

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**D**uring the three weeks between 17 Tammuz and Tisha b'Av, as we recall the destruction of the Temples, we read three of the most searing passages in the prophetic literature, the first two from the opening of the book of Jeremiah, the third, next week, from the first chapter of Isaiah.

At perhaps no other time of the year are we so acutely aware of the enduring force of ancient Israel's great visionaries. The prophets had no power. They were not kings or members of the royal court. They were (usually) not priests or members of the religious establishment. They held no office. They were not elected. Often they were deeply unpopular, none more so than the author of this week's haftarah, Jeremiah, who was arrested, flogged, abused, put on trial and only narrowly escaped with his life. Only rarely were the prophets heeded in their lifetimes: the one clear exception was Jonah, and he spoke to non-Jews, the citizens of Nineveh. Yet their words were recorded for posterity and became a major feature of Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. They were the world's first social critics and their message continues through the centuries. As Kierkegaard almost said: when a king dies, his power ends; when a prophet dies his influence begins.[1]

What was distinctive about the prophet was not that he foretold the future. The ancient world was full of such people: soothsayers, oracles, readers of runes, shamans and other diviners, each of whom claimed inside track with the forces that govern fate and "shape our ends, rough-hew them how we will." Judaism has no time for such people. The Torah bans one "who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead" (Deut. 18:10-11). It disbelieves such practices because it believes in human freedom. The future is not pre-scripted. It depends on us and the choices we make. If a prediction comes true it has succeeded; if a prophecy comes true it has failed. The prophet tells of the future that will happen if we do not heed the danger and mend our ways. He (or she – there were seven biblical prophetesses) does not predict; he or she warns.

Nor was the prophet distinctive in blessing or cursing the people. That was Bilaam's gift, not Isaiah's or Jeremiah's. In Judaism, blessing comes through

priests not prophets.

Several things made the prophets unique. The first was his or her sense of history. The prophets were the first people to see God in history. We tend to take our sense of time for granted. Time happens. Time flows. As the saying goes, time is God's way of keeping everything from happening at once. But actually there are several ways of relating to time and different civilisations have perceived it differently.

There is cyclical time: time as the slow turning of the seasons, or the cycle of birth, growth, decline and death. Cyclical time is time as it occurs in nature. Some trees have long lives; most fruit flies have short ones; but all that lives, dies. The species endures, individual members do not. Kohelet contains the most famous expression of cyclical time in Judaism: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course ... What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

Then there is linear time: time as an inexorable sequence of cause and effect. The French astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace gave this idea its most famous expression in 1814 when he said that if you "know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed," together with all the laws of physics and chemistry, then "nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present" before your eyes. Karl Marx applied this idea to society and history. It is known as historical inevitability, and when transferred to the affairs of humankind it amounts to a massive denial of personal freedom.

Finally there is time as a mere sequence of events with no underlying plot or theme. This leads to the kind of historical writing pioneered by the scholars of ancient Greece, Herodotus and Thucydides.

Each of these has its place, the first in biology, the second in physics, the third in secular history, but none was time as the prophets understood it. The



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prophets saw time as the arena in which the great drama between God and humanity was played out, especially in the history of Israel. If Israel was faithful to its mission, its covenant, then it would flourish. If it was unfaithful it would fail. It would suffer defeat and exile. That is what Jeremiah never tired of telling his contemporaries.

The second prophetic insight was the unbreakable connection between monotheism and morality. Somehow the prophets sensed – it is implicit in all their words, though they do not explain it explicitly – that idolatry was not just false. It was also corrupting. It saw the universe as a multiplicity of powers that often clashed. The battle went to the strong. Might defeated right. The fittest survived while the weak perished. Nietzsche believed this, as did the social Darwinists.

The prophets opposed this with all their force. For them the power of God was secondary; what mattered was the righteousness of God. Precisely because God loved and had redeemed Israel, Israel owed Him loyalty as their sole ultimate sovereign, and if they were unfaithful to God they would also be unfaithful to their fellow humans. They would lie, rob, cheat: Jeremiah doubts whether there was one honest person in the whole of Jerusalem (Jer. 5:1). They would become sexually adulterous and promiscuous: “I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes. They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man’s wife” (Jer. 5:7-8).

Their third great insight was the primacy of ethics over politics. The prophets have surprisingly little to say about politics. Yes, Samuel was wary of monarchy but we find almost nothing in Isaiah or Jeremiah about the way Israel/Judah should be governed. Instead we hear a constant insistence that the strength of a nation – certainly of Israel/Judah – is not military or demographic but moral and spiritual. If the people keep faith with God and one another, no force on earth can defeat them. If they do not, no force can save them. As Jeremiah says in this week’s haftarah, they will discover too late that their false gods offered false comfort:

They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ They have turned their

backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, ‘Come and save us!’ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah. (Jer. 2:27-28)

Jeremiah, the most passionate and tormented of all the prophets, has gone down in history as the prophet of doom. Yet this is unfair. He was also supremely a prophet of hope. He is the man who said that the people of Israel will be as eternal as the sun, moon and stars (Jer. 31). He is the man who, while the Babylonians were laying siege to Jerusalem, bought a field as a public gesture of faith that Jews would return from exile: “For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (Jer. 32).

Jeremiah’s feelings of doom and hope were not in conflict: there were two sides of the same coin. The God who sentenced His people to exile would be the God who brought them back, for though His people might forsake Him, He would never forsake them. Jeremiah may have lost faith in people; he never lost faith in God.

Prophecy ceased in Israel with Haggai, Zekharia and Malachi in the Second Temple era. But the prophetic truths have not ceased to be true. Only by being faithful to God do people stay faithful to one another. Only by being open to a power greater than themselves do people become greater than themselves. Only by understanding the deep forces that shape history can a people defeat the ravages of history. It took a long time for biblical Israel to learn these truths, and a very long time indeed before they returned to their land, re-entering the arena of history. We must never forget them again. *Covenant and Conversation 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z”l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**"T**his is the matter that the LORD has commanded concerning the daughters of Tzelofhad, saying: Let them be married to whom they think best... Just as the LORD commanded Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad” [Num. 36:6,10]. What can we do to transmit a love of the Land of Israel to the next generation? The Book of Numbers, by concluding with the case involving the five daughters of Tzelofhad, touches on this very issue. These women – Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milca and Tirza – moved all the way up the judicial and political ladder until they stood before Moses himself.

By insisting on their rights of inheritance so that Tzelofhad would also have a portion in the future

eternity of Israel through his descendants' working and living in the Land of Israel, they won the case for female rights to inheritance, causing an entire addendum to be added to the previous inheritance laws of the Torah!

Who was this man, Tzelofhad, father of such special women, and how did he instill in them such a strong love of the Land of Israel? The Talmud [Shabbat 96b-97a] records a fascinating dispute that offers insights that have far-reaching implications as it relates to transmitting a love for the Land of Israel.

According to Rabbi Akiva, "he one who gathered wood [on the Sabbath and was stoned to death as a punishment] [Num. 15:32–36] – was Tzelofhad, as it is written, 'and the People of Israel were in the desert and they found a man gathering wood,' and later it is written, 'our father died in the desert' [regarding Tzelofhad; *ibid.*, 27:3]. Just as the second case refers to Tzelofhad, so, too, does the first."

The Talmud provides a different interpretation in the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteyra, who even takes Rabbi Akiva to task for his commentary: "Akiva, whether or not you are correct in your identification [of Tzelofhad], you will eventually be punished. If it is as you say, then if the Torah saw fit to hide [the identification], why did you reveal it? And if you are mistaken, how dare you cast aspersions on such a righteous person?... Rather, from where did Tzelofhad come? From the group of brazen climbers [ma'apilim] atop the mountain [who defiantly attempted to conquer Israel without God in their midst and without the Holy Ark (*ibid.*, 14:40–45)]".

From the perspective of this Talmudic discussion, we can glean much about Tzelofhad. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteyra sees Tzelofhad as one of the ma'apilim, the brazen would-be conquerors of Israel, the non-religious Zionists who storm the ramparts of the Land of Canaan with neither God nor the Holy Ark of the Torah in their midst, but nevertheless with a strong love for the land and the peoplehood of Israel.

They may have failed at their attempt in the desert, but it was apparently their passionate love for the land of Zion that produced these very special five daughters, who learned their love for the land from their father, and added to it an indomitable faith in God and in the equitability of His Torah.

In contrast, why did Rabbi Akiva identify Tzelofhad with the culpable gatherer of wood, a Sabbath desecrator who was condemned to death?

I believe that Rabbi Akiva is emphasizing a crucial foundational principle of Judaism: we are both a nationality as well as a religion, with each of these critical compartments of our faith having been worthy of a Divine covenant. The Torah [Gen. 15] records national covenant with Abraham "between the pieces" in which He guaranteed the first patriarch progeny and a homeland, and the religious revelation at Sinai, a Divine covenant with the entire nation of Israel [Ex. 19

and 24].

And even though Tzelofhad, in desecrating the Sabbath, may have "lapsed" in terms of his religious obligations, this does not detract from his status as a member of Klal Yisrael, the historic Jewish nation. "An Jew, even though he sins, remains a Jew," teach our Talmudic sages [Sanhedrin 44a].

And remember that the daughters' claim was that "the name of their father not be diminished" [Num. 27:4] by his inability to bequeath a portion of land in Israel because he lacked male heirs. Certainly there were some "sages" at the time who may well have claimed to the five sisters that they were not entitled to any land, to any parcel of the Israel patrimony, if their father had been a transgressor of the law.

Perhaps Rabbi Akiva specifically identifies Tzelofhad as the culpable wood-gatherer in order to stress that even though a Jew may tragically cut himself off from the religious covenant, he still remains an inextricable member of the national covenant, the historic nation of Israel. And although his five brilliant and righteous daughters re-established a profound relationship with the Hebraic laws and traditions, they undoubtedly received much of their Zionistic fervor for the land from their father! Therefore, his share in the land was indisputable, and deserved to be bequeathed to his daughters. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he Jewish people have always been a traveling nation. It is almost as if wandering has become our second nature, built into the DNA of our society and history. The Torah lists for us over forty way stations and oases that the Jewish people visited during their trek in the desert from Egypt to the outskirts of the Land of Israel.

Rashi, subtly and almost ironically, comments that the Lord was kind to us and that He did not force us to visit many other way stations that could also have been part of our journey. In fact, for thirty-eight years, the camp of Israel resided in one place in the desert.

Wanderlust has within it a positive component of curiosity and creativity. It also contains the nucleus of dissatisfaction and frustration. We are constantly looking for a better place to be and we are loath to make the proper investment and effort in improving the place in which we are. We are always looking for a more comfortable environment, better weather and more luxurious surroundings.

This has been true of the Jewish people over its long history. Even though many of our migrations were forced upon by others, with evil degrees and from cruel governments, nevertheless the spirit of migration made substantial numbers of Jews leave their homes to travel to other countries and continents. The wandering Jew

became a stereotype both in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds.

Among the many disparaging comments made about Jews by Charles de Gaulle was the one that described us as a restless people. Perhaps this is so but it is also the key to our creativity, with countless number of contributions to human civilization.

Over the past two centuries there has been a slow but steady reversal of our wandering. The vast majority of the Jewish people in the world now reside in two geographical locations – the State of Israel and the United States. Both communities feel themselves very much at home in their countries. So much so, that Jews from the rest of the world continue to migrate to these two centers of Jewish life.

The State of Israel remains the promised-land and our eternal homeland, spiritually and physically. The United States has provided its Jewish citizens with freedom and opportunity never before granted to them in the history of our exile and diaspora. There is no question that these two communities have developed independently with different goals, ideas, practices and societal norms. I think that is obvious that neither community will be able to satisfy the other one completely and consistently.

The idea of Jewish unity has to be built not only with what connects us, our faith and shared history, but also with the realization that the communities are different and will diverge in attitude and practice on a regular basis. Nevertheless, the fact that these communities are different should not mean that they are bound to be antagonistic one to the other. A healthy respect and tolerance for each other and for the differences that exist between these communities would go a long way towards easing tensions and in promoting a spirit of good will. ©2017 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

**T**he Torah states: "If her husband will remain silent for a complete day, then she must fulfill all of her vows or all of the bans which are upon her. He has established them because he remained silent on the day that he heard them" (Numbers 30:15).

Why is her husband's silence considered to be agreement to her vow? Comments the Sforno (Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, 1475-1550): When a person has the ability to protest and remains silent, his silence is similar to verbal consent. When you do not say something to disagree, it is as if you agree with what was said or done.

This concept has many practical applications.

Very often, someone might say something in your presence that is improper and you feel that you cannot really influence the person to change his mind or to stop what he is saying. Should you speak up or remain silent?

Whenever your silence can be understood by others as agreement with what was said, you have an obligation to speak the truth. This way no one will mistakenly think that you agree with what was said.

Moreover, you can never tell; perhaps you will be successful in influencing others to make positive changes. A person who is not very assertive might find this difficult. However, learn from the person who says things that should not be said. If he is able to say something that he shouldn't, you certainly have a right to say those things that should be said. He is not afraid to say something improper, you should have the courage to speak up out of idealism! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**O**ne of this week's Parshiot, Parshat Maasei, lists the many places where the Jews in the desert traveled through and camped. Since the Torah doesn't waste any words or letters, it would seem strange to list places that the Jews visited, if it meant nothing for us today. As commentaries help explain, when you love someone, you want to remember everything you did together, and G-d's love for us is no different. This love that G-d has for us is the reason why the Torah spends so many Pessukim (verses) listing the places the Jews visited. As Rabbi Twerski asks, though, at each point the Torah says (33:1-12) that they "traveled from A and camped at B. They traveled from B and camped at C", when it could have saved words and simply said that they camped at A, B, and C?

Commentaries help us understand this by explaining that the forty years that the Jews spent in the desert was filled with spiritual growth, and the "travels" represented that growth. The Torah attests to the fact that not only did the Jews travel to point A, but they camped/grew there. The lesson for us is simple and true: If you want to "travel" through Torah growth, make sure you not only travel along a solid path, but make sure you "camp" at every stage, and make sure you're comfortable with it, before you move onto another level. For example, you can't jump to Kaballah (mysticism) before you know Halacha (law) and Talmud. There's a process that requires "camping" at every step of the way. So before we venture off to see the wonderful sites the Torah has to offer, make sure you take a road map (Torah), a guide (Rabbi), and patience. Only then will you truly enjoy the life camping adventure. ©2017 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion of Masei includes the sentence that speaks to the commandment of living in Israel. The key phrase is "and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein." (Numbers 33:53)

Rashi is of the opinion that this sentence does not constitute a command to live in Israel. It is rather good advice. Take possession of the land from its inhabitants, otherwise you will not be able to safely live there.

Ramban (Nahmanides) disagrees. In his addendum to Rambam's (Maimonides) Book of Commandments, Ramban notes that Rambam failed to mention living in Israel as a distinct mitzvah. Ramban writes: "We have been commanded in the Torah to take possession of the land which God gave to the patriarchs and not leave it in the hands of others or allow it to remain desolate, as it says 'and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein.'" (Addendum, Mitzvat Aseh 4)

Some commentators argue that implicit in Rambam is the commandment to live in Israel. So basic is the mitzvah, writes the late former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, that it need not be mentioned, as it is the basis for all of Torah.

But whether or not one maintains that Rambam believes it is a mitzvah to live in Israel, doesn't this commandment, as certainly understood by Ramban, fly in the face of our mission to be an or la'goyim? How can we be a light to the nations of the world if we don't live amongst Gentiles and are ensconced in our own homeland?

One could argue however, that the mandate to live in the chosen land of Israel is crucial to the chosen people idea. Being the chosen people doesn't mean that our souls are superior. Rather it suggests that our mission to spread a system of ethical monotheism, of God ethics to the world, is of a higher purpose. And that can only be accomplished in the land of Israel.

From this perspective, the significance of the modern state of Israel is not only as the place of guaranteed political refuge for Jews; or as the place where more mitzvot can be performed or where our continuity as a Jewish nation is assured. Rather it is the only place where we have the potential to carry out the chosen people mandate.

In exile, we can develop communities that can be a "light" to others. But the destiny of the Jewish people lies in the State of Israel. Israel is the only place where we as a nation can become an or la'goyim. In the Diaspora, we are not in control of our destiny; we cannot create the society envisioned by the Torah. Only in a Jewish state do we have the political sovereignty and judicial autonomy to potentially establish the society from which other nations can learn the basic

ethical ideals of Torah.

As we near Tisha B'av, the fast commemorating our exile from the land, this position reminds us of our obligation to think about Israel, to visit Israel, and, most important, to constantly yearn to join the millions who have already returned home. Only there do we have the potential to be the true am hanivhar (chosen people). ©2017 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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## Travel Experience

The second of this week's two portions is named Masei, Travels. It begins by enumerating the various stops along the Jewish nation's forty year trek through the desert. The first verse opens the narrative. "These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Numbers 33:1). The second verse seems to have a redundant and unclear clause. "Moshe wrote their goings on according to their journeys at the bidding of Hashem, and these were their journeys according to their goings on (ibid v.2). But the phrase seems to be juxtaposed differently at the beginning and at the end of the very same sentence. At first the Torah says "Moshe wrote their goings on (experiences) according to their journeys," and when the Torah begins listing each stop it precedes the listings by stating "these were their journeys according to their goings on (experiences)."

What does the Torah mean "journeys according to their goings on"? The word translated as "goings on" is motzoaihem, which means experiences. The Torah is relating not only the geographical destinations of the Jews as they wandered, but also the historically eternal implications of each rest-stop. Thus the Torah tells us more than the journeys. It tells us the journeys according to their experiences. Were the journeys listed according to the experiences or were the experiences listed according to the journeys?

The story is told about the Toldos Ahron Rebbe. He was sitting at his table with one of his Chasidim. After a very long while, the sexton brought a bowl of beautiful fruit to the table. It was quite appealing and the Rebbe noticed the sparkle in the eye of the hungry patron. The Rebbe invited his disciple to make a blessing over the shiny crimson apple.

The guest declared that such a beautiful fruit was worthy of a beautiful blessing and he resolved to make a blessing with all his heart one truly befitting this marvelous creation. The student stood up, held the apple in both his hands, and spent a few minutes contemplating the delicious fruit that Hashem had created. His eyes sparkled in anticipation, which

enthused him even more. Carefully he annunciated every word of the blessing. Swaying back and forth he began, "Boruch Atah, Blessed art Thou ..."

After what must have been the most eloquent blessing the man ever recited, he bit excitedly into the delicious fruit, and after swallowing, he once again praised the beautiful taste and appearance.

The man seemed to revel in his act of spirituality, and the Rebbe knew he had to explain something to him.

"You made a beautiful bracha my dear disciple," he began. "Now I will teach you the difference between your blessing and the blessing of a complete tzadik."

"You saw the fruit. You wanted to eat it. But alas, one is not allowed to eat a fruit without a blessing over it. And so you made a most beautiful blessing. It is truly commendable.

"A complete tzadik, however, does not have his mind set on fruit. He wants to bless Hashem for his beautiful handiwork. But alas, one is not allowed to make that blessing without partaking in the pleasure of His handiwork. And so he looks for a fruit. When he finds the fruit, he is now ready to make the blessing he had long waited to make."

Every meaningful experience is comprised of temporal circumstances and spiritual, philosophical or ethical ramifications. In the larger picture, in view of the greater picture one may ask: Was it the circumstance that is the foremost character of the experience, or was it the experience that makes the circumstances pale in retrospect.

The Torah tells us that Moshe wrote their goings on according to their journeys. That seems to say he wrote the occurrences, the various events, traumatic and otherwise, that occurred as a result of the journeys. After all, as a result of their journeys certain events occurred. Fate brought them to certain places and thus certain events occurred. To our human eye that is what happens in life. We go places. We do things. Events occur. But the Torah itself announces these journeys with a twist. It declares the journeys in a different light. It does not precede the events saying this is what happened as a result of the journeys. Just the opposite! It tells us "These are the journeys according to the experiences." The journeys were secondary to the experiences, the journeys were listed according to the experiences! Maybe in life's journeys and the ensuing experiences, perhaps in all our actions it is worth reflecting. Do we bless to eat or do we eat to bless?

Do we mark our experiences according to where we travel, or do we mark our travels according to where we have had our experiences? It is critically important to understand what has occurred and its ramifications, perhaps more than the mere geographic

vehicle that brought us to our life's true destination. © 2001 by Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and Project Genesis, Inc.

## ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Hatarat Nedarim

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit*

*by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**A** person who vows and then regrets making this vow, may approach a Rabbi to have it annulled. Our sages have stated that the term in Hebrew for annulment (Hatarat) means to untie that which was previously tied. Others say that it comes from the word "Heter" (permissible) as opposed to "Issur" (forbidden).

As to the source for "Hatarat Nedarim" (annulment of Vows) some Rabbis state that its source is this week's portion when it states "Lo Yachel Devaro" to mean that the one making the vow cannot be forgiven for his words (coming from the Hebrew word "Mechila") however someone else can give him "Mechila" (forgiveness).

Our Rabbis further state that "Hatarat Nedarim" really has no basis in the Torah and is a law given to Moses from Almighty G-d and in essence gives the Rabbi the ability to annul vows using the formula sited, even though it has no logical or scriptural basis.

With reference to the annulment itself, the Rabbi who annuls the vow in essence destroys the vow from its source as if it never existed. This is the difference between a Rabbi who annuls a vow and a husband who annuls the vows of his wife (Hafarat Nedarim). The former destroys the vow from its source, while the latter only nullifies the vow from the moment the husband becomes aware of his wife's vow, but not prior.

What is the actual annulment ceremony? The person comes before the Rabbi or three laymen and announces his regret for making the vow. At that time they say "The vow is annulled" using the Hebrew formula "Sharu Lach" or "Mutar Lach" or "Machul lach" or similar language signifying the annulment of the vow. Some have the tradition of reciting the formula three times as a sign of strength, however even if said once it is sufficient. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

## BRIJNET/UNITED SYNAGOGUE - LONDON (O)

### Daf HaShavua

*by Rabbi Hershi Vogel, Ealing Synagogue*

**T**his week we read two Parshiot which share an inner connection. The central element of Parshat Mattot is the war our people waged against Midian, while the essential aspect of Parshat Masei is the recounting of the journeys of the Jewish people from the exile in Egypt until they reached the banks of the Jordan preparing to enter Eretz Yisrael.

What is the connection between Midian and the journeys of the Jewish people? Midian stands for the

spiritual counterpart of friction and strife, a person who is so focused on himself that he sees others only in terms of what they can do for him, rather than appreciating who they are and what they need. The most important thing for him is to be given attention and for people to gratify his desire for appreciation. Indeed, at times, even before another person has a chance to open his mouth, he will attack. For he is so insecure about his space that he will fear any and all intrusions upon it.

Before entering Eretz Yisrael, there has to be a war with Midian. Eretz Yisrael is a place where G-d's presence is openly revealed. When someone is haughty spirited and self-centred G-d says: "He and cannot dwell in the same place." For when a person is focused on his own self, there is no way in which he can appreciate G-d. He certainly cannot sense the Gdliness which resides within other people and which exists in every element of the world around him. Before the Jews can enter Eretz Yisrael, where G-dliness is to be the focus of their lives, they must rid themselves of this type of self-concern.

The forty years of wandering through the desert was a period of training and practice in which the Jews learned how to get in touch with and express their inner spiritual potential and free it from all constraints so that they would be fit to enter Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, the Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim can also mean boundaries and limitations.

In essence, the core of this entire journey is fighting Midian, learning how to master oneself and relate openly and genuinely to others.

These Torah readings also relate to the time in which they are being read; the three weeks, which focus on the mourning for the destruction of the Temple. The goal of this period of mourning is not merely to shed tears over the past, but primarily to focus on the future to realize the spiritual faults that led to the exile, and to correct them so that the Redemption will come.

The emphasis on unity during these three weeks should not focus merely on undoing the wrongs of the past. On the contrary, we should be future-orientated. The era of the Redemption will be characterized by peace and love. By expressing these emotions at the present time, we anticipate that future era. © 2003 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

## **Haftorah**

**T**his week's haftorah continues the theme of the three weeks and introduces the month of Av. The prophet Yirmiyahu reprimands the Jewish people and reminds them, in the name of Hashem, of all of the favors they have received over the years. Hashem

asks, "What wrong did your fathers find in Me that distanced them from Me and resulted in their following the empty practices of idolatry diminishing the Jews to nothingness? They didn't turn to Hashem who brought them up from Egypt and led them through the desolate dangerous desert." Hashem continues, "And I brought them to the fertile land of Israel to partake of its fruits and goodness. But they defiled My land and disgraced My inheritance." (Yirmiyahu 2:5) Hashem faults the Jewish nation for presently rejecting Him and resorting to the shameful ways of idolatry.

Hashem says, "They forsook Me, the source of the waters of life; to dig empty cisterns." But the blame wasn't limited to the common folk, it even extended to their leaders and prophets. Hashem describes their spiritual decline in the following terms, "The Kohanim didn't revere Me and the upholders of Torah didn't publicize My name, the kings rebelled against Me and the prophets delivered false prophecy." (2: 8) This bleak picture of the Jewish people was certainly not a comforting one and almost promised immediate retribution and destruction.

Yet, we discover that Hashem's response to all the above was one of concern and compassion. Hashem surprisingly responded, "Therefore I will continue to quarrel with you and even with your grandchildren." Hashem vowed to send more prophets and continue showing them and their descendents the proper path. Although every attempt thus far had been unsuccessful Hashem remained determined to help His people. Hashem refused to reject them even after the numerous rejections they showed him. The present leaders were not loyal to Hashem and didn't inspire the nation to repent and follow the proper path. Perhaps the next group of leaders would be more loyal and could successfully leave their imprint on the Jewish people. Although the Jews had reduced themselves to the point of emptiness and nothingness Hashem still cared about them with deep compassion. He wouldn't leave His people until every last avenue had been exhausted and it had been determined that there was literally no more hope for them.

This unbelievable degree of compassion is explained in the verses immediately preceding this week's haftora. Hashem says, "I remember you for the kindness of your youth, the love of our initial relationship when you blindly followed Me in the desert." Even after all the offenses the Jewish people committed against Him, Hashem still remembered His initial relationship with His people. Hashem never forgets those precious years wherein He enjoyed a perfect relationship with His people. Hashem actually longs for the opportunity of returning to that relationship and will do virtually anything to restore things to their original perfection. This explains Hashem's persistence in sending prophets to the Jewish people attempting to persuade them to return. In truth, Hashem views the

Jewish people from an entirely different perspective than their present rebellious state. Hashem sees them through the visions of the past. True, they have presently gone totally astray but Hashem sees in them their perfect past as the devout people whose intimate relationship with Him directed them to follow blindly wherever they were led. Hashem therefore expresses His sincere desire that the present Jewish nation live up to His perfect vision of them, the glorious vision of the past. Through this perspective the Jewish people deserve every last chance they can to return to their glorious era.

With this insight in mind we can truly appreciate the words of Chazal in Midrash Tehilim (137) which reveal Hashem's indescribable love and compassion for His people. The Midrash relates that the Prophet Yirmiyahu accompanied the Jewish people into their exile until the Euphrates River, the doorstep of Bablyonia. He then informed them that he would be leaving and returning to the segment of Jewish people left behind in the land of Israel. Suddenly there was an outburst of uncontrollable weeping from the Jewish people who realized that they were being abandoned by Yirmiyahu. He responded with the following words, "I testify in the name of Hashem that if this sincere cry would have transpired moments ago, when we were still in our homeland, the exile would never have come about." So great is Hashem's love for His people that even after all the atrocities they committed, rebelling against Hashem and intentionally spiting Him, one sincere gesture from the Jewish people was all that was needed. Even one emotional outburst, sensing Hashem's rejection would have sufficed to hold back the terrible calamity they now faced. Hashem loves His people so deeply that even at the last moments He still awaited their return to Him and was prepared to call off their imminent exile. In Hashem's eyes we will always be seen through the perspective of our past, a perfect devout people ready to serve Him unconditionally. And Hashem is therefore always prepared to do anything He can to restore us to that glorious position, His perfect nation. © 2003 Project Genesis, Inc. & Rabbi D. Siegel

#### RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

### Hama'ayan

**T**he commanders of the thousands in the legions, the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds, approached Moshe. They said to Moshe, 'Your servants took a census of the men of war under our command, and not a man of us is missing!.' (31:48-49)

In his classic work on ethics and philosophy, Chovot Ha'levavot / Duties of the Hearts, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakudah z"l (Saragossa, Spain; early 11th century) relates the story of a tzaddik who met victorious warriors returning from battle. He said to

them, "It is premature to rejoice, for you have won the battle and collected booty only in the small war. The greatest battle, though, still lies ahead."

The soldiers asked him, "What battle is that?"

He answered, "The fight against the yetzer hara and its agents." [Until here from Chovot Ha'levavot, Sha'ar Yichud Ha'maaseh Ch.5]

R' Moshe Gruenwald z"l (rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Khust, Hungary; died 1911) explains the above teaching of the Chovot Ha'levavot in light of another story in that work. There it is recorded that a pious man said to his disciples, "If I believed that you were free of all sin, I would fear for your sake from something that is worse than sin, namely, that you might believe yourselves to be tzaddikim." Similarly, why must a victorious warrior prepare for battle against the yetzer hara? Because the haughtiness he feels makes him particularly susceptible.

R' Gruenwald continues: When the armies of Bnei Yisrael returned from the battle against Midian, as related in our verses, they knew that they had to prepare for the next battle, the one against the yetzer hara. And, they knew that this meant they had to subdue any feelings of haughtiness. But they did feel haughty. They "took a census" and felt as if "not a man was missing (i.e., lacking)." Therefore, the next verse (31:50) relates, "So we have brought an offering for Hashem—what any man found of gold vessels, anklet and bracelet, ring, earring, and clasp, to atone for our souls before Hashem." (Arugat Ha'bosem)

R' Shlomo Halberstam z"l (1907-2000; the Bobover Rebbe) finds the above teaching of the Chovot Ha'levavot alluded to in another verse, i.e., in Moshe's words to the tribes Reuven and Gad later in our parashah (32:22), "And the Land shall be conquered before Hashem, and then you shall return— then you shall be 'clean' before Hashem and Yisrael." After you successfully conquer the Land, then you also need to ensure that you are clean of any sin before Hashem and Yisrael. (Kerem Shlomo, Vol. III) ©2004 Rabbi S. Katz & torah.org

