

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

“You are children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be His treasured possession" (Deut. 14:1-2).

These words have had a considerable history within Judaism. The first inspired the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: "Beloved is man because he was created in the image [of God]. Beloved are Israel for they are called children of the All-present" (Avot 3:14). The phrase, "Do not cut yourselves", was imaginatively applied by the sages to divisions within the community (Yevamot 14a). A single town should not have two or more religious courts giving different rulings.

The plain sense of these two verses, though, is about behaviour at a time of bereavement. We are commanded not to engage in excessive rituals of grief. To lose a close member of one's family is a shattering experience. It is as if something of ourselves had died too. Not to grieve is wrong, inhuman: Judaism does not command Stoic indifference in the face of death. But to give way to wild expressions of sorrow -- lacerating one's flesh, tearing out one's hair -- is also wrong. It is, the Torah suggests, not fitting to a holy people; it is the kind of behaviour associated with idolatrous cults. How so, and why so?

Elsewhere in Tanakh we are given a glimpse of the kind of behaviour the Torah has in mind. It occurs in the course of the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah had challenged them to a test: Let us each make a sacrifice and see which of us can bring down fire from heaven. The Baal prophets accept the challenge: "Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. 'O Baal, answer us!' they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.' So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed." (I Kings 18:26-28)

This was, of course, not a mourning ritual, but it

gives us a graphic sense of the rite of self-laceration. Emil Durkheim provides us with a description of mourning customs among the aborigines of Australia. When a death is announced, men and women begin to run around wildly, howling and weeping, cutting themselves with knives and pointed sticks.

"Despite the apparent frenzy, there is a precise set of rules governing this behaviour, depending on whether the mourner is a man or woman, and on his or her kinship relationship with the deceased. 'Among the Warramunga, those who slashed their thighs were the maternal grandfather, maternal uncle and wife's brother of the deceased. Others are required to cut their whiskers and hair and then cover their scalps with pipe clay.' Women lacerate their heads and then apply red-hot sticks to the wounds in order to aggravate them." (Emil Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen Fields, Free Press, 1995, pp. 392-406.)

(A similar ritual is performed by some Shia Muslims on Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the prophet's grandson, at Karbala. People flagellate themselves with chains or cut themselves with knives until the blood flows. Some Shia authorities strongly oppose this practice.)

The Torah sees such behaviour as incompatible with kedushah, holiness. What is particularly interesting is to note the two-stage process in which the law is set out. It appears first in Vayikra/Leviticus Chapter 21.

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: A priest may not defile himself for any of his people who die, except for a close relative... They may not shave their heads or shave the edges of their beards or cut their bodies. They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God." (Lev. 21:1-6)

There it applies specifically to cohanim, priests, on account of their holiness. In Deuteronomy the law is extended to all Israel (the difference between the two books lies in their original audiences: Leviticus is mainly a set of instructions to the priests, Deuteronomy is



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Moses' addresses to the whole people). The application to ordinary Israelites of laws of sanctity that apply to priests is part of the democratisation of holiness that is central to the Torah idea of "a kingdom of priests". The question remains, however: what has restraint in mourning to do with being "children of the Lord your God", a holy and chosen people?

[1] Ibn Ezra says that just as a father may cause a child pain for his or her long-term good, so God sometimes brings us pain -- here, bereavement -- which we must accept in trust without an excessive show of grief.

[2] Ramban suggests that it is our belief in the immortality of the soul that is why we should not grieve overmuch. Even so, he adds, we are right to mourn within the parameters set by Jewish law since, even if death is only a parting, every parting is painful.

[3] R. Ovadiah Sforno and Chizkuni say that because we are "children of God" we are never completely orphaned. We may lose our earthly parents but never our ultimate Father; hence there is a limit to grief.

[4] Rabbenu Meyuchas suggests that royalty does not defile itself by undergoing disfiguring injuries (nivul). Thus Israel -- children of the supreme King -- may not do so either.

Whichever of these explanations speaks most strongly to us, the principle is clear. Here is how Maimonides sets out the law: "Whoever does not mourn the dead in the manner enjoined by the rabbis is cruel [achzari -- perhaps a better translation would be, 'lacking in sensitivity']" (Hilkhot Avel 13:12). At the same time, however, "One should not indulge in excessive grief over one's dead, for it is said, 'Weep not for the dead, nor bemoan him' (Jer. 22:10), that is to say, weep not too much, for that is the way of the world, and he who frets over the way of the world is a fool" (ibid. 13:11).

Halakhah, Jewish law, strives to create a balance between too much and too little grief. Hence the various stages of bereavement: aninut (the period between the death and burial), shiva (the week of mourning), sheloshim (thirty days in the case of other relatives) and shanah (a year, in the case of parents). Judaism ordains a precisely calibrated sequence of

grief, from the initial, numbing moment of loss itself, to the funeral and the return home, to the period of being comforted by friends and members of the community, to a more extended time during which one does not engage in activities associated with joy.

The more we learn about the psychology of bereavement and the stages through which we must pass before loss is healed, so the wisdom of Judaism's ancient laws and customs has become ever more clear. As it is with individuals, so it is with the people as a whole. Jews have suffered more than most from persecution and tragedy. We have never forgotten these moments. We remember them on our fast days -- especially on Tisha B'Av with its literature of lament, the kinot. Yet, with a power of recovery that at times has been almost miraculous, it has never allowed itself to be defeated by grief. One rabbinic passage epitomises the dominant voice within Judaism: "After the Second Temple was destroyed, ascetics multiplied in Israel. They did not eat meat or drink wine... Rabbi Joshua told them: 'Not to mourn at all is impossible, for it has been decreed. But to mourn too much is also impossible.'" (Tosefta Sotah 15:10-15; see also Baba Batra 60b.)

In this anti-traditional age, with its hostility to ritual and its preference for the public display of private emotion (what Philip Rieff, in the 1960s, called "the triumph of the therapeutic"), the idea that grief has its laws and limits sounds strange. Yet almost anyone who has had the misfortune to be bereaved can testify to the profound healing brought about by observance of the laws of avelut (mourning).

Torah and tradition knew how to honour both the dead and the living, sustaining the delicate balance between grief and consolation, the loss of life that gives us pain, and the re-affirmation of life that gives us hope. *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

"See, I am giving before you this day a blessing and a curse..." (Deut 11:26) So opens our

Biblical portion, which is making reference to the covenant at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eybal which dramatically concludes the Book of Deuteronomy and precedes our entry into the land of Israel. What I would like to analyze in this commentary is a curious and seemingly pedantic detail, a strange grammatical formulation which, when properly understood, will shed light not only upon the nature of this third and final Pentateuchal covenant but also upon a fundamental philosophy of our religious nationality.

Our verse began with a singular verb which addresses an individual, re'eh -- see, but then continues

with a plural pronoun, lifnehem – (giving) before you, addressing a multitude. This grammatical switch in number – from singular to plural – is especially worthy of note, since when we do find such Biblical changes they take place in the opposite direction, from plural to singular. In the Biblical portion of the Decalogue, for example, G-d's introduction addresses in plural form the multitude of Israelites (Exodus 18: 4 ff : "You have seen –re'etem – what I have done to Egypt, and I lifted you – et'hem upon eagles' wings..."), but then switches to the singular form in the ten commandments themselves (Exodus 20:1 ff: "I am the Lord your G-d – E-lohekha, singular – whom I took you – hotzeitikha, singular – from the land of Egypt..., You shall not murder, lo tirzah, singular").

Nahmanides explains the switch from plural to singular, and catalogues many other instances when such a transition in number appears, as the desire of G-d to make certain that His words are being heard not only as a command to the general masses but also as a personal injunction to each and every individual! (Ramban, on Genesis 18:3 s.v. Al na).

In effect, G-d is thereby appearing as a Hassidic Rebbe rather than as a Congregational Rabbi, in accordance with the common folk understanding of the distinction between the two. When a congregational Rabbi speaks, every individual believes that he is addressing the person next to him; when a Hassidic Rebbe speaks, every person listening knows and feels that he is addressing him personally.

But if this is the case, how can we understand our opening verse, in which G-d begins with the singular and continues with the plural? I believe that this unusual grammatical phenomenon speaks to the very definition of this third covenant, known as the covenant of arevut or mutual responsibility (B.T. Sotah 33 b). The Israelites, divided by the tribes in two groups of six stand together to receive G-d's blessings on Mt. Gerizim and G-d's curses on Mt. Eyval, poised before Shekhem and ready to enter the Promised Land. Our Biblical portion provides the exact location: "Are they not beyond the Jordan, ... in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the Aravah, over against Gilgal, beside the oak tree of Moreh?" (Deut 11:30). And the term aravah, or plains, is taken by the sages of the Talmud as a double entendre (play on words), the Hebrew arev also meaning co-singer, the individual who takes financial responsibility if a borrower reneges on the payment of his debt. This is the covenant which insists that every Israelite must see himself as part of a whole, as a member of a nation which sees itself as a united organism whose separate individuals feel inextricably and indelibly bound to each other in fate, destiny and responsibility. Hence G-d begins with the singular and continues into the plural in order to impress upon the individual Israelite that he must in some way merge with the multitude that he must assume responsibility

for the entire Jewish people, that "every Israelite is a co-signer, responsible for every other Israelite."

This is what I believe to be the higher meaning of a shomer torah u-mitzvot, literally a guardian over the Torah and Tradition. It is not sufficient to merely study Torah and to perform the commandments; just as a guardian takes responsibility for the objects in his possession, so must each of us – everyone in his/her own way – take responsibility for the dissemination of Torah and the establishment of proper Torah institutions in his/ her community, in his/her generation.

It is recorded that the famed Rav Meir Shapiro of Lublin (early twentieth century) was forced into a dispute with a Cardinal concerning the quality of our Jewish tradition. "The Talmud is blatantly anti – Christian," argued the Cardinal. "Does it not state that 'only Israelites are called adam (Hebrew for human beings) whereas Gentiles are not called adam,' and therefore we Gentiles are not considered by you to be human beings?!" The Rabbi explained that there are four synonyms for human being in the Hebrew language: gever, ish, enosh and adam. The first three of these nouns have both a singular and a plural: gevarim, ishim, aneshim; only adam has only one form, both singular and plural, humanity – a compound noun, including every one together as a single organism. If a Jew is suffering in an Islamic – Fundamentalist country, or if Israel seems to be in danger, Jews world – wide demonstrate and flock to their homeland. This is a unique Jewish quality, built into our third covenant. In the case of the Jewish nation, the singular merges into the plural, the individual Jew is an inextricable part of his people.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the frightening phenomena of civilizations, both ancient and modern, is discussed in the Torah reading this week. That recurring phenomenon is the one of the false prophet. The Torah warned the people of Israel that there would be false prophets in their future. It also warned them how dangerous and sinister such people are, because for all of their charisma and attraction, their influence is lethal. Even if the false prophet gives signs and omens to substantiate the prophecy that he is advancing, and those signs and omens apparently become actual and real, nevertheless the Torah admonishes us "do not dare to succumb to listen [and have belief] in him." The Torah wants us to carefully inspect both the message and the messenger before investing our behavior and future in the forecasts of anyone. The Torah especially emphasizes the danger of "dreamers of dreams," the purveyors of utopian schemes, unrealistic magic and ideologue nonsense. Look at what Karl Marx' dreams, theories and ideological certainties have accomplished

for mankind. How about the false prophets of all of the major idealistic movements of our sad century? Hitler, Mao, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Pol Pot, etc. all prophesied the emerging "New Order," the "Brave New World," "Democratic Collectivism," "Redesigning the World," and all of their prophesies gained millions of believers. But all their dreams, certainties and bravado ended up as pure nonsense, or better put, impure bloody nonsense. False prophets are deadly expensive luxuries for human societies.

How does one spot a false prophet? Again, the Torah is most instructive in dealing with this problem. If the prophet promotes goals, or means to achieve those goals, which are contrary to the accepted value norms of Torah, then he is automatically a false prophet. The promotion of paganism, the unjustified violence in the supposed cause of good, "moral" political and intellectual leaders who are personally immoral, radicals who are determined to destroy everything old to make way for the purportedly blessed new -- none of these scenarios is allowed by the Torah. They should not be condoned by society, certainly not by Jewish society, either. Our world is always looking for a new false prophet. The new ideologues such as the Greens, who are dangerously close to pantheism, if not paganism; the homosexual lobby, interested in proselytizing others and debasing all standards of accepted human behavior established over the last two millennia; and the true believers, both Right and Left, who believe that coercive social engineering is the panacea for all our inner and communal ills, are all part of the group of the false prophets of our time. We should be steadfast in avoiding being swayed by their currently, but only temporarily, political correct, siren song. Anything that does not conform to God's natural law of nature and humans, as clearly expressed in the Torah, is a dangerous delusion and a false and destructive type of prophecy.

The Jewish society, because of its innate, almost naive, search for spirit, perfection, and a compassionate and just world, is particularly prone to the disaster of false prophets. The Jewish world in its long history has been able to identify and reject false prophets and false messiahs. But that ability has suffered over the past two centuries. Our Jewish world has embraced many Jewish and non-Jewish false prophets, ideologies, programs and goals recently. The disastrous consequences of such recklessness in the Jewish world are by now patently obvious to all unprejudiced observers. The admonition of the Torah to ignore and reject the false prophets of the world is as valid today as ever. We disregard it at our extreme peril. © 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The first word in our portion, re-eh, is one of the most powerful terms found in the Torah. In fact, God is described as a ro-eh on three different levels.

The first time the word is found in the Torah, the Torah states that after creating light or energy, "vayar Elohim ki tov, God saw it was good." (Genesis 1:4) Obviously an anthropomorphism. Still, as God saw, so do we have the power to see.

On a deeper level, re-eh means to see in the sense of empathizing for the other. Note the description just prior to the deluge in the time of Noah. There the Torah states, "and the Lord saw (vayar Hashem) that the wickedness of man was great on the earth." (Genesis 6:5) This could mean that God saw with the sense of feeling the pain and horror which was unfolding—the wickedness of man whom he had created. As God felt the pain of humankind, so too should all people created in God's image empathize with the other.

There is yet another understanding of ra-ah. Ra-ah could have covenantal connotations—that is God seen with an eye on establishing and fulfilling His covenant with His people. Indeed, the first time ra-ah appears after Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah were chosen, the Torah states "and the Lord appeared (veyera) to Avraham and said 'to your seed I will give this land.'" (Genesis 12:7)

Re-eh as used in our portion seems to echo the covenantal approach. Note that when God covenantally chooses Avraham, the Torah states, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." (Genesis 12:3) Similarly in our portion, the Torah states—"see (re-eh), I have placed before you a blessing and a curse." (Deuteronomy 11:26)

And just as Avraham first built an altar to God in Shechem—Elon Moreh (Genesis 12:6) and his rendezvous with God reaches a crescendo in Yerushalayim, (Genesis 12:9) so in our parsha is there discussion of how the blessing and curse would be put forth on Har Gerizim and Har Eyval which are in the area of Shechem. (Deuteronomy 11:29) Not coincidentally, the parsha proceeds to discuss our obligations once we enter the land and come to Yerushalayim. (Deuteronomy 12:1-19)

Thus, ra-ah has a threefold meaning. To see, to empathize, to covenantalize. However, when Avraham and Sarah were chosen, ra-ah was in the context of the promised covenant. God was the ro-eh. Here, in our portion, as the Jews prepare to enter Israel, it is in the context of the covenant for the first time soon being realized. Re-eh, therefore, refers to the Jewish people achieving their covenantal mission.

No matter what political leaning, this has been possibly one of the most challenging chapters in the progression of this covenant. However, we must continue to remember that we are fortunate to live in the era of the establishment of the State of Israel, when we are all a bit closer to the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. ©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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah uses some mighty strong language this week that really needs some understanding: "See I am placing before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing, if you will listen to the commandments of the Almighty which I am commanding you this day. And the curse, if you do not listen to the Almighty's commandments."

On top of this, the Sforno, a renowned 15th century Italian commentator, adds "There is no middle way. If a person follows the Torah, his life will be a blessed life. If a person fails to live by the commandments, he will live a cursed life."

This seems to be a rather extreme statement. However, if we understand that life is either purposeful and meaningful or not, then we can understand that a life of meaning is a blessed life. And a life without meaning is a life devoid of satisfaction and imbued with a sense that nothing makes a difference when life is over anyway (and what could be a greater curse than that?).

Understanding that there is a God Who created the world, sustains it and supervises it -- gives life intrinsic meaning. One can always create a sense of meaning in a diversion -- acquiring wealth, following baseball or even in something as noble as helping others. However, unless there is a God and there are absolute responsibilities and values, then there is no inherent meaning to life. It gnaws at one's psyche.

A person needs to have purpose in life, to know that life is meaningful. To be aware of the Creator and to fulfill His will enables a person to experience the greatest of blessings in this world. Each day will be an exciting adventure full of the joy of doing the Almighty's will. The choice is yours to make. Choose life! Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Giving Personally

This week the Torah teaches us about charity. Not only does it tell us who to give, it tells us how to give. And it does so in an uncharacteristic and seemingly repetitive fashion.

"If there shall be an impoverished person from among you or any of your brethren in your cities... you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather you should surely give him and you shall not harden your heart when you give him" (Deuteronomy 15:7-10).

The repetitive expression and emphasis on the word him is troubling. "You shall surely give him and not feel bad" would suffice. Why is the phrase "when you give him" necessary? The Torah is referring to the person to whom you have given. It tells us not to feel bad about giving charity. Why the extra phrase about the recipient?

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soleveitchik, the Rav (Rabbi) of Brisk, was revered throughout Europe as a foremost scholar and Talmudic sage. One aspect of his character was known to shine even brighter than his scholarship -- his humility.

Once, he stopped by an inn in the middle of a freezing night and asked for lodging. He had no entourage with him, and the innkeeper treated him with abuse. He did not disclose who he was, and after pleading with the innkeeper, he was allowed to sleep on the floor near a stove. The innkeeper, thinking that the man was a poor beggar, did not offer him any food and refused to give him more than a little bread and water for which Rabbi Soleveitchik was willing to pay.

The next morning Rabbi Soleveitchik did not see the shocked expression on the face of the innkeeper when a few of the town notables came to the inn. "We understand that the Brisker Rav was passing through this town. Is it possible that he came by your inn last night?"

At first, the innkeeper dismissed the question -- until the Rav appeared and the group entered to greet him warmly. In a few minutes the town dignitaries converged on the inn with their students and children all in line to meet the great sage.

Terribly embarrassed, the innkeeper, who realized that he had berated and humiliated a leading Torah figure, decided to beg forgiveness from the Rav.

"Rebbe," he cried, "I am terribly sorry. I had no idea that you were the Brisker Rav. Please forgive me."

The Rav replied. "I would love to, but you see that would be impossible."

"But why?" asked the owner in shock.

"You see," explained the sage. "You are coming to ask forgiveness from the Brisker Rav. That is not who you insulted. You debased a simple Jew who came for lodging -- and he is no longer here to forgive you."

The Torah explains that there are in essence two parts to tzedaka -- the patron and the recipient. Often the giver becomes detached from the recipient; he wants to give but has no concern for the receiver. He may even have disdain for the person at the door, but the mitzvah of tzedaka overrides his pre-judgment

and a contribution is given. Perhaps the Torah stresses the words "do not feel badly in your heart when you give to him," to teach us an important lesson.

In addition to the mitzvah of giving, one should identify with the recipient too. Know the true situation of the person to whom you are giving. Understand what you are giving for. Be sure that when you are giving to him, your heart should not be in bad spirits. The Torah recognizes the simplest beggar as someone worthy enough to have his pronoun repeated. "Surely give him; do not feel bad in your heart when you give him." If the Torah is careful enough to classify the beggar as an individual who transcends a generic recipient -- and transform him into a personal beneficiary, then perhaps he is worthy of recognition by all of us. ©2017 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Baal Tosif

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

One is forbidden to add on to the Mitzvot whether in relation to time (as in the case of adding an extra day to a holiday), or relating to an object (as in adding a fifth species in the Lulav, or another portion in the Tefillin), or adding any new Mitzvah. The question arises; how can our sages add for example the prohibition of eating chicken with milk when the Torah does not?

Some say that the prohibition of "Baal Tosif" is only if our Rabbis state that this is the law dictated in the Torah. However if they state that the prohibition is derived from the Rabbis it is permitted.

Others state that this law of "Baal Tosif" only applies to adding positive commandments ("Aseh") but negative commandments ("Lo Taaseh") are permissible for our sages to add. However this reasoning would present the question how our sages were able to enact the positive laws of Purim and Chanukah.

With regard to the adding of a day (as in the eighth day of the holiday of Succot) if one was to openly announce that he is not adding this day as an extra day of the holiday, in such a case it would be permitted. Thus Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook states, that if one made a "Heker" (a specific identification) to exclude it from the laws in the Torah it would be permissible. Thus in the case of Chanukah and Purim , since in each of the two holidays there is a specific identification ("Heker")that separates it from the other holidays, it would be permissible to establish these laws(in the case of Purim there is a differentiation between those who live in a city surrounded by walls from the time of Joshua, and those who not, and with Chanukah there are three distinct ways of lighting the Menorah).

On the other hand, one who performs a Mitzvah numerous times during the day, or a woman

who performs Mitzvot that are not obligatory for her to perform, do not transgress the prohibition of "Baal Tosif". However according to one view, if they perform these Mitzvot because they believe it is dictated from the Torah, they would indeed transgress the prohibition of "Baal Tosif". ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah directs its focus towards Zion and presents her illustrious future in the time of the Jewish redemption. In the haftorah, we discover that after all the warm comforting words said to the Jewish people Zion still refused to be consoled. The prophet Yeshaya directs his words towards Zion and says in the name of Hashem, "You afflicted, stormy city who has not been comforted, behold I will lay your floors with precious stones and set your foundation with sapphire stones." (54:11) In truth, the Jewish people have already returned to the land of Israel but Zion remained unconsoled. The thousands of years that Zion lay in ruins needed to be accounted for. In the past, she had been accustomed to being the center of the world, the most beautiful sight on earth. But that wonderful respect, dignity and appreciation was taken away from her and has been withheld for such an extended period of time. Instead of her previous splendor and glory she continuously faced shame, degradation and times of despair. Zion therefore responded to Hashem and requested compensation and consolation for her long forsaken life.

Hashem granted her request and told Zion that He would restore her tenfold to her original glory. In addition, Hashem pledged to establish Zion such a desirable city that even her floors and walls would be constructed from precious jewels and stones. Her physical beauty will transcend any existing structure and the city will literally sparkle and glisten. Every moment spent in Zion will be an unforgettable experience and everyone will be irresistibly attracted to her splendor and glory.

The prophet adds a special dimension to this glorious era and says, "And all of your children will be students of Hashem and much peace will be amongst them." (54:13) The clarity of Torah knowledge will be so readily accessible that all of the children of Zion will be regarded students of Hashem Himself. Chazal in Yalkut Shimoni (Yeshaya 479) expound upon this verse and reveal that the confusion and diversity amongst the Jewish people are the result of the present system of learning. Until the era of Mashiach one must rely upon human beings with their limited intellectual capacities to transmit the Torah from teacher to student. But in the times of Mashiach all of the children of Zion will be privileged to study Torah from the original source, Hashem Himself. The clarity that will result from such

study will produce an indescribable degree of peace and harmony, everyone following the same perfect path of observance.

The prophet then directs his words to the nations of the world and says, "All who are thirsty go and drink, even without pay; go and acquire wine and milk." (55:1) Chazal (Yalkut ad loc.) explain that the water stated here refers to Torah knowledge and the wine and milk refer to spiritual sustenance. The Radak develops this and says that the revelations of Hashem in the time of Mashiach will produce an indescribable thirst for knowledge. The nations of the world will be so impressed by Hashem's miracles and revelations that they will flock to Zion to study the word of Hashem. This will produce the ultimate fulfillment of the prophetic words, "For from Zion will go forth Torah." Once again Zion will be the center of Torah for the world. But this time the Torah will be appreciated even by the nations of the world who will recognize it as the absolute truth. Even the nations will experience Torah as their true source of life and will search for it as one searches for his bread and water.

And to complete the picture, Yeshaya foretells, "Behold nations that never knew you will run and become your servants because the glory of Hashem shines upon you (55:5) With this, Zion will finally be consoled. She has been promised to return to her original splendor. She has been promised to become the most desirable spot on the face of the earth. Her students will be privileged to study directly from Hashem. She'll serve as the center of Torah for the entire world, nations of the world included. And finally she'll even attract the nations to flock to her and display total subservience to the glory of Hashem which will permanently rest in her midst. Her lonely forsaken life is over forever and in its place she will now enjoy the glorious future of being the most desirable site on earth.

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RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

This week's parsha discusses the navi sheker, or false prophet. He's the guy who shows up claiming to have spoken to God and received instructions to do that which is contrary to Torah law. He might even SUCCESSFULLY perform a miracle to validate his assumed authority.

The Torah says to kill him. After being proven guilty before a Sanhedrin, he is executed as mandated by Torah. For obvious reasons, the world has no room for false prophets and dreamers who steer people away from God and truth.

Of course, now that the Jewish people are still in exile, we lack a Sanhedrin and any authority to execute anyone. Consequently, "false prophets" spring up everywhere and can say and do whatever they want. They can act without any obvious impunity.

Then again, we don't have prophecy either. We lost that in 313 BCE, long before we even entered this fourth and final exile. That being the case, it is even harder to be a false prophet than ever before, seemingly ending the entire issue of the navi sheker.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. There is usually a lot more to mitzvos than what first meets the eye. This is why when explaining the parameters of a mitzvah it is not uncommon to include actions that, at first, do not seem to be part of the mitzvah. Mitzvos have underlying principles that often have multiple and varied expressions, making them applicable even at times one might have thought they were no longer relevant.

For example, a navi sheker only CLAIMED to have received his instructions as prophecy. God, of course, never actually told him what he said to do. He doesn't need prophecy to be a false prophet. He just needs to say he had it, and that can apply in ANY generation, even today, especially if people are gullible enough to believe him/her.

I'm not sure if the prohibition can be stretched to include the following, but its message certainly does.

One of the main aspects of the false prophet is his credibility in the eyes of others. If everyone thinks that he is crazy, they won't listen to him. He is only dangerous as long as people believe he may speak on behalf of God, something God does not take lightly -- AT ALL.

What about a "rabbi" or "leader" who tells their congregation what THEY think God REALLY meant when He commanded a particular mitzvah? I was once told by someone with authority in his community, "I don't believe God meant for people to sit in the dark on Shabbos just because they forgot to turn on their lights, or that He wanted someone to be alone on Shabbos instead of driving to shul to be with others."

Now, he didn't say that God told him that. Even if he did, no one would have believed him and they would have let him go instead. That gullible they were not. But, when he expressed such beliefs as opinions, they carried weight in the minds of those to whom he spoke, partly because they wanted to believe the same thing, partly because he was an intelligent and "learned" man. They relied upon their rabbi for religious direction.

That too is speaking in the Name of God. It says, "Though God did not tell me to say this, He probably would have if prophecy was possible today." That implication is far from harmless.

There is a famous midrash in the Talmud in which Moshe Rabbeinu is shown the greatness of Rebi Akiva (Menachos 29b). The vision, apparently, occurred prior to Moshe Rabbeinu being taught the entire Torah on Mt. Sinai by God. Therefore, when Rebi Akiva expounded what he knew, Moshe Rabbeinu did not recognize what he said, and became concerned.

It wasn't until Rebi Akiva said that the law came

directly from Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai that Moshe Rabbeinu calmed down. Moshe realized that Rebi Akiva had been teaching law that he himself had yet to learn.

The midrash is clear. Rebi Akiva had not known something Moshe Rabbeinu had not known as well. He had not originated a law, based upon the needs of his time, that had not begun with Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai. It had been a timing issue in the Talmud, not a knowledge one.

This did not stop a current branch of the Jewish people from using the midrash, in a large ad in the New York Times, to say exactly the opposite. They were faithful to the Talmudic account up until the end of the story. The conclusion THEY inserted was: If the great Moses did not know what Rebi Akiva knew in his time, then Rebi Akiva would not have known what he know in our time.

In other words, the ad ignored the most important part of the story, the punchline if you will. They inserted their own message which contradicted the point of the story. They used a midrash that was written to reduce any falsely assumed halachic authority in the future to invest themselves with it. And you can be sure that their words did not fall on deaf ears.

Now, if people do not believe in the authority of the Talmud, or even that Torah was given word-by-word by God to Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai, they can think they were just cleverly making THEIR point. What THEY believe however does not determine reality. What GOD thinks IS reality, and He is going to be far less impressed by their faulty and abusive representation of Torah and Judaism.

This does not just apply to secular religious leaders. It applies to everyone. "God" and "truth" are spelled differently, but they mean the same thing. A person may not believe in absolute truth, but that does not mean they aren't misrepresenting it when they express their opinion. If they convince others of their tragically mistaken point of view, then they are guilty of lying about God.

It is something to consider unless a person is 100 percent certain that God doesn't exist, which he can never be. It is simply impossible to know enough to be 100 percent certain of such a thing. Too much exists to say otherwise to be even close to it. Doubt in God's existence is due to ignorance, not knowledge, even with respect to atheistic geniuses.

Even when a God-believing person acts in a way contrary to Torah -- a profanation of the Name of God -- he misrepresents truth to the world. He may not be a navi sheker, but his actions might be considered close to it. Torah believing Jews, for many, represent the word of God in the world. That's a HUGE responsibility that must be shouldered with care.

The bottom line? Pursue truth, and protect it.

The reward is great for doing so, and the opposite is true when it is left vulnerable to abuse. ©2017 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI ZEV LEFF

A Life Lesson

In this week's Torah portion, Moses tells the Jewish people additional commandments they need to follow. And then he implores upon them to: "...do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d." (Deuteronomy 12:28)

It seems rather obvious for Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, to tell his followers to do what is right in the eyes of G-d. But this really isn't as much of a rhetorical statement as one might think.

We live in a society where we care enormously about what other people think about us. Whether you're aware of it or not, the things you say, the clothes you wear, and the places you shop are influenced largely by the perception you want to give to others. This is precisely why in public we might act one way towards someone, but in private-outside the watchful eyes of those we so much want to impress-we will act in a completely different way.

When Moses told the Jews to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d, he was teaching us all a life-changing insight: G-d is everywhere. He's right next to you as you're reading this. And He "follows" you when you walk to your car, and He sits right next to you at work. There isn't a cubic foot of space in which G-d is not completely and totally present and aware of everything this is being said and done. Remember, when it comes to G-d's presence, there's no such thing as privacy. G-d is always right there.

In New York City's Time Square there exists a massive television screen called the JumboTron. Thousands of people-some as far as 20 city blocks away- can see whatever images are displayed on this screen. What if you lived your life as though it was being shown live on the JumboTron? How much different would you act if everything you did was being broadcast in real-time on this giant screen?

But that's exactly the powerful message that G-d's teaching us. We are on this screen and G-d is observing everything.

So instead of doing what looks right in the eyes of your co-workers and friends, listen to the words of Moses. Concern yourself with impressing the One who truly wants you to become great and strive to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d. ©2008

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