

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In the last days of his life Moses renews the covenant between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of the covenant -- how it came about, what its terms and conditions are, why it is the core of Israel's identity as an am kadosh, a holy people, and so on. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a kind of national referendum as it were.

Moses, however, is careful not to limit his words to those who are actually present. About to die, he wants to ensure that no future generation can say, "Moses made a covenant with our ancestors but not with us. We didn't give our consent. We are not bound." To preclude this he says these words: "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 God, and with whoever is not here with us today." (Deut. 29:13-14)

As the commentators point out, the phrase "whoever is not here" cannot refer to Israelites alive at the time who happened to be somewhere else. That cannot be since the entire nation was assembled there. It can only mean "generations not yet born." The covenant bound all Jews from that day to this. As the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai*, foresworn from Sinai (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a). By agreeing to be God's people, subject to God's laws, our ancestors obligated us.

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 and responsible for our actions, at the age of 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 including us.

But how can this be so? Surely a fundamental principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation without consent. How can we be bound by an agreement to which we were not parties? How can we be subject to a covenant on the basis of a decision taken long ago and far away by our distant ancestors?

The sages, after all, raised a similar question about the wilderness generation in the days of Moses who were actually there and did give their assent. The Talmud suggests that they were not entirely free to say No. "The Holy One blessed be He suspended the mountain over them like a barrel and said: If you say Yes, all will be well, but if you say No, this will be your burial-place" (Shabbat 88b). On this, R. Acha bar Yaakov said: "This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the covenant." The Talmud replies that even though the agreement may not have been entirely free at the time, Jews asserted their consent voluntarily in the days of Ahasuerus, as suggested by the book of Esther.

This is not the place to discuss this particular passage, but the essential point is clear. The sages believed with great force that an agreement must be free to be binding. Yet we did not agree to be Jews. We were, most of us, born Jews. We were not there in Moses' day when the agreement was made. We did not yet exist. How then can we be bound by the covenant?

This is not a small question. It is the question on which all others turn. How can Jewish identity be passed on from parent to child? If Jewish identity were merely racial or 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. There is a halakhic principle, *zakhin le-adam shelo be-fanav*: "You can confer a benefit on someone else without their knowledge or consent." And though it is doubtless a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Had we not been Jewish, we could have worked on Shabbat, eaten non-kosher food, and so on. You can confer a benefit, but not a liability, on someone without their consent.

In short, this is the question of questions of Jewish identity. How can we be bound by Jewish law, without our choice, merely because our ancestors agreed on our behalf?

In my book *Radical Then, Radical Now*



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(published in America as A Letter in the Scroll) I pointed out how fascinating it is to trace exactly when and where this question was asked. Despite the fact that everything else depends on it, it was not asked often. For the most part, Jews did not ask the question, 'Why be Jewish?' The answer was obvious. My parents are Jewish. My grandparents were Jewish. So I am Jewish. Identity is something most people in most ages take for granted.

It did, however, become an issue during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel says, "What is in your mind shall never happen -- the thought, 'Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.'" (Ez. 20:32). This is the first reference to Jews actively seeking to abandon their identity.

It happened again in rabbinic times. We know that in the second century BCE there were Jews who Hellenised, seeking to become Greek rather than Jewish. There were others who, under Roman rule, sought to become Roman. Some even underwent an operation known as epispasm to reverse the effects of circumcision (in Hebrew they were known as meshukhim) to hide the fact that they were Jews. (This is what R. Elazar of Modiin means when he refers to one who "nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham", Avot 3:15.)

The third time was in Spain in the fifteenth century. That is where we find two Bible commentators, R. Isaac Arama and R. Isaac Abarbanel, raising precisely the question we have raised about how the covenant can bind Jews today. The reason they ask it while earlier commentators did not was that in their time -- between 1391 and 1492 -- there was immense pressure on Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity, and as many as a third may have done so (they were known in Hebrew as the anusim, in Spanish as the conversos, and derogatively as marranos, "swine"). The question "Why stay Jewish?" was real.

The answers given were different at different times. Ezekiel's answer was blunt: "As I live, declares the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you." In other words, Jews might try to escape their destiny but they will fail. Even against their

will they would be known as Jews. That, tragically, is what happened during the two great ages of assimilation, fifteenth century Spain and nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. In both cases, racial antisemitism persisted, and Jews continued to be persecuted.

The sages answered the question mystically. They said, even the souls of Jews not yet born were present at Sinai and ratified the covenant (Exodus Rabbah 28:6). Every Jew, in other words, did give his or her consent in the days of Moses even though they had not yet been born. Demystifying this, perhaps the sages meant that in his or her innermost heart even the most assimilated Jew knew that he or she was still a Jew. That seems to have been the case with figures like Heinrich Heine and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived as Christians but often wrote and thought as Jews.

The fifteenth century Spanish commentators found this answer problematic. As Arama said, we are each of us both body and soul. How then is it sufficient to say that our soul was present at Sinai? How can the soul obligate the body? Of course the soul agrees to the covenant. Spiritually, to be a Jew is a privilege, and you can confer a privilege on someone without their consent. But for the body, the covenant is a burden. It involves all sorts of restrictions on physical pleasures. Therefore if the souls of future generations were present but not their bodies, this would not constitute consent.

Radical Then, Radical Now is my answer to this question. But perhaps there is a simpler one. Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is even possible for a monarch to abdicate. But no one chooses to be heir to a throne. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God himself said, "My child, my firstborn, Israel" (Ex. 4:22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It may be both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to think that the only significant things about us are those we choose. For the truth is some of the most important facts about us, we did not choose. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are no longer here, and the question for all of us is: will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory the words of Moses continue to resonate. "It is not with you alone

that I am making this sworn covenant, but with... whoever is not here with us today." We are part of that story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us. *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

"**F**or this commandment that I have commanded you today is not concealed from you, nor is it far away." [Deut. 30:11]. How often it is that we – and people we know – say, "I can't help it. It's in my nature to get angry." Or, perhaps most commonly, "I give up. I'll never be able to go on a diet and keep the weight off." At this time of year, perhaps more than at any other time, we wrestle with issues such as these brought to our attention as a result of deep introspection.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the great 19th century scholar, noted, "It is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait." Indeed, can we change? Is a particular trait part and parcel of human nature, built into the our personality, seemingly impossible to overcome?

Judaism, with its emphatic message of freedom of choice, insists on our ability to change. But is it really fair to ask individuals to do what may very well be beyond their ability to achieve? Do we really have the power to overcome our most potent and persistent weaknesses? To what extent can we take into account the human difficulty in overcoming one's weakness?

Our Torah portion, Nitzavim, emphatically insists on the possibility of change, no matter the circumstances: "I have set before you so that you will consider in your heart, among all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you. And you shall return to the Lord your God and obey His voice" [ibid., v. 1–2].

And once a person has begun the process of teshuva, God Himself – aware of the almost insuperable difficulty of changing one's nature and overcoming one's inherent weakness – steps in and completes the process on behalf of the penitent: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live" [v. 6].

From the perspective of the Holy Zohar, the mystical interpretation of the Bible, this is the difference between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashana falls on the first day of the month of Tishrei, when the moon – a symbol of God's light and grace – is hidden and barely visible. The individual approaches the synagogue in fearful and trembling anticipation,

hopeful but not at all certain that he can pierce through the veil of darkness covering the heaven and masking over the moon.

Ten days later, on Yom Kippur, the moon glows briefly, imbuing the heavens with renewed light and hope. The individual is then ecstatically reborn, cleansed, transformed, and purified by the grace of Divine love and forgiveness.

Indeed, we repeat again and again throughout the penitential prayers of the Day of Atonement the words of the prophet Ezekiel: "And I shall sprinkle upon you the purifying waters and you shall be purified...and I shall give you a new heart, and a new spirit shall I place in your midst" [36:25–26].

We can thus appreciate anew the enormous power of Yom Kippur, the one day during the year when the Almighty grants us not only forgiveness, but also the renewed inner strength to overcome our inborn weaknesses and foibles.

And we also may better understand the terse interpretation of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk on the verse immediately following the command – as well as our ability – to repent after one has transgressed: "For this commandment that I have commanded you today is not...far away from you" [ibid., 30:11]. Says the Kotzker, "It requires only one small turn (Yiddish: nur ein kleine drei)."

What he apparently meant was that the penitent is expected only to make a change in direction, to turn his back on his temptations and begin to embrace God and His Torah.

We return to our original question: can we change? The simple answer is yes. However, it is incumbent upon the would-be penitent making the all-important first step. At that point, the Almighty will give him a hand to help him complete the journey, as the Sages taught, "One who comes to be purified receives Divine assistance" [Talmud, Yoma 38b]. And at the end of Yom Kippur, after a day of pleading with God for forgiveness and atonement, we cry out in the Ne'ila prayer: "Your right hand is extended to accept the penitent!", reminding us that when returning to God, we are never alone. ©2017 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Ah! The covenant once more. The basis of the relationship between the Jewish people and their Creator is the covenant that exists between them. The covenant is central to the story of the Jewish people. Our father Avraham entered into and created the terms of this eternal covenant. The covenant was embodied in his flesh itself and sanctified by the sense of sacrifice that the historical narrative of Avraham and Yitzchak reinforced.

Yaakov received the covenant from his father –

after contests with Eisav and Lavan and bequeathed it to his sons, the twelve tribes of Israel. His family took the covenant with them down to Egypt and it was miraculously preserved throughout centuries of slavery. Yosef had promised them redemption and belief in the existence and efficacy of the covenant. And that promise of redemption for all ages and future conditions was attached to the overriding theme of the covenant.

To this historical and faith narrative was added the holy spirituality and Divine laws of the Torah granted at Mount Sinai. This combination of holiness, the discipline of behavior, the historical narrative of tradition and family, all combined to form the foundation of the covenant.

This has remained the great backbone of Jewish survival during our long and painful exile and dispersion. It is this covenant that unites Jews the world over as a family, not only as a faith and not only as a nationality.

The continuity and presence of this covenant – alive and well as it assuredly is in our time now – was and is the leitmotif of the rhythms of Jewish life everywhere. The covenant was binding upon all Jews even though many Jews, especially in modern times, were completely unaware of its existence and the grip it exerted on their lives and society.

It is this covenant that governs Jewish history and our current events as well. There is no other rational way to look at our story, past, present and undoubtedly future, in the absence of the overriding influence and presence of the covenant that Moshe and Israel entered into as recorded in this week's Torah reading.

The demands of the covenant are strong and oftentimes appear to be severe. But an "easy" covenant would be useless considering the challenges and rigors of Jewish history. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein often stated: "People say it is difficult to be a Jew and they are correct in that assessment. But I say that it is even more difficult for a Jew not to be a Jew!" Such is the nature of God's covenant with us and it has proven to be eternal and binding for all of the millennia of Jewish existence. That is why this is the final major public act of the career of Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people. As long as the covenant holds, he is assured of the eternity of Israel and his own immortality. ©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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

"You are all standing this day before HASHEM, your G-d the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your

young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers, that you may enter the covenant of HASHEM, your G-d, and His oath, which HASHEM, your G-d, is making with you this day, in order to establish you this day as His people, and that He will be your G-d, as He spoke to you, and as He swore to your forefathers to Avraham, to Yitzchok, and to Yaakov. But not only with you am I making this covenant and this oath, but with those standing here with us today before HASHEM, our G-d, and [also] with those who are not here with us, this day." (Devarim 29:9-14)

"and [also] with those who are not here': also with future generations." -- Rashi

The verse is speaking historically to those standing there at that time. Rashi tells us that the message is meant to reach future generations as well. Our sages recommend that the day of everyone standing together is Rosh HaShana, the Day of Din-Judgment. Maybe there's a different reference here to this day of all standing altogether.

With Rosh HaShana rapidly approaching and the Ten Days of Teshuva in sight, it may be worthwhile to mention a certain practical idea stated by Reb Tzadok HaKohen, that may keep us from throwing out the baby with the bathwater in a panic to "clean house". He's declares that when a person does Teshuvah -- repents, then all the experiences he had, whether good or bad become useful in Serving HASHEM. How so?

Somebody who went through a terrible addiction can become a resource to help others regain their sanity. I spent so many years of my life pitching a baseball and perfecting my basketball shot, and then years later, miraculously mystically, students grant instant respect and open their hearts to listen deeply to words of Torah when they see I can still drain a three pointer. There are more examples too.

A friend of mine told that he heard from Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZTL that if someone wants to get a whiff, a sense of what the next world is about, it is detectable when you pass by a stadium and you hear the roar of the crowd. When I heard that it awoke and validated the real and deep meaning of an experience I had many times in my youth.

For many years my father used run the food concession at Yankee Stadium. I was treated often to being there for special occasions like Old Timers' Day. They would call out on the loud speaker a host of retired "greats". Each was met with an adoring round of applause and as they ambulated onto the field waving to the crowd. Some reactions were bigger than others depending upon the size of the star but one name was met with the most incredible response. It made the whole experience worth the while when they would call upon the beloved Dodge catcher, Roy Campanella, who was crippled in a car accident and left unable to move his limbs. When his name was called and he was

wheeled out onto the field, 65,000 people spontaneously stood on their feet and showered him with a twenty minute standing ovations. It was a giant wave of love and admiration. They-we all knew that we were breathing life into his broken body and his shattered spirit. It was a collective act of supreme kindness that seemed would never end.

Similarly, I watched a brief video recently regarding a Sir Winton, an Englishman who save 669 Jewish children during the war. He found homes for them in England. He never breathed a word about this and then his wife discovered some documents and was able to realize what her husband had done for these young children. He is pictured sitting in a theatre unaware. Suddenly all the people around him rise and applaud him. These people are the children he saved, now as adults thanking him personally. It was stirring to witness. I sent this video to a friend who speaks all over the world and helps thousands of people. He sent me back a message immediately telling me how extremely moved he was. I told him that if we do it right in this lifetime, that's a slice of what we have to look forward to. ©2017 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Parshat Netzavim is replete with the message of teshuvah (repentance). Teshuvah is most often associated with our return to God. This portion also speaks of a different form of teshuvah—the return of God.

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

Similarly, God 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 God 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 God feel that lowliness. God is one in our suffering, empathizing with our despair. (Rashi, Exodus 3:2)

This idea teaches an important message. God is a God of love who cares deeply for His people. Hence, when we are cast aside, God 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 yenaheem etkhem - may God

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. God feels our loss to the extent that He is sitting shiva with us, hence etkhem. From this perspective, God is the comforter and the comforted. And so we recite, may God comfort you-with “you” including God.

No wonder then, when reciting kaddish, we begin with “Yitgadel, ve-yitkadesh” which means “may God become great, and may God become holy.” With the death of a human being, with a family in bereavement, God, 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 God Himself.

As we participate in the teshuvah process on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this idea teaches that God is one with us, caring, leading and carrying us from step to step, higher and higher. As we return to God, God returns to us. ©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 YAAKOV WOLBE

Bais Hamussar

"Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I've done it thousands of times." -- Mark Twain Is it easy to change behavior? Is it easy to repent? In Parshas Nitzavim we see conflicting stances on this matter. In one verse (30:2), repentance is described in a similar way to martyrdom: "And you shall return (repent) to Hashem your God, and you shall hearken to his voice as all that I command you today, you and your sons, with all your hearts and with all your soul." Reb Chaim Volozhiner notes the overlapping word usage with the verse in Shema, "And you shall love Hashem your God... with all your soul", which Chazal explain to mean that we must even forfeit our lives for the love of our Creator. By utilizing the same verbiage for repentance, the verse is hinting that changing behavior and adopting a new way of life is akin to the ultimate self-sacrifice. Walking away from ingrained character and behavior demands similar courage, resolve and intestinal fortitude as allowing oneself to die for God. Apparently, repentance is pretty hard. That sentiment is likely shared by those who are intimidated by the myriad components and draconian conditions necessary for complete repentance of Rambam's "Laws of Repentance" and Rabbeinu Yonah's "Gates of Repentance."

Contrast that with a string of verses (30:11-14) later on in the chapter, describing an inordinately easy mitzvah: "This mitzvah that I command you today -- it is

not hidden from you, nor is it distant. It is not in the Heavens that you may say, 'who will ascend to Heaven, and take it for us, and teach it to us, so that we may do it'. Nor is it across the sea that we may say, 'who will cross the sea for us, and take it for us, and teach it to us, so that we may do it'. Rather, the matter is exceedingly close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it." While the verses themselves do not explicitly identify which mitzvah is being referenced, the great commentaries do. Rashi explains that it refers to the mitzvah of Torah.

Ramban disagrees and interprets the verse to be referring to the mitzvah of repentance. How can we understand labeling repentance as being so easy -- "In your mouth and in your heart"? Also, how can it simultaneously be exceedingly difficult? Another point to ponder is the characterization (30:6) of repentance as "circumcision of the heart." What is intended by this odd classification?

What is the essence of repentance? There is a misconception that repentance is exclusively sin-centric: To repent you must act in opposition to the sin. My grandfather, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe zt"l, explained that this was precisely the miscalculation of the ma'apilim (Bamidbar 14:44), the Jews that defiantly attempted to ascend to Israel after the Almighty decreed that the nation will languish in the wilderness for 40 years due to the sin of the Spies, only to be slaughtered by Amalek. Their decision was not without reason. They assessed that the core of the sin of the Spies was resistance to enter the Land of Israel and even proposing to return to Egypt (14:4), and therefore attempting to enter Israel in disregard of the entailed dangers can be the only remedy. But they were mistaken. Repentance, Teshuva, means to return to the Almighty and to His Will. At that time His Will mandated that they remain in the wilderness for 40 years, and thus accepting that was the correct avenue to repentance. My grandfather would also invoke this notion with regard to the repentance of Rosh Hashana. The days of Rosh Hashana make up the first two of the "Ten Days of Repentance" yet unlike Yom Kippur, there is nary a mention of sin. At its root, repentance is returning to your Creator. On Rosh Hashana that is manifest by us coronating Him as King of the world, and on Yom Kippur the same objective is approached from a different angle by addressing sin.

Given that repentance is about man achieving closeness to his Creator, the process of repentance is bridging the gap between man and the Almighty, between the created and the Creator. Hence, the degree of difficulty in achieving it is contingent upon the distance between the two. In essence, the question of, "Is repentance easy or hard?" is precisely the same question as, "Is man close or distant from the Almighty?"

The answer to the latter question hinges upon

which of the disparate elements of man is being referenced. The "body" of man, the physicality, the ephemeral -- has no commonality with the Almighty. However, our Neshama (Soul) is very similar to its Creator. In one teaching in the Talmud (Brachos 10a), five parallels between the Almighty and the Neshama of man are enumerated; another (Niddah 30b) plainly equates the purity of the two. As such, we indeed have an element of our being that is already extremely close to the Almighty and thus repentance for it is natural and seamless.

With this understanding, the conflicting messages about the difficulty of repentance can be reconciled. It is true that repentance is really difficult. By default we identify as an ephemeral body, and in that state repentance is unachievable. To repent we must shed ourselves clean of that attitude and identity. That is a painful process, akin to martyrdom. However, once we identify as our true and lasting element of self, our Neshama, we are already in close proximity to our Creator, and have achieved repentance. This process is illustrated by the circumcision of the heart.

We already have everything that is needed to be close to the Almighty, it is just concealed. All we must do to reach our goal is to peel away the inhibiting factors, and reveal our true self that was all ready to go, lying dormant and awaiting liberation. This is a helpful and heartening thought to take with us during the season of repentance. It is very difficult to repent. But it is comforting to know that all we are really doing is clearing out the path for our true self to shine. It may be back-breaking labor to dig out buried treasure, but it's made easier knowing that the treasure is there, and it is complete, and once it is unearthed it's yours. ©2017 Rabbi Y. Wolbe & aishdas.org

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The Mitzvah of Hakhel

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit

by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "You are standing this day, all of you before God your Lord; your leaders, your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel" (Deut. 29:9).

The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments on this verse: "When are the Jewish people 'standing'? When they are together ('all of you'). Even a young child can break a single reed. However, a bunch of reeds together is strong and cannot be broken. The Jewish people will not be redeemed until they are a unified group." Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman

The Maharal (as well as other commentaries) asks a famous question: Last week's parsha (Parshas Ki Savo) contained the terrible Tochacha [Prophetic listing of curses that will befall the Jewish nation if they abandon the Torah]. Parshas Bechukosai, at the end of Sefer VaYikra, also contains a terrible Tochacha.

The end of the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai contains a consolation, while the Tochacha at the end of Parshas Ki Savo ends without any consolation. The Torah in Bechukosai writes "And I will remember the covenant with Yaakov..." [Vayikra 26:42]. It ends, so to speak, on a positive note. The narration in Ki Savo merely ends with the pasuk, "And the L-rd shall bring you back to Egypt in ships...and there you shall sell yourselves to your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen and no man shall buy you." [Devorim 28:68] Period!

Why are there words of comfort at the end of the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai, but not at the end of the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo? I once said over an insight from Rav Yoshe Ber Soleveitchik, zt"l, that in fact there is consolation to be found at the end of the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo as well -- except that it comes in Parshas Nitzavim. The Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai foreshadows the destruction of the First Bais HaMikdash [Temple] and Galus Bavel [the Babylonian Exile]. Galus Bavel was finite. It was

supposed to last for 70 years and then it ended. There was light at the end of the tunnel. It came. It was scheduled to end at a specific time. It finished. Therefore, the consolation in that Tochacha comes right away.

The Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo foretells the calamities that accompanied the destruction of the Second Bais Hamikdash. It is now almost two thousand years later and Hashem has still not redeemed us from this destruction. There is a consolation to this second Tochacha, just like there will be an end to this exile. However, the consolation is not immediate. It comes later on -- in Parshas Nitzavim. What is the consolation? The consolation is "And it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you -- then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d has dispersed you; and you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul." [Devorim 30:1-2] The consolation is that Klal Yisrael will in fact do Teshuva and then the exile will end.

This is what the Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuva [7:5]: "All the prophets exhorted regarding Teshuva [repentance] and Israel will only be redeemed through Teshuva. And the Torah has already promised that in the end, Israel will do Teshuva at the end of their exile and immediately they will be redeemed as it is written 'And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you... and you will return unto Hashem, your G-d...'" In a nutshell, Rav Yoshe Baer concluded, the consolation to the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai, which was finite, came right away. However, the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo, which is indefinite in length, comes eventually. It comes later in our parsha, Parshas Nitzavim, and the consolation is that at the end of days, Klal Yisrael will do Teshuva and then the Geulah will come.

Whenever I study this Rambam, I contemplate the following question. I do not for a moment doubt the Rambam's words that in the end Israel will do Teshuva, but I have always wondered -- how on earth is this going to happen? When the majority of Klal Yisrael today does not know about Shabbos and does not know about Teshuva and does not know the most basic ideas of Jewish practice or tradition, how is it going to happen that in the end of the exile, suddenly, Klal Yisrael will repent?

How is it going to happen? Can you imagine it? Even most people today who are somewhat affiliated know almost nothing. They do not even know that they are doing anything wrong. What scenario can we envision such that "in the end of days Israel will repent?"

I found somewhat of an answer to this question

this year in the sefer Shem m'Shmuel [by Rav Shmuel Borenstein; the second Sochatchover Rebbe 1855-1926], the son of the Avnei Nezer].

On the pasuk in our parsha "v'shav Hashem es Shevuscha v'reechamecha" [the L-rd will return your captivity and have compassion on you] [Devorim 30:3], the Shem m'Shmuel writes... The simple interpretation of the word "shevuscha" comes from the word "shevi" [captives]. The pasuk thus means that the Ribono shel Olam will return our captives and he will gather us from all the nations to which he has dispersed us.

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel reads the pasuk in an entirely different fashion. He interprets the word "shevuscha" from the word "Teshuva" [repentance]. The pasuk thus means that the Ribono shel Olam will gather in (i.e. -- accept) all our repentances and have mercy on us. He will gather in all the thoughts of repentance that have been uttered over all the generations.

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel alludes to a Gemara [Rosh Hashanah 17], which qualifies an expression from the High Holiday liturgy: "ma'avir rishon rishon..." [He removes the first (sin), the first (sin)] and teaches, "However the first (sin) itself is not erased." The Talmud interprets that when the Heavenly Court weighs our sins against our merits -- if they are evenly balanced such that taking away one sin will tip the scales in favor of mitzvos, the Ribono shel Olam does that.

However, the Gemara says, "The sin itself is not erased." The Almighty does not toss away that aveirah, but rather, He holds it in abeyance. He puts it in cold storage. If the time will come when the person will do more sins, the Almighty will say, "Okay, I gave you a chance, but now I am going to add this back onto the pile." Thus far, we have been quoting the interpretation of the Gemara.

The Shem m'Shmuel says, "If the Ribono shel Olam holds sins in abeyance for the "right time" (or the "wrong time") then certainly the Ribono shel Olam puts all the Teshuvahs and thoughts about Teshuva that people have done for tens of centuries in cold storage.

This includes Teshuvahs that were perhaps not complete and Teshuvahs that were perhaps done for the wrong reason and perhaps only preliminary thoughts contemplating a Teshuva which never came to fruition. The Ribono shel Olam collects all of these and He waits. He has this entire pile of these less than perfect



thoughts and acts of repentance.

The Shem m'Shmuel says that with this concept, he understands how it could be that if a person was a rasha [wicked person] his entire life and then on his deathbed, he has hirhurei teshuva [contemplative thoughts about repentance]; Hashem considers it as if he died as a baal teshuva [one who has repented].

What kind of Teshuva is this? There is no "acceptance upon oneself to improve in the future" [kabbalah al ha'asid]. He is going to die within hours! The answer, says the Shem m'Shmuel, is that this person, even though he has been a rasha his entire lifetime, had thoughts of Teshuva. During his lifetime, these thoughts never came to fruition, but on his deathbed, when he was in fact sincere, the Ribono shel Olam takes all these thoughts of Teshuva that even this person did over his entire lifetime and now He considers it that he dies a Baal Teshuva.

The Shem m'Shmuel says that we can say the same thing about the Tochacha. The above idea does not only apply to individuals but it applies to all of Klal Yisrael. The Teshuvah fragments from throughout Klal Yisrael from throughout the thousands of years of exile combine into one "appropriate" Teshuva. Over the last two millennia, the Almighty has collected all sorts of thoughts about repentance and good intentions to change people's ways, which taken as a single conglomeration, meets the bill for a "complete and appropriate repentance," even though until now they had been pushed off to the side and held in abeyance. This, the Shem m'Shmuel writes, is how "complete repentance" could happen even in our day.

In the final generation, as spiritually weak as we may be, we will only need a little repentance to supplement the vast reserves of "Teshuva" that we have collectively amassed over the millennia. Therefore, in our generation, in spite of all the people who perhaps do not even know how to do Teshuva, we -- who do know how -- have it within our power to tip the scales. We should therefore not give up hope and every single day we should be anxiously awaiting and anticipating the arrival of our righteous Moshiach.

This is an old question -- if Moshiach did not come in the days of Rav Chaim Ozer, the Chofetz Chaim, or the Chazon Ish -- how can we have the audacity to suggest that he might come in our day? Nevertheless, at the end of time, we must be exceptionally strong in the belief in his coming "...for my redemption is indeed at hand..." (k'rova yeshuasi lavo [Yeshaya 56:1]).

With this Shem m'Shmuel, we can understand the Rambam that says, "In the end, Israel will do Teshuva at the end of their exile" [Hilchos Teshuva 7:5]. Only a tiny bit of extra Teshuva will be required at the very end. Those are encouraging words. ©2017 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org