

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

What was the first commandment? On this there are two fascinating disagreements in Judaism. One was between Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) and the author of the Halakhot Gedolot, written in the period of the Gaonim, probably by R. Shimon Kayyara (eighth century), that for the first time enumerated in a systematic way the 613 commands. The other was between Maimonides and the poet and thinker Judah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1145). These were two different arguments, and they touched, as we will see, on fundamentals of faith.

The first is simply this. Maimonides counts the opening line of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery," as a positive command, to believe in God. (Sefer haMitzvot, positive command 1) The Halakhot Gedolot does not count it as a command at all. Why not?

Nahmanides (1194-1270), in defence of the Halakhot Gedolot,² speculates that its author counted among the 613 commands only the specific laws enjoining us to do this or avoid doing that. (Nahmanides, Hasagot to Sefer haMitzvot, ad loc. This is not Nahmanides' own position. In his Commentary to the Torah (to Ex. 20:2), he counts the first verse of the Decalogue as a commandment in its own right, adopting a view similar to that of Maimonides.)

The commands are rules of behaviour, not items of faith. Faith in the existence of God, or acceptance of the kingship of God, is not itself a command but a prelude to and presupposition of the commands. He quotes a passage from the Mekhilta:

"You shall have no other gods besides me." Why is this said? Because it says, "I am the Lord your God." To explain this by way of a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province. His servants said to him, "Issue decrees for the people." He, however, told them, "No. When they accept my sovereignty, I will issue decrees. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, how will they carry out my decrees?"

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בן ציון בן שמואל אהרן ורחל ע"ה
תוצבה

According to Nahmanides, the Halakhot Gedolot must have believed that the verse, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is not itself a command, but a statement of why the Israelites should be bound by the will of God. He had rescued them, liberated them, and brought them to safety. The first verse of the Decalogue is not a law but a statement of fact, a reason why the Israelites should accept God's sovereignty.

Thanks to the archeological discoveries about which I wrote in the previous Covenant and Conversation, we now know that the biblical covenant has the same literary structure as ancient near eastern political treaties. These treaties usually follow a six-part pattern, of which the first three elements were [1] the preamble, identifying the initiator of the treaty, [2] a historical review, summarising the past relationship between the parties, and [3] the stipulations, namely the terms and conditions of the covenant.

Seen in this context, the first verse of the Ten Commandments is a highly abridged form of [1] and [2]. "I am the Lord your God" is the preamble. "Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is the historical review. The verses that follow are the stipulations, or as we would call them, the commands. If so, then the Halakhot Gedolot as understood by Nahmanides was correct in seeing the verse as an introduction to the commands, not a command in its own right. That is the first disagreement.

The second was between Maimonides and Judah Halevi. For Maimonides, the first command is to believe in God, creator of heaven and earth: The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realise that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being... If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If however it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist... To acknowledge this truth is a positive command, as it is said: "I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:2, Deut 5:7). (Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah, 1:1-5)

Judah Halevi disagreed. Halevi was not only the greatest of medieval Hebrew poets, he also wrote one of Judaism's theological masterpieces, The Kuzari. It is framed as a dialogue between a rabbi and the King of the Khazars. Historically, the Khazars were a Turkish people who, between the seventh and eleventh

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centuries, ruled a considerable area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, including southern Russia, northern Caucasus, eastern Ukraine, Western Kazakhstan, and northwestern Uzbekistan.

Many Jewish traders and refugees lived there, and in 838 the Khazar King Bulan converted to Judaism, after supposedly holding a debate between representatives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. The Arabic writer Dimashqi writes that the Khazars, having encountered the Jewish faith, "found it better than their own and accepted it". Khazaria thus became, spiritually as well as geographically, an independent third force between the Muslim Caliphate and the Christian Byzantine Empire. After their conversion, the Khazar people used Jewish personal names, spoke and wrote in Hebrew, were circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the Torah and Talmud, and observed the Jewish festivals.

The Kuzari is Judah Halevi's overarching account of Judaism, cast in the form of an imagined conversation between the King and a rabbi that led to the King's conversion. In it, Halevi draws a portrait diametrically opposed to Maimonides' account. Judaism, for Halevi, is not philosophical but counter-philosophical. It's not about abstract concepts but about concrete experiences: the taste of slavery, the feeling of liberation, the realisation on the part of the people that God had heard their cry and set them free. The God of Abraham is not the God of Aristotle. The prophets were not philosophers. Philosophers found God in physics and metaphysics, but the prophets found God in history. This is how Halevi's rabbi explains his faith to the king of the Khazars: I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land, after having brought them through the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way... (Kuzari I:11)

He goes on to emphasise that God's opening words in the revelation at Mount Sinai were not, "I am the Lord your God, creator of heaven and earth" but "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Kuzari I:25). The covenant God made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai was not rooted in the ancient past of creation but in the recent

past of the exodus.

What is at stake in this difference of opinion between Maimonides and Halevi? At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of the nature of God and His relationship to the universe. On the one hand God is creator of the universe and the maker of the human person "in His image". This aspect of God is universal. It is accessible to anyone, Jew or gentile. Aristotle arrived at it through logic and metaphysics. For him, God was the "prime mover" who set the universe into motion. Today, many people reach the same conclusion through science: the universe is too finely tuned for the emergence of life to have come into being through chance. Some arrive at it not through logic or science but through a simple sense of awe and wonder ("Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical" said Wittgenstein). This aspect of God is called by the Torah, Elokim.

But there is a quite different aspect of God which predominates throughout most of Tanakh. This is God as He is involved in the fate of one family, one nation: the children of Israel. He intervened in their history. He made a highly specific covenant with them at Sinai -- not at all like the general one He made with Noah and all humanity after the Flood. The Noahide covenant is simple and basic: it involved a mere seven commands. The Sinai covenant, by contrast, is highly articulated, covering almost every aspect of life. This aspect of God is signalled by the use of the four-letter name for which we traditionally substitute the word Hashem. (On the two aspects and names, see Kuzari IV:1-3; and Ramban to Exodus 3:13.)

Maimonides, the philosopher, emphasised the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of God. Judah Halevi, the poet, was more attuned to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of God in the historical drama of the Jewish people.

Maimonides was the greatest halakhist and philosopher of the Middle Ages, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that here, at least, the Halakhot Gedolot and Judah Halevi were closer to the plain sense of the text. Even the greatest thinker is not right all the time, which is why Judaism remains a conversation scored for many voices, each with its own insight into the infinite inflections of the Divine word. *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

"When it shall be difficult for you, all of these words [Heb: "devarim"] will find you at the end of the days, and you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice" [Deut. 4:30].

Curiously, our Sages refer to Tisha b'Av as a festival, a "Mo'ed". How could this be? After all, it is the date on which both Temples were destroyed! And in contrast to the other fast days marking the destruction of Jerusalem, which span "merely" from sunrise to sunset, Tisha b'Av lasts for an entire 25 hours, during which time we express an intensity of mourning for Jerusalem unmatched during the rest of the year.

The paradoxical quality of this utterly solemn yet fundamentally celebratory day finds practical expression in Jewish Law, where Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of *Shulchan Aruch*, rules that on Tisha b'Av, we do not recite the somber supplication prayers of Tachanun, or the penitential Selichot that define our other fast days, "because Tisha b'Av is called a 'Mo'ed'" [festival, based on a homiletic explanation by our Sages to Lamentations 1:15].

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, in his *Aruch Hashulchan*, explains that the basis for this festival-like quality of Tisha b'Av is the Divine promise that, ultimately, days of mourning will be transformed into joyous festivals and holidays [cf. Zech. 8:19].

I would like to suggest a complementary view of why Tisha b'Av is seen in a celebratory light, based on a verse from this week's Torah portion, Va'etchanan. Moses provides a quintessential outline of Jewish history: settlement of Israel, corruption and idolatry, assimilation, destruction and exile.

But these tragedies will be followed by our eventual return to God and His land, because "the Lord your God is a compassionate God who will not forget the covenant with your forbears which He has sworn to them" (Deut. 4:25–31, 38).

Indeed, we read these very verses on the day of Tisha B'Av itself, the day on which we commemorate the destruction of the Temples, the loss of our national sovereignty; and we remember at the same time that although our sacred shrines and even our sacred cities were destroyed, our nation was not!

And so the seed for our ultimate rejoicing on the Ninth of Av is firmly planted in the ringing declaration, "when it shall be difficult for you, these words [Heb.: "devarim"] will find you...and you shall return" (Deut. 4:30). The promise of Tisha B'Av is the fact that even as God allowed the temple's "wood and stone" to be destroyed, He kept the Jewish people and our covenant alive, promising ultimate return and redemption.

I translate the Hebrew "devarim" in this context as "words" – the words of the Torah will find you in the depths of your exile and will cause you to still retain your identity as Jews even without your homeland and Temple – because the relationship between Israel and the words of the Torah is the true miracle of Tisha B'Av. It is what enabled us to live despite the physical destruction; no mortal force could ever destroy the Divine words! The parchment may burn to the ground,

but the letters fly aloft and live eternally. The letters lived – and so the nation lived – despite the physical destruction of Tisha B'Av.

I first learned to translate it that way in 1965, when Lincoln Square Synagogue was in a small apartment on the West Side of Manhattan (150 West End Avenue, 1D). I began to notice a middle-aged gentleman enter the back of the synagogue towards the end of the Torah reading, remain standing near the door, and quickly leave after the sermon. On the Sabbath of Va'etchanan, he came towards the beginning of the reading – and as the aforementioned words were read, he fled from the synagogue in tears.

I ran out after him, and caught up with him. I discovered that his name was Wolf Reichard, and that he came from a family of pious Satmar Hasidim. After living through the hell of Auschwitz, he gave up on God. Nevertheless, when our apartment synagogue opened up, however, he became strongly attracted to the services, almost despite his present self but in deepest recognition of his truest self.

Wolf explained that when he heard the Torah reader call out, almost specifically to him, "When it shall be difficult for you, all of these words will find you...and you shall return," he knew he could no longer escape his past or his future destiny. From then on, he came to shul not only every Sabbath (from the beginning of services) but also every morning.

In our generation, one's estrangement from Judaism is more likely to be the result of a thoroughly assimilated upbringing than persecution and theological rebellion. The spiritual decimation of the Jewish People in contemporary diaspora is truly worthy of mourning.

But on this Sabbath of Comfort ["Shabbat Nachamu"] we can find solace that the words of the Torah have the power to find every Jew, no matter how disconnected from his or her roots, and inspire them back to the destiny of the Jewish People. Indeed, embedded within the destruction symbolized by Tisha b'Av is God's promise of return and redemption. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vaetchanan begins with Moshe pleading to be able to enter Israel. The Gemara (tractate) brings a question posed by Rav Simlai, who wonders why Moshe needed to go into Israel so much that he had to beg for it. He answers that there are many Mitzvot (commandments) that can only be performed in Israel, and Moshe needed to perform them. The Chassam Sofer, however, questions the wording of Rav Simlai. Who said Moshe needed to go into Israel? Couldn't it be that he simply wanted to?

The Chassam Sofer answers that Moshe saw an opportunity to do more Mitzvot, and although they weren't in front of him (he had to go into Israel to

perform them), he still felt the need to perform them, and did what he could to be able to complete them. In contrast, when was the last time we begged anyone to be able to do a Mitzvah? In fact, do we perform all the Mitzvot that we can? We should strive to be like Moshe, and work to appreciate, take advantage of, and especially learn about all the opportunities we are given, to do something good both for G-d, for each other, and ultimately for ourselves. ©2017 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe's final heartfelt appeal to the merciful God of Israel is somehow refused and of no avail. He will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. One can only feel the bitter disappointment and frustration that he must have experienced at this response. Nevertheless, he continues in his role as teacher and leader of Israel even until his final day.

The balance of this book of Dvarim is taught to his people and to all eternity after he is aware that the greatest ambition of his life – entering the Land of Israel – has been denied to him. Though he will refer to this matter a number of times throughout this book of Dvarim, there is no further evidence of any resentment on his part to the will of God, as expressed to him in the Torah reading of this week.

Even though he was apparently answered in the negative this did not affect his attitude towards the Jewish people, let alone the God of Israel. Apparently he is comforted by the fact that he was answered and that all doubts were removed as to his status and future. The rabbis of the Talmud have taught us that there is no greater satisfaction than when all doubts regarding a given situation are removed. Even a negative response contains within it a certain measure of satisfaction at the resolution of a doubtful issue.

Moshe will be joined to his people for all eternity even though he will not be privileged to enter the Land of Israel with them. And this half-full glass should suffice to bring him comfort and contentment.

On the surface there appears to be relatively few times in our painful history of exile and persecution when comfort and contentment are afforded to us. We have to make do with glasses that are only half-full, physically speaking. However, the Jewish people always had an overflowing cup when it came to spirit, holiness and Torah scholarship. This was always our vessel of hope and optimism.

The Jewish people always believe that there are better days ahead. That belief alone sustains us through the darkest of times and the most perilous of situations. Hope for the future is the greatest tool for consolation in the present. Our generation has lived to see a physical and spiritual rebirth of the Jewish people, unimagined a century ago.

But there were people then who dreamt that such a rebirth was not only possible but that it actually would take place. It was this belief, illogical as it appeared at that time, which was the source of comfort and consolation to a stricken people. It is only when grief and disappointment create a lack of hope and commitment to a better future that any meaningful form of consolation and healing is prevented.

These weeks of consolation and preparation for the great days that soon will be upon us should strengthen us in our resolve and spirit... and will truly remain a great source of consolation for Israel and the Jewish people. ©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

This week's portion presents a grim forecast of the Jews' fortune. God says that following their entry into the land of Israel, the Jews would sin, resulting in their exile. The Torah then states: "And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." (Deuteronomy 4:28) This sentence may be descriptive of further sins the Jewish people would commit once driven out of Israel. Yet, one could also look at it another way; not as a description of sin, but as part of the initial punishment Am Yisrael would bear.

Abarbanel describes the punishment as follows. Once exiled the Jews would worship idols. Although they would be aware of the false nature of these idols, they would be forced to serve them in order to protect themselves and save their lives. To paraphrase Abarbanel, this is not mentioned as a sin but a punishment. Despite their recognition in their hearts of their true God, they would have no choice but to pray to idols and lie about their true belief, a tortuous punishment indeed.

Biur agrees that the sentence is descriptive of punishment, yet sees the punishment differently than Abarbanel. Biur suggests that in exile we would find ourselves in a foreign culture imbued with a value system contrary to Torah. To restate Biur, there is no greater punishment than the soul drowning in the abomination of sin from which one cannot escape. There is no worse soulful pain and punishment than recognizing the evil of one's actions but not being able to withdraw—having become so accustomed to committing this sin (hergel aveirah).

Nehama Leibowitz points out that these two commentators reflect the challenges of their respective generations. Abarbanel lived in Spain in the latter part of the 15th century during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. It was then that the Catholic Church

demanded that Jews worship their man-god, otherwise they would be killed. Hence, he sees the punishment here as descriptive of what his generation was experiencing. At the risk of being killed, Jews had no choice but to outwardly leave their faith.

Biur of Devarim was Hertz Hamburg who lived in the 18th century in Western Europe. The challenge of his generation was the enlightenment which ensnared the Jewish people and caused rampant assimilation. The threat was not physical but spiritual. For Biur, our Torah speaks of Jews who leave the faith, not because their lives are threatened, but because they have been swept up in the temper of the times.

In truth, Abarbanel and Biur speak of the physical and spiritual tasks that we face throughout history. What both of these challenges have in common is the promise which immediately follows in the text that somehow against all odds we would extricate ourselves from that exile and return to God—in fulfillment of God's covenant with the Jewish people. As the Torah states, "and from there you will seek the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 4:29)

The season of Tisha B'Av not only commemorates our being forced into exile, but it forces us to focus on the low points and tragedies we have experienced as a people in the Diaspora. With this seasonal backdrop, the challenges brought forth in this parsha become frighteningly clear. And so, the Torah gives us a most appropriate reading for Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of comfort—a portion that describes reality, yet emerges with the promise of seeking out God and returning to a path of connection and holiness. ©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 states: "When you beget children and grandchildren and will become old in the Land, you will grow corrupt and make an idol, the image of anything, and you will do evil in the eyes of the Almighty, your God, to anger Him" (Deut. 4:39).

How does having children and grandchildren lead to becoming corrupt and doing evil? Shouldn't a person always be grateful for what the Almighty has given him?

The answer lies in the Hebrew word, venoshantem, "becoming old." If one becomes accustomed to what he has, then he no longer appreciates it. If he no longer appreciates it, he no longer feels a sense of gratitude to the Almighty. And without a sense of gratitude, a person will not only neglect his obligations to God, but can turn against Him.

The same principle applies in our relationships

with our fellow human beings. Therefore, we must always focus anew upon our possessions and the favors we have received. Each day look at your possessions as if you just received them that very day. This will ensure gratitude. This will enhance our lives and those around us! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Intermarriage

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week's portion the Torah states "And I will deliver them from before you....You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son, for he will cause your child to turn away from after Me". Our sages in the Talmud argue as to whom this was referring. Our Rabbis state that this prohibition of the Torah applies only to the seven nations that were enumerated in the Torah and that lived in the land of Canaan, while Rabbi Shimon states that it applies to all Gentile nations because it deals with intermarriage. Rabbi Shimon's reasoning is based on the superfluous words "Ki Yassir" ("and he will cause your child to turn away from me"), in which he interprets to include all the nations of the world even if they do not indulge in idolatry.

Our Rabbis also believe that one is prohibited to intermarry with all nations, although they base this prohibition as Rabbinic and not Torah based, as it appears in the book of Nechemiah, when Ezra states "And we will not give our daughters to the people of this land nor will we take their daughters for our sons"(Nechemiah 10,31).

There are those however, who believe that this sentence as it appears in the book of Nechemiah is based on a Torah prohibition since the decree by the Rabbis against intermarriage did not appear until much later during the time of the Chashmonaim.

Our Rabbis forbade many things that might promote intermarriage such as cooking for a Jew by a non-Jew, and the prohibition of Intermarriage sited in this week's portion. However there are those sages who state that it is not only the prohibition of intermarriage that we are concerned with, but also the adoption of the traditions of the Non-Jews. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

Chazal tell us that a person must say, "When will my actions rival the actions of my forefathers, Avraham, Yltzchok and Yaakov." The source for this obligation, writes Rav Wolbe (AleI Shur vol. II p. 159), can be found in this week's parsha. In the first

paragraph of Shema Hashem commands us, "You shall love Hashem with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources" (Devarim 6:5). The Medrash (Yalkut Shemoni 837) cites Rebbi Meir's explanation: "You shall love Hashem with all your heart like Avraham, with all your soul like Yitzchok and with all your resources like Yaakov."

Focusing on the greatness of our forefathers and striving to emulate their love for Hashem, forces every Jew to acknowledge the innate greatness that can be found in each and every individual who is part of our exalted Nation. This idea is extremely important for anyone engaged in bettering himself. Before one begins working on rectifying his negative character traits, it is imperative that he be cognizant of and familiar with his positive character traits. Otherwise, as he learns through a mussar sefer, he will end up concentrating solely on the negative aspects of his own personality. Such behavior is a sure-fire way to bring about depression or to cause him to give up the possibility of curing his spiritual maladies.

Before starting Mesillas Yesharim, one should open to the table of contents and peruse the various different chapters. He must become aware of the fact that, not only do the virtues of zehirus, zerizus, nikius and taharah etc. exist, they are very much within a person's reach. Moreover, it is advisable that the first time he learns through the sefer, he should not stop after each chapter to size up where he stands in relation to what the Mesillas Yesharim writes. Rather, he should simply appreciate the middah being discussed and yearn to achieve it himself.

The Ramchal writes in Derech Eitz Chaim, that merely thinking about the awesome spiritual levels attainable, aids a person in his journey toward perfection. "A person should spend some time free of all distractions and think about what we have mentioned. He should ask himself, 'What did our forefathers do that caused Hashem to cherish them? What did Moshe Rabbeinu do? What did Dovid, the anointed of Hashem, and all the great people who preceded us do? Then He should think how worthy it is for a person to act in a similar fashion so that it will be good for him! He should then contemplate where he stands in relationship to the path followed by the great men of prior generations...The bottom line is that for one who does not think about this, it is exceedingly difficult to reach perfection, while the person who does think about this is very close to perfection." Even just thinking about the greatness attained by our predecessors helps us achieve the goal for which we strive.

The first step to self improvement is being cognizant of one's ma'alos, because if we would appreciate our innate greatness we wouldn't bother ourselves with the pettiness that brings about most lapses in avodas Hashem. The summer is a time which

affords many people some extra time for relaxation. It might be very worthwhile to relax with a book about one of the greats of the past century. Their spiritual stature is something to strive toward, and if they could do it so could we! The purpose of reading these books is not to imitate those portrayed, rather to appreciate what we too can achieve if we would utilize our virtues to the best of our ability! ©2015 Rabbi S. Wolbe zt"l & aishdas.org

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The degree to which the mitzvah of ahavas Hashem is fundamental to a life of Torah and mitzvos is captured in its expression in krias Shema as well as its presence in our tefillin. As we enter our homes and kiss the mezuzah we once again acknowledge the centrality of ahavas Hashem in our lives. How do we practically fulfill this core mitzvah?

There are several important aspects of avodas Hashem that are vehicles for a proper fulfillment of ahavas Hashem in our daily lives. The Rambam in the end of Hilchos Teshuva equates loving Hashem with knowing Hashem. Just as the love one feels for another person increases the better one gets to know that person, so too the more we know Hashem the more intense our love for Him becomes. How do we attain this knowledge requisite knowledge of Hashem?

The Rambam explains that by delving into His wisdom we can know Hashem, and that wisdom is composed of two parts. First, by studying the intricacies of His creation we can attain a greater understanding of Hashem and thereby enable our love of Him to grow. In Sefer Hamitzvos the Rambam highlights that Hashem revealed the second aspect of His knowledge to us in His Torah. The greater understanding of Torah one achieves, the more one knows, and thereby loves, Hashem. This relationship between ahavas Hashem and talmud Torah appears in the Shema itself. The Sifrei, as quoted by Rashi, notes that immediately after the Torah commands us to love Hashem we are instructed to immerse ourselves in talmud Torah. It is only through a deep commitment to talmud Torah that one can reach the lofty goal of ahavas Hashem.

We usually associate ahavas Hashem with mitzvos bein adam lamakom. And yet, even our service bein adam lachaveiro depends upon internalizing our love for Hashem. Chazal interpret the mitzvah of "v'holachta b'drachav -- to walk in the path of Hashem" as the source for the mitzvah of chessed; Hashem performs countless acts of chessed and we are supposed to imitate Him. We naturally look to imitate those whom we admire. As such, by following the example of Hashem and performing acts of kindness we express our love and admiration for Him.

Ahavas Hashem also expresses itself in merging our bein adam lamakom with our bein adam

lachaveiro. Chazal teach us that part of ahavas Hashem is to bring others to love Hashem. One who exemplifies ahavas Hashem and is pleasant to other human beings will encourage others to lead their lives in a similar manner. We are commanded to love Hashem with all our hearts, our souls, and our possessions. This intense love comes about from our pursuit of the knowledge of Hashem, and it is this love that results in our performance of chessed and sets the tone for our interpersonal behavior.

On a personal note, I am writing this dvar Torah as I am returning from being menachem avel two families who lost sons in Gaza. These kedoshim, as well as our other brothers who gave their lives for the entire Jewish people, have fulfilled ahavas Hashem and ahavas Yisroel in the ultimate sense, "bechol nafshecha -- with your entire soul." These young men sacrificed everything so that the Jewish people can live in safety and security. As we approach Shabbos nachamu, we extend our comfort to all of the grieving families and pray that Hashem will comfort His people by rebuilding the Beis Hamikdash and thus enable us to once again know Him even more and serve Him with maximal love. © 2014 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

One of the highlights of Parshat Va'etchanan is the repetition of the Ten Commandments. In vivid detail, Moses recalls the scene as the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moses also describes this monumental event later in the Torah, saying, "G-d came from Sinai, having shone on them from Seir, having appeared from Mount Paran..." (Deut. 33:2). According to Rashi (Avodah Zara 2b), Seir is a location associated with Esav, whereas Mount Paran is associated with Yishmael.

We know that G-d first offered the Torah to the other nations of the world before He gave it to the Jewish people. Each nation wanted to know the contents of the Torah before accepting it. When the nation of Esav discovered that the Torah contained the commandment "You shall not murder," they refused to accept it. Similarly, the nation of Yishmael did not want to accept the Torah once they heard the commandment, "You shall not steal."

It seems odd that the nations refused to accept the Torah based on these basic restrictions. The seven Noachide laws-that every nation must uphold as universal law-include the prohibitions against murder and theft. What made the acceptance of Torah any different? Why would the nations refuse to do something so easy-that in fact they were already doing?

The commentator Ohr Gedalyahu suggests an explanation based on the purpose of mitzvot. According

to his view, the Ten Commandments are intended to sanctify us to such a degree that the mitzvot become part of our basic nature. In other words, through performing the mitzvot, we become so attached to G-d, and so aware of Him in our thought, speech, and action, that our very essence changes.

We see a support to this in the Mechilta (Parshat Yitro, citing Rebbe Akiva), which states that the Jewish people answered "he'in" (yes) when they were informed of the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments. Instead of responding, "No, we won't murder," they replied, "YES, we won't murder." What is the significance of a positive response to a "thou shalt not" command?

According to the Ohr Gedalyahu, this positive response hints to a transformation that the Jewish people underwent when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. When they heard the command, "You shall not murder," they became filled with such love for each other that it was impossible for them to even entertain the idea of harming another person. In other words, this "thou shall not" command brought them to a level of connection with G-d that their very essence changed.

Based on this idea, we can understand why the nations of the world refused to accept the Torah. Previously, the nations with a proclivity toward murder had refrained because it was against the Noachide Laws. The Torah was altogether different. It was not a reiteration of universal law, but rather an expectation of positive change. The nations refused to accept this offer. Sometimes it is easier to hold on to our pockets of darkness and negative baggage than to attempt to make positive changes in our lives. The Jewish people were the only ones who were willing to transform themselves in order to fulfill the Torah.

This idea will help us gain an insight into another highlight of the parsha: the Shema. Our intention when reciting "Shema Yisrael" should be that we are willing to give up our life for G-d if the situation requires (Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 417). Where do we find a hint to this idea in the words of the Shema?

According to the Slonimer Rebbe, the word "echad" (one) carries the same implication as the verse "Ein od mil'vado"-There is nothing besides Him (Deut. 4:35). Nothing exists outside of G-d. Therefore, by working on ourselves to grow ever closer to Him, it is as though we have already given up our life. Our whole life is totally given over to G-d.

This also helps us understand why, in Parshat Shoftim, the officers of the Jewish army begin their pre-battle talk to the soldiers by telling them, "Shema Yisrael! You are going out to war against your enemies" (Deut 20:3). According to the Talmud (Sotah 42a), the officers' phrasing implies that, even if the soldiers have only the merit of saying the Shema, that is reason enough for G-d to protect them. This makes sense

according to the reasoning of the Slonimer Rebbe. If a soldier says Shema properly, and connects to G-d with his whole life, of course he will be victorious, because he will have aligned himself as much as possible with the unlimited power of G-d: the only force that exists.

We therefore learn from both the Shema and the Ten Commandments the importance of having a close connection to G-d. But how do we achieve this attachment? Connection to G-d grows out of loving Him. We see this on a practical level—since, when we love someone, we want to be with that person every possible minute. The Torah even commands us to love G-d (Deut. 6:5). Yet how can we be commanded to feel an emotion?

The Slonimer Rebbe suggests that, rather than being commanded to love G-d, we are commanded to do things that bring us to love G-d. One of these is to study Torah (Deut. 6:6). Once we start studying Torah and doing mitzvot, it is much more natural for us to begin feeling love for G-d.

May we soon see the day when, in the merit of this connection to the Divine, our true enemies will disappear, and we will enjoy an era of everlasting peace. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Don't Forget

In Parshas Va'eschanan we find the very famous portions of the Torah that are imbedded in the soul of the nation: The Ten Commandments and the Shema Yisrael.

Although every word of the Omnipotent carries equal force, these commanding portions are better known, if not better observed, by the nation.

But powerful as they are, they were not given in a vacuum. Moshe forewarns the nation not to forget the message of Sinai and to impart its message and its relevance to future generations.

"Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

In order to comprehend the posuk, it must be separated into two distinct parts. "Beware not to forget the things that your eyes have beheld from your heart all your days." In addition, the Torah adds, "you shall teach the Torah to your children and children's children."

Nevertheless, the grammar is surely questionable, "lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children." In its simplest form, the verse seems at best contradictory. Look at the words. Beware that you do not remove the teachings from your heart and make them known to your children. How is that possible? If

one removes the teaching from his own heart, how can he pass it to his children? The Torah should have overtly inserted some phrase or word clarifying the transition.

The perplexing composition in its simplest form surely leaves for a creative interpretation, perhaps the omission of the transitional word lends itself to a drash that deviates from the obvious meaning.

Thousands of people receive this weekly D'var Torah. In return, I receive many stories for possible use as anecdotal parables. Here is one from the archives.

Junior came home from day camp one day without towel.

"Where is your towel?" asked his mom.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I could not find it after swimming. Maybe someone took it."

The mother was irate. "Who could have taken your towel? It was a great towel! Junior you would never take someone else's towel. You know I raised you differently than that. Right?"

A few moments later, she was on the phone with the day camp director.

"Hello. There is a young thief in your camp!"

"How so?" "My son had a towel stolen from camp! He brought it in today and it was nowhere"

"Calm down," came the voice on the line. "I am sure that no one stole it. Please describe the towel to me."

"Sure I can! It was white and big. You could not miss it. It had the words Holiday Inn emblazoned on it!"

The Leket Amarim interprets the verse in its purest and most simplistic form, revealing a deeper meaning that belies the simplicity of the verse.

"Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children's children."

Often when it comes to our actions, we forget the principles that we were taught as youngsters, but we remember them when chiding our children and pontificating.

We may give our children a speech about honesty and integrity, and only minutes later command them to tell a caller on the telephone that, "my father is not home."

We may give speeches about integrity and corporate greed only to have pushed our own portfolios in a certain direction through creative manipulation.

And so, the Torah warns us not to forget its principles for ourselves yet to teach them to our children. Consistency is the message of the moment. For yourself. For your children. For eternity. © 2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

