men, women, children and the stranger in your midst, in order that they will learn, hear and fear Almighty G-d" (Devarim 31:10-12). This is the Mitzvah of "Hakhel", which occurs on Succot at the conclusion of the "Shmittah" year. The Torah designates who this Mitzvah is incumbent upon.

With regards to women, initially they would be required to fulfill the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" once in seven years, even though it is a Mitzvah based on time (which women are exempt). However, women are also essentially exempt from the Mitzvah of "Reiyah (coming to Yerushalayim on the festivals), since one must own land in Israel to fulfill this Mitzvah and generally women don't own any land. Hence ipso facto they would be exempt from the mitzvah of "Hakhel".

Regarding children, there are those sages that state that even a nursing child must attend "Hakhel". Others state that the children must be of educable age. What is interesting is that if we ascribe to the view that women are exempt from the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" because they don't own land, then while their husbands would be attending "Hakhel" the children who are in the category of exemption, would be supervised since their mothers (if they wish) would be available to tend to their needs. © 2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

## RABBI DOV KRAMER

# Taking a Closer Look

**"T**he wicked will desire but not attain, a haven is beyond them, their hope becomes despair" (Iyov 11:20, based on how the commentators explain the expressions in this verse). The Midrash, quoted by Yalkut Shimoni (906), compares the wicked, who had the opportunity to do "t'shuva" and return to G-d by repenting but remained wicked instead, to a prisoner who had the opportunity to escape, but didn't. The question is asked (I heard it from my nephew this past Sunday, during a eulogy for his father, R' Yacov Eis, a"h, shortly before Sh'loshim) how not doing t'shuva can be compared to not escaping from prison if one is supposed to do t'shuva, but not supposed to escape from prison. Let's take a closer look at how this Midrash is quoted so that we can further explore the question, and some possible answers.

"A parable (to not doing t'shuva) would be a group of bandits who rebelled against the king. He grabbed them and locked them up in prison. What did they do? They dug a tunnel and escaped. There was one there who did not escape. In the morning, the king found him, and said to him, 'fool! The tunnel was right

there in front of you, and you didn't escape?' So too does G-d say to the wicked; 't'shuva is right there in front of you and you don't return?' If you were the king, and you found the one prisoner who did not escape still in the prison, would you appreciate his acceptance of the punishment and not escaping, or berate him for not running away when he had the chance? A very similar Midrash is quoted in Koheles Rabbah (7:16), but there, when the ruler finds the one prisoner who did not escape, he starts to hit him with a stick! Is that how to treat someone who followed the rules of the prison? If anything, the prisoner who did not escape is showing remorse for what he had done! Why is he belittled and/or punished for not escaping? Isn't it the ones who did escape that deserve to be punished, not those who stayed?

At the eulogy, my nephew quoted his father, a"h, who gave a very insightful, and enlightening, answer. What if the tunnel was dug by the king, to help the prisoners escape, and yet one of them refused to use the escape route prepared by the king? Wouldn't he be the one who deserved punishment? Bringing the parable back to reality, since Hashem gives us the opportunity to do t'shuva, imploring us to correct our past mistakes and return to Him, not doing t'shuva becomes a great sin in and of itself.

This is a very powerful thought, which would certainly explain why the prisoner who didn't leave even though the king prepared an escape route for him was punished. However, as my nephew pointed out, the wording of the Midrash precludes this from being its intent, as it was either the gang of bandits who (working together) dug the tunnel (Yalkut Shimoni uses the plural "they dug"), or one of the bandits (Koheles Rabbah uses the singular "he dug") who dug the tunnel that almost everyone escaped through. So even though Yacov's thought is very pertinent to our relationship with G-d, we still need to understand why, according to the Midrash, the one prisoner who didn't escape was taken to task by the king.

Rabbeinu Yonah (Sha'aray T'shuva 1:2) quotes this Midrash, and although there are some slight differences (such as the prison warden hitting the prisoner who didn't escape with the others, not the king), it is much closer to the version in Koheles Rabbah than the one quoted by Yalkut Shimoni. From Rabbeinu Yonah's context, a slightly different focus emerges.

"A sinner who delays doing t'shuva for his sin greatly increases the severity of the punishment for the sin every day (he delays), for he knows that [G-d's] anger rages against him, and that he has a haven to escape to (that will save from that anger) -- and that haven is t'shuva -- and [yet] he remains in his rebellious state and continues to do bad things, even though it is within his ability to leave that overturned state, [still] he is not swayed by [G-d's] wrath and anger, therefore his

wickedness is great." Rabbeinu Yonah then says that our Sages, of blessed memory, provided us with a parable to illustrate this, and quotes/paraphrases the Midrash. It is clear that Rabbeinu Yonah understands the point of the Midrash to be more than just not returning to G-d, but not taking advantage of the opportunity to remove oneself from being in a terrible situation.

When the group of bandits rebelled against the king, catching them and putting them in prison accomplished several things. Besides punishing the bandits and keeping them off the street, it sent a message to other possible bandits that there are consequences for being a bandit -- being put in prison, a powerful deterrent. However, when the one bandit chose to remain in prison, he sent the message that being in prison wasn't so terrible. After all, if it was, he would have escaped from it when he had the chance. Therefore, the king (or the prison warden, who is responsible for making the conditions in prison so harsh that everyone will be afraid to be sent there) got upset with the prisoner who didn't escape, which undermined the deterrence a prison is supposed to provide. And just as remaining in prison indicated that it isn't so bad in there, not doing t'shuva, thereby choosing to remain in a state of G-d being angry at him, indicates that the sinner doesn't mind that G-d is so upset with him.

[Although the Midrash quoted in the Yalkut doesn't mention the prisoner who stayed being hit, only that the king called him a fool, the Midrash being quoted is the Midrash Zuta on Koheles (7:16), which adds more to the king's rebuke, "your friends who escaped, what can I do to them," implying that even though he can't punish them, he can and will punish him. His being a "fool" may be for not realizing that the king will take out the wrath he has for their escape on him, or for not realizing that by staying he is also going to anger the king, for undermining the deterrence of prison. Even if Yalkut Shimoni understood the focus of the Midrash to be not escaping, equating it with not doing t'shuva, or wanted to get that point across, from the fuller version of the Midrash, as well as from the version in Koheles Rabbah and how it is used by Rabbeinu Yonah, it is clear that the focus is not appreciating how terrible it is to be in a state of not having done t'shuva.]

Even though the point of the Midrash is how upset G-d is with those who aren't concerned enough with being distant from him to do t'shuva, a point made by using a parable where the tunnel was not dug by the king, in real life both are very true. There is a tunnel through which we can escape from G-d's wrath, and it would be bad enough if we didn't use it no matter who dug it. But since it was G-d who dug the tunnel, providing us with the opportunity to remove His anger and imploring us to do so, it is that much more problematic if we don't. ©2016 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### RABBI DANIEL STEIN

## Wrong Way!

"Perhaps there is amongst you a man, woman, family, or tribe, whose heart strays this day from Hashem, our G-d, to go and worship the deities of those nations. Perhaps there is among you a root that produces hemlock and wormwood" (Devarim 29, 17). The Torah juxtaposes in the very same pasuk two individuals who ostensibly seem vastly different from one another. The first has strayed entirely from the ways of the Torah and embraced idol worship whole heartedly. The second merely has an eroded and infected "root." The Ramban explains that this second individual is presently committed to the mitzvos and avodas Hashem, but in the deep recesses of his heart there lies a kernel of doubt and insubordination. However, currently they are at opposite ends of the spectrum. The first individual in the pasuk has already abandoned yiddeshkeit completely while the second is a practicing, loyal, and faithful Jew. Why are these two people grouped together? What do they share in common?

Rav Henoch Leibowitz (Majesty of Man), explains that even though presently there might be a great distance between these two individuals, they are both on the same path, bearing an identical trajectory; one might be further down the road than the other, but ultimately they will be united. The Torah is alluding to us that a critical component of our teshuvah process is not only evaluating our previous actions and assessing our current status, but also taking time to consider the path we are on and the direction in which we are heading, because inevitably that will determine our destination. Rav Elya Meir Bloch was once standing with his talmidim on a Chicago train station platform waiting for the Pacemaker to New York. A few feet away, on the other side of the platform stood the Sunshine Express to San Francisco. He asked his talmidim, "How far apart are these two trains?" They hastily conjectured that they were separated by about eight to ten feet. Rav Bloch disagreed, "The two trains are 3,000 miles apart, because one is headed to California, and the other to New York."

This is arguably the unique message of Parshas Nitzavim. Parshas Nitzavim seems to embody a very similar theme to that of Parshas Ki Savo. Both parshiyos convey and underscore the centrality of our covenant -- bris with Hashem. They both describe how if we will perform the mitzvos we will be rewarded, and if not we will be punished. However, the Netziv (Haamek Davar) notices a fundamental difference between the two presentations. Parshas Ki Savo focuses primarily on actions, on two possible modes of conduct; either "If you will listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d, to keep and perform all of His commandments" (28:1) or "If you will not listen to the

voice of Hashem your G-d to keep and perform all of His commandments" (28:15). The lesson of Parshas Ki Savo corresponds to the aspect of teshuvah which demands that we examine our previous actions and identify areas where we can improve.

However, Parshas Nitzavim adds an additional element, another dimension to the covenant, namely that of loving Hashem. As the pesukim state: "I have commanded you this day to love Hashem your G-d to follow His ways and keep His commandments" (30:16), "To love Hashem your G-d, to listen to His voice and to cleave to Him" (30:20), and "Hashem will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your children to love Hashem your G-d" (30:6). The Netziv explains that the Torah is teaching us in Parshas Nitzavim that adherence to the mitzvos is not enough, because if our core commitment to the mission is weak and waning, if our hearts are lacking in love of Hashem, we will be trending off course and ultimately religious decay will undoubtedly ensue. As the pasuk states, "If your heart turns away and does not listen, you WILL be drawn away and bow down to other gods and serve them" (30:17). Genuine teshuvah demands not only that we evaluate our deeds, but our direction, because if we are headed down the wrong path, the results can be catastrophic.

The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:3) writes, "the sins of every inhabitant of the world together with his merits are weighed on the festival of Rosh Hashanah. If one is found righteous, he is sealed for life, if one is found wicked, he is sealed for death. A beinoni, one who is in between, his verdict remains tentative until Yom Kippur. If he repents, he is sealed for life, if not, he is sealed for death."

The Lechem Mishnah questions why the beinoni must specifically repent and perform the mitzvah of teshuvah in order to receive a positive judgment on Yom Kippur; after all, once he performs any mitzvah that should tilt the scales in his favor. He explains (and this is elaborated upon by Rav Yitzchak Blazer in his Kochvei Ohr) that the greatest of all sins is squandering the opportunity for change and teshuvah. Therefore, any positive act that is performed by the beinoni will be eclipsed and outweighed by his failure to repent and perform teshuvah. Alternatively, Rav Aryeh Pomeranchek (Emek Bracha), Rav Chaim Shmulevitz (Sichas Mussar), and Rav Ahron Kotler (Mishnas Rebbe Ahron) suggest that the performance of any additional mitzvah will accrue towards the following year, and therefore will be ineffective in altering the previous year's tally. Only the mitzvah of teshuvah has the power to change the past, to rewrite history, and thereby favorably skew the judgement of the previous year.

However, the Meiri (Chibur Hateshuvah), and later Rav Yitzchak Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak), suggest that the Rambam does not view the beinoni as one who

is literally caught in the limbo of a formal numerical stalemate between mitzvos and aveiros. For if that were the case, it would presumably be an exceedingly rare occurrence, yet the Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4) exhorts us all to view ourselves as beinonim throughout the ten days of repentance and beyond. Rather the Rambam understands the judgment of Rosh Hashanah to be a function not only of our past performance but also of our direction for the future. Therefore, the beinoni represents all those who are wavering or feel conflicted about their religious arc and trajectory. Are we progressing closer towards Hashem or drifting further away? Is our religious commitment intensifying or subsiding? The only mitzvah which can effectively address and impact this aspect of our lives is the introspective soul bearing process of teshuvah, and that is why teshuvah is the only avenue available to the beinoni.

As we stand at the doorstep of Rosh Hashanah and the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah we must undertake, individually and collectively, not only to assess the validity of our actions, but also to inspect what lies within our hearts, and honestly ask ourselves, "Where are we headed?" Concerns regarding trajectory and direction should be welcomed and embraced as the indispensable hallmark of authentic avodas Hashem. We are enjoined to respond to the message of Parshas Ki Savo as well as the call of Parshas Nitzavim. We are obliged not only to recommit ourselves to a scrupulous observance of all of the mitzvos, but to reinvest in an honest and unadulterated love of Hashem, and to chart a course for the future based solely on that agenda. May we all be zoche to be successful in this endeavor, and merit as individuals and as a community to have a kesivah vechasima tovah and a gut gebentched yor!  
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#### JEWISH WORLD REVIEW

## The Shofar and the Echo of Sinai

*By Rabbi Yonason Goldson*

**T**he Israeli army stands on alert, poised to attack. Opposing the Jewish force is an uncompromising enemy claiming sovereignty over the land that has been the cornerstone of Jewish tradition for centuries. Neither reason nor diplomacy has had the slightest impact upon the enemy's outlook, permitting no other recourse than a full-scale military offensive.

These were the headlines only a few years ago, and circumstances in Israel are not so different now. But the same conditions prevailed more than three thousand years old, when the Jewish people crossed the Jordan River to occupy the land that had been first promised to their patriarchs five centuries earlier.

To establish and preserve an ethically and spiritually elevated society, the Jews could not live

along side peoples steeped in immorality. And so Joshua, the leader of the Jews, sent forth his message to the inhabitants of the land: if they agreed to renounce murder, theft, idolatry, and adultery, then they could live together with the Jews as neighbors; if they were unwilling to accept these terms, then they were free to leave; but if they refused either option, then they should prepare for war.

With few exceptions, the Canaanite nations chose war over either conformance to an ethical code or repatriation elsewhere.

The first military encounter drew near with the encampment of the Jewish army opposite the fortified city of Jericho. Intimidated by the size of the Israelite camp, the residents of Jericho shut themselves inside the great walls that surrounded the city and prepared for the Jewish onslaught.

The Jews, however, employed an unorthodox strategy. For six consecutive days the Jewish army marched around the perimeter of the city; and on the seventh day, when the Jews sounded the shofar, the walls of the city sank into the ground, enabling the Jewish soldiers to swarm into the city and easily conquer the astonished inhabitants.

Since the Almighty does not perform miracles haphazardly, why did Jericho have to fall through divine intervention? Could the Jews not have defeated the city conventionally, as they had in the desert and would in their subsequent battles? And what is the special significance of their victory coming about through the blowing the shofar?

The battle of Jericho followed only a few days after the Jewish people's entry into the Land of Israel. Throughout the preceding forty years, the Jews had lived in the desert, fed by the manna from heaven, guided by the pillar of fire, and protected by the clouds of glory. But from the moment they crossed over the Jordan River, all the open manifestations of the divine presence departed instantaneously and left them to live according to the natural laws of the physical world.

From that time forward, the Almighty concealed His presence, requiring us to seek Him out by recognizing the intelligent design behind the intricate workings of nature. Instead of allowing ourselves to become numb to the wonders that surround us, it is our obligation to find inspiration in the multifaceted miracle that is Creation.

The great danger of physical existence, however, is that we easily forget that we are essentially spiritual beings. All the gratification offered by that the material world seduces us, while our own mastery over the world we live in makes us arrogant. And when we convince ourselves that success and prosperity reside in our own might and the strength of our own hands, we lose our appreciation for our place in the community of Man and come to believe that there is no power or authority greater than ourselves.

And so, at the moment of their transition from supernatural to natural existence, the Jewish people received a dramatic reminder that even within the natural course of events, success or failure depends not upon military armaments or tactics, but upon our own sense of place in the natural order. As the Jews circled the walls of Jericho, the call of the shofar summoned them back to when they stood together at Sinai, as one man and with one heart, to accept upon themselves the mission that defines the Jewish people as a nation, to strive together toward spiritual and moral self-perfection.

Tragically, we often fail to take the call of the shofar to heart. Rather than fostering appreciation and unity, we respond to our successes with disregard for both our fellow Jews and our national destiny, so that lasting success slips repeatedly through our fingers.

Jewish history illuminates our failures in the harshest light. The glory of the first Temple gave way to civil war and national humiliation. The accomplishments of the Hasmoneans devolved into the murderous reign of Herod and the Roman occupation. The golden age of Spanish Jewry culminated in the Inquisition and the Edict of Expulsion. And the pillars of the Jewish communities of Europe splintered before the wanton violence of the Crusades and vanished amidst the ashes of the Holocaust.

Today, more than ever, when Israel continues to face military aggression from every side, and when militant secularism and religious extremism threaten people of faith throughout the world, Rosh HaShonah offers every one of us a priceless opportunity. When we hear the call of the shofar, let us hearken back to the time when Jewish national identity was forged at Sinai and remember that, ultimately, our success depends not upon the strength of our hands but upon our commitment to our identity and our commitment to one another. © 2008 Rabbi Y. Goldson & [jewishworldreview.com](http://jewishworldreview.com)

