

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to G-d -- not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, "Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan," (Deut. 3:25). Let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But G-d said No: "That is enough," the Lord said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter." (Deut. 3:26). G-d, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.

(There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others and others pray for us that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically "in the midst of others" who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.)

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 commands, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as Hakhel, the command that the king summon the people to gather during Sukkot following the seventh, shemittah year: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your G-d at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people -- men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns -- so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your G-d and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your G-d as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

There is no specific reference to this command

This issue of *Toras Aish* is dedicated in loving memory of my dear parents  
Chayim Yitchak ben Yehudo Hakohen  
Paul Kahn  
and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehoshua  
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt  
by Fernand Kahn

in the later books of Tanakh, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings: covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with G-d.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The book of Deuteronomy as a whole is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is another example in the last chapter of the book of Joshua (Josh. 24). Joshua had fulfilled his mandate as Moses' successor, bringing the people across the Jordan, leading them in their battles and settling the land.

Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for 55 years, was one of the worst of Judah's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry, including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering among other things the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was in the course of this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered, sealed in a hiding place, to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten.

(This is Radak and Ralbag's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were not other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history, and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses' own Torah, written by his hand.)

The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly: "Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets -- all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the



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temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord -- to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant." (2 Kings 23:1-3)

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read the Torah to the assembly, having positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah, culminated after Sukkot when the people collectively "bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of G-d given through Moses the servant of G-d and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord" (Neh. 10:29)

The other command -- the last Moses gave the people -- was contained in the words: "Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites," understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that G-d had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses' request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. "That is enough... Do not speak to me anymore about this matter." Is this the Torah and this its reward? Is this how G-d repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands G-d was teaching Moses, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is -- on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon and stars. (See Jeremiah 31)

G-d showed Moses, and through him us, how to become part of a civilization that never grows old. It

stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal, first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address -- every four years since 1789 -- has been, explicitly or implicitly, a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel.

In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of "covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance." America's duty, he said, is "to constantly renew their covenant with humanity...to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling -- the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under G-d." (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-4.)

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moses' way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago -- by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold

Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that G-d should give him, and us, the secret of immortality -- not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old." Moses died, but what he taught and what he sought lives on. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"Now, therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the People of Israel..." (Deut. 31:19) Is Yom Kippur a happy day or a sad day? Many associate the Day of Atonement with solemnity and trepidation. Indeed, according to most translations, the Torah specifically states regarding this holiest of days, "you shall afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:29).

The great Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, however, suggests a radically different understanding of this day. "On Tisha B'Av, I can't eat because I'm so sad," he said. "On Yom Kippur I have no need to eat, because I'm so happy." But what of the command to afflict oneself? What is the basis for his happiness?

In truth, his interpretation reflects a deep insight about the essence of the day, based on the fact that the Hebrew letters that form the root, "affliction" ("ayin-nun-yud"), are also the letters that form the root for expressions of joyous song. For example, the Torah states (Deut. 26:5) regarding the declaration of the farmer, who, filled with feelings of happiness, brings the First Fruits (Bikkurim) to the Temple: ("V'anita v'amarta"), "you shall happily sing and declare...", with the proper musical cantillations.

Similarly, at the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the Torah (Ex. 15:21) reports, "And Miriam (happily) sang to them" ("V'ta'an la'hem Miriam")

This gives us a fresh perspective on the aforementioned verse in Leviticus, which as we noted above, is usually translated as "you shall afflict yourselves". However, re-reading the Hebrew original – ("t'anu et nafshoteichem") – in light of the above, we can accurately understand it as "you shall make your souls sing". Indeed, the next verse explains why we should be happy: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you; from all your sins shall you be purified before G-d."

We can now gain an appreciation of the verse in our portion that refers to the Torah as a song. In what way is the Torah a song? Because like a song, the Torah can bring us great happiness via the commandments, which allow us to ennoble and sanctify ourselves. In the same way that we enjoy a great high when we accomplish a difficult task and perform it well, so, too, does the song of the Torah allow us to rejoice in the potential of human nature and the ability of the human being to achieve a life of morality and holiness.

It is for this reason that the Day of Atonement is fundamentally a day of happiness. One might have thought that with all the fasting and the many hours spent in the synagogue, we should relate to the day in purely solemn terms. But Yom Kippur is not a fast of sadness. Rather, it is when we re-discover our great spiritual capacity to be like the angels who never need food or drink, soaring close to G-d, and transcending the physical. It is then that we understand the meaning of true rejoicing: spending twenty-five hours in fellowship with the Divine, without need of physical comforts. This experience opens the window to the spiritual rejoicing that gives us such great comfort and well-being.

Indeed, the custom in yeshivot is to ecstatically sing and dance with renewed vigor and dedication after the last Shofar blasts are sounded at the end of the Ne'ila prayer, at the conclusion of the fast. The excited students and teachers declare with their enthusiasm: Behold, we have transcended our physical selves. We have climbed upwards into the Divine embrace. We feel Your gracious compassion, and we are ready and hopefully worthy to attempt to perfect ourselves and the world. ©2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vayelech includes the commandment for every Jew to write a song for themselves (31:19), which Rashi says is referring to the following Parsha, Haazinu. The sages derive from this rule the final of the 613 commandments that each Jew has to take part in the writing of a Torah scroll. Why would we be required to write our own song, and then be given the song to sing? Also, how is the requirement to write our own song the same as the requirement to take part in scribing our own Torah?

If we apply the concept of this weekly Dvar Torah, we can easily understand the Torah's final commandment: If we take any commandment in the Torah and personalize it, although its source is the Torah, its ownership is very personal. Songs, too, sound different when sung by different people. In fact, music becomes even more personal because it's a more emotional medium. That's exactly why the Torah chose music as the metaphor to teach us about personalizing the Torah to make it special for ourselves. The Torah wants us to internalize it so much that we sing about it. If we accomplish this, we've fulfilled the final commandment of writing our own Torah -- with all the harmonies that accompany it. © 2016 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**M**oshe's fixation with the covenant between G-d and Israel, so evident in the Torah readings of the past two weeks, continues apace this week. Only now there is a note of desperation in Moshe's words and tone. He bluntly states that he knows that after his death the Jewish people will shirk the obligations of the covenant and fall prey to worshipping false gods and non-Jewish values.

No matter how strong his teachings have been and how stern his warnings about the consequences of violating the covenant, he sadly realizes that the Jewish people will not withstand the allure of pagan cultures and decadent societies.

Moshe is powerless to stop this process and he only tells them how it will play itself out. Eventually Israel will realize the error of its ways, repent and return to the obligations of the covenant and obey the rules set forth in that agreement between G-d and Israel.

It is almost as though the covenant can have no real validity unless it is breached and the consequences forecast for such a breach actually occur. Only then will Israel truly value the terms of the covenant and understand how significant that agreement is. Only when disasters strike and bad things happen do they truly appreciate the binding commitment between G-d and Israel, as represented and defined by the commandments and value system of the Torah.

Jewish societies may be more observant or less observant from time to time but any reading of Jewish history shows us that the covenant is always in force. And that is the sobering message that Moshe delivers to the Jewish people at the end of his life and leadership.

While the consequences of violating the covenant can be viewed in a negative light, and all of Jewish history tells of those negative aspects of violating the covenant, in its essence the covenant is the positive lodestone of Jewish life. It is the guarantor

of our survival no matter what our shortcomings may have been or may be now. He promises us that the Lord will never forsake us.

We are the necessary partner in this historic endeavor but G-d, so to speak, is the ultimate facilitator of the covenant and purveyor of its consequences. And even though Moshe knows that the Jewish people will stray, he does not give up hope about their eventual fate and role in human history.

They will never completely forsake the Torah and its covenant and even if they are found wanting in their behavior, there will always be enough spirit left within them to resiliently cling to the covenant, no matter the difficulty. In the midst of all of the backsliding and assimilation that is afflicting the Jewish world today; there is a countercurrent of Jewishness. Many who would have been alienated from observance are now seeking the threads of their heritage. I am certain that that is also part of the vision that Moshe saw and communicated to all later generations at the end of his life on earth. © 2016 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**I**n this week's portion, G-d declares that the time will come when He will hide his face from the Jewish people. In the words of the Torah, "and I will certainly conceal my face on that day, (haster astir)." (Deuteronomy 31:18) What does this term mean?

After the Shoah, some suggested that the murder of six million Jews proves that G-d is dead (sic). Martin Buber, the 20th century philosopher insisted that the Shoah does not speak of the demise of G-d but of the eclipse of G-d. With death comes finality. Eclipse on the other hand, like the eclipse of the sun, means that for a moment G-d may not be seen, but in the end He would be visible.

In reality, Buber was echoing a very traditional approach to haster astir. Consider the sweep of Jewish history. No doubt, there have been difficult moments, but when these moments are seen as part of a larger whole, these dark times are complemented by a far larger, more glorious history.

Hence our calendar is counted by the moon. The Zohar insists that the moon reflects the very essence of the Jewish people. It wanes, diminishes and vanishes. To the one who views the moon for the first time, it would appear as if all is lost. But the power of the moon is that it reemerges, it resurfaces. Much like the Jewish people. Over and over, we've experienced low points only to extricate ourselves and rise up from the ashes.

What's true about our national existence is

equally true in our personal lives. Setbacks can be devastating and life effecting, but it is still important to never lose hope, or become overly pessimistic. Rather we should be alive and await renewal.

No wonder at the moment of greatest pain, the death of someone close, even as we rend our garments, we recite the blessing barukh dayan emet, blessed is the truthful and loving judge. Even then, we step back and as we cry out in pain, we remember the better times, the good times that G-d gave us.

The reverse is also true. At our moments of greatest celebration, at a wedding itself, we break the glass to remind ourselves that life has its highs but built into those great moments are the inevitable experiences of breakage, of pain.

As a young rabbi, I heard a wonderful tale of a young girl who had an amazingly deep faith. She told her friend that although her doll's hand was broken, she would pray to G-d, and G-d would hear her prayers. Her skeptic friend reacted with disbelief. G-d doesn't answer such prayers.

That night, before going to sleep, the believing girl offered deep prayers to G-d. Upon rising the next morning, she eagerly reached for her doll, only to find its hand still broken. "I told you" her skeptic friend said, "G-d wouldn't listen to your prayers." "No," said the believing girl, "G-d did listen, but his answer was no."

And so it is in life. Often, reflective of haster astir, G-d says no. May we, however, take note of the abundance of yeses in our lives and merit more in the future. A reflective thought especially around Rosh Hashanah, the only holiday celebrated on the beginning of the month, as the moon appears as but a sliver of light. And no wonder Rosh Hashanah is called Yom ha-Keseh, the holiday of concealment. This reminds us that even if G-d doesn't seem to be present, like the moon, his presence will one day be felt in its fullness. © 2016 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 DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd for sin that we committed in a state of a confusion." The last "al cheit" in the series of sins we acknowledge during the Yom Kippur davening refers to sins we committed because we were "dazed" (see Targum HaLa'az, entry #2001), and therefore unable to think clearly enough to be better equipped to avoid sinning. This same expression ("simhon leivav") is used to describe part of our punishment we are warned will happen to us if we abandon G-d and His Torah (D'varim 28:28). In Iyun HaParasha (#115, pg. 26), a two-part question is asked. First, they ask how "simhon leivav" is considered a sin that needs to be confessed if it is

clearly a punishment and a curse. Before discussing why I don't think this is really a question, allow me to explain why I don't understand the second part of their question either.

In the second part, a straw man is set up, claiming that the only purpose of being punished by G-d is to wake the person up so that he no longer sins, after which the question is raised how being put into a state of confusion can be used as a punishment if it prevents the sinner from being able to think clearly enough to change his ways. (Rambam's Hilchos T'shuvah 9:1 is referenced.) Even according to this line of thinking, though, being put into a state of confusion could also prevent the sinner from using (what had been) his full brain power to sin further, and would therefore be consistent with the assumption made (that punishments are only given to bring about positive results). However, it is clear from the verses, as well as from the Rambam's explicit words, that a sinner can be punished without the goal being to bring about a positive change in the sinner. [This includes preventing the sinner from fulfilling mitzvos so that he cannot deserve any reward.] Confusing a sinner in order to prevent him from doing something positive is therefore consistent with Rambam's approach to the punishments described in the Torah.

Getting back to the seeming contradiction between a "state of confusion" being a punishment and being a sin we must atone for, I wonder if the question is based on the assumption that we are asking G-d to forgive us for being in a state of confusion rather than for those sins committed while being in such a state. However, even if it's the former, we could simply be asking G-d to forgive us for deserving such a punishment.

Looking at the various sins in the "al cheit" sequence that we are asking G-d to forgive us for, some refer to specific sins (such as profaning G-d's name and Loshon HaRa), some refer to categories of sin (such as those committed through speech, those done purposely or accidentally, and those done in a business setting) and some that refer to a state of being (such as through a lack of knowledge, through being haughty, being brazen, or being stiff-necked). This one (being dazed and confused) would seem to fall under the latter classification. Although it is true that we are held responsible for allowing ourselves to become confused, this does not seem to be the intent here. Rather, we are asking G-d to forgive us for those sins that can be attributed to our being in a confused state.

Can we be blamed for sins committed because of a mental haze placed upon us as a punishment for previous sins? Absolutely, since we were the cause of being put in that state. This creates a nice symmetry between the first "al cheit" and the last one. The first, when we confess and ask forgiveness for those sins committed "against our will," refer to sins beyond our

ability to overcome, yet need forgiveness because they are only beyond our ability to choose because of other choices we've made (see page 2 of <http://tinyurl.com/q87dq9f>). Similarly, the last one ("simhon leivav"), would be sins committed because we are in a state of confusion, a state we are in because of sins we committed before entering that state. Nevertheless, we are responsible for sins committed while in a state of confusion even if being in that state is unconnected to our own actions.

The expression "simhon leivav" literally translates as having a confused heart, rather than a confused mind. The term "heart" is often used to refer to our thought process, rather than the beating organ that pumps blood. More specifically, though, it refers to our natural state (which changes as we change), the starting point in our thought process before our intellect (hopefully) examines our initial reaction to things and determines whether that initial reaction should remain intact or be adjusted. [It can be argued that "free-will" only comes into play from the moment we have the ability to examine our initial reaction and adjust our actual course of action.] This "intellectual filter" is vital, and is what becomes impaired under the influence of alcohol. The first step in becoming a better person, and a holier person, is to use our intellect to help us decide what we should or shouldn't do, even if it doesn't coincide with what our "heart" wants. But real change only occurs when our "heart" is affected by the choices our "brain" made. Not just when our actions change because of these decisions, but when that starting point -- what we actually want, even before the intellect kicks in -- improves as well.

When in a state of confusion (no matter how it came about), our ability to use our intellectual filter is severely impaired, and we are left primarily with our (current) starting point. Ideally, that starting point would include not wanting to sin, and not allowing sin. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and there are sins that might be committed when in a state of confusion that would not have been committed under "normal" circumstances. Even if/when we cannot be held accountable for being in a state of confusion, we are held accountable for those sins committed while in that state, since we should be/should have been on the level of not sinning even when we lose our "filter."

Yes, sometimes being in a state of confusion is a punishment. But even if it is (as well as when it is not), our natural instinct should be to avoid sin, not commit any. We therefore ask G-d to forgive us for those sins committed "b'simhon leivav." © 2016 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## Breaking Open the Vault

"**M**oshe wrote this Torah and gave it to the Kohanim..." Meshech Chochmah: "Moshe

didn't hand over this sefer Torah to the kohanim because he wanted to keep it in the family. He had good reason to. As it turned out, the reason became controversial in the course of time."

The gemara (Yerushalmi Yevamos 1:6) reports that R. Elazar ben Azaryah bore some resemblance to Ezra HaSofer, his illustrious forebear of ten generations earlier. ("His eyes were similar to his [Ezra's].") This could simply mean that there was some facial similarity. (So learns the Pnei Moshe.) But there is much more to it than that.

Our pasuk reflects a sobering reality. It makes sense to entrust the continuity of Torah to a relatively small group of people who act as its vigorous protectors and prudent guardians. That was Moshe's point in handing the Torah -- physically -- to the kohanim. They would guard it zealously, ensuring that its content would not be violated by the impious or uninformed. At other times, Torah was localized with elders of impeccable background. In the time of the Second Temple, the Perushim kept tight tabs on who should be admitted to the great yeshivos. The working assumption was that if a student wanted Torah badly enough, he would find a way to seek out the great centers of learning -- all housed in Yerushalayim.

The very script that was used in Torah scrolls supported this guarded approach to the transmission of Torah. The script was a specialized one. The masses were not familiar with it. It served as a barrier to study, limiting access to Torah study.

Our first record of any change in this approach came from Ezra. He found halachic sanction to change the script to Ashuris, a script brought back from the Babylonian captivity. At the time, it was more "user-friendly." Ezra was deeply concerned by a confluence of factors that endangered the continuity of Torah. He saw the Jewish community begin to drift off to far-flung locations, all distant from the main centers of Torah learning. He observed vast ignorance concerning fundamentals of Jewish belief and practice, including chilul Shabbos, intermarriage, and the inability of a younger generation to speak Hebrew. (Nechemiah 13:15-24)

Ezra reasoned that the text of the Torah had to become more accessible to more people. He recognized the risks involved, but was prepared to pay a stiff price for the advantage of making Torah study available to far more people. These risks were in fact realized in the coming centuries of the Second Temple, as students who would have previously been barred from the yeshivos took their places in the great academies. The sub-standard students -- as could have been expected -- grasped the material imperfectly, and set the stage for the first protracted halachic disputes our people knew. Nonetheless, Ezra felt that the gains outweighed the losses.

The decision was a wise one, according to

Chazal (Sanhedrin 21B) who praise Ezra as one through whom it would have been fitting to give the Torah.

Ten generations after Ezra, this issue was still not resolved. Rabban Gamliel, the Nasi, favored a restrictive approach. He was taciturn in his halachic pronouncements: "So I have received from my teachers." (Rosh Hashanah 25A) Rather than provide arguments for his position -- which would invite all kinds of responses, including wildly invalid ones -- he invoked the discipline of mesorah, as if saying, "This is what we have been taught by greater people of previous generations, and nothing more persuasive needs to be said." Furthermore, he imposed a strict standard for admission to the main academy. Only those whose inner selves matched their outward comportment were accepted. (Berachos 21A)

R. Elazar ben Azaryah believed differently. No sooner had he assumed the position of Nasi than he flung open the doors of the beis medrash, immediately gaining four hundred students who had previously been barred. He leaned towards seeking explanations for what others were content to accept as just-so. Thus, he questions why the Torah would ask people to bring small children to Hakhel when they are too young to understand the message -- and he provides an answer. (Chagigah 3A) He took pride in the swelling of the ranks of Torah students in his times.

We thus can find a different understanding of the Yerushalmi that speaks of the resemblance of Ezra and R. Elazar ben Azaryah. The "eyes" were similar not in color and shape, but in function. Both possessed eyes that were able to look into the future, and determine a better policy for the continued growth of Torah. (Based on Meshech Chochmah, Devarim 31:9)  
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### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Esti Rosenberg

Head of the Midrasha for Women, Migdal Oz

Translated by Moshe Goldberg

**A** long journey of three Haftarot of rebuke and seven of consolation ends this Shabbat with the Haftarah "Return Yisrael to your G-d" [Hoshaya 14:2]. The masters of the Tosafot explain: "Three passages of rebuke are read before Tisha B'Av... and seven of consolation after Tisha B'Av, including two that deal with repentance -- Dirshu and Shuva." [Megillah 31b].

The destruction of the Temple requires us to enter into a process of repentance. The journey of retribution and consolation ends with the subject of repentance.

Let us delve more deeply into the two Haftarot that deal with "Teshuva" -- repentance. (We will not go into the discussion in the Tosafot about exactly when

the two Haftarot are read.) This discussion is based on ideas that I heard from Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein.

The Haftarah "Dirshu -- Seek G-d when He is available" [Yeshayahu 55:6] is familiar to many of us from the Mincha prayers of public fast days. It is read during the Ten Days of Awe on the Fast of Gedalia. Yeshayahu tells the nation to seek G-d, and the nation rises enthusiastically to the challenge. Yeshayahu demands, "Seek G-d when He is available, call out to Him when He is close." The nation responds, "Let the evil one abandon his ways and the sinner his thoughts, and let them return to G-d" [55:7]. Even the Gentiles come close to G-d and repent, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, gives them a place of honor in His house. The hills and mountains break out in song, and there is an active movement of returning to G-d. This excellent movement is a symbol of proper repentance. It was chosen as the Haftarah for public fast days out of a deep understanding that fasting can encourage people to repent.

The other Haftarah, "Shuva," is different. The nation of Yisrael, which has failed by sinning, is called by Hoshaya to repent. This is repentance that is a reaction to distress. "Ashur will not save you, we will not ride on a horse, and we will no longer call our own handiwork god" [Hoshaya 14:4]. It seems that in the time of Hoshaya the nation of Yisrael repents not because of a deep understanding of their sins and their evil thoughts -- but rather it is searching for rescue, which does not come from Ashur.

Here is what Rashi writes about this verse: "I will cure their affliction, I will love them freely" [14:5]. "Because of My good spirit, even though they do not deserve love, I will show my good will to love them, for my anger of them has been reduced."

The Holy One, Blessed be He, will accept the repentance of Yisrael in the time of Hoshaya -- not as judgement but rather as an act of kindness. In truth, they will not be worthy of it by merit of their repentance -- but in His love, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will agree to accept the repentance of His nation. This is exciting but it is also disappointing. The Holy One, Blessed be He, will act towards Yisrael like the dew. Dew does not have the power or the force of rain, but its strength is seen in its quiet and never-ending dedication to its task. Later we read of repentance of the nation in the time of Yoel. This seemed deeper than what took place in the time of Yeshaya, but it too was motivated by a fear of locusts.

At times, Bnei Yisrael repent as the result of a long internal process of abandoning sin, as in "Dirshu." At other times, the repentance is not at a superior level, and it involves external fears and troubles, as in the case of "Shuva."

The Holy One, Blessed be He, extends His hand to His nation when they repent even when it is not at a superior level but is mixed with human interests. It

is exhilarating to see that the sages chose for the Ten Days of Awe the Haftarah "Shuva," which is at a relatively low level.

"Freely-given love." How refreshing this can be.

### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

## **RavFrand**

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

*Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman*

**T**he Torah introduces the mitzvah of Hakhel in Parshas Vayelech. Hakhel is a national gathering held once every seven years in which all Jews -- men, women, and children -- come together to celebrate national unity and purpose: "Gather together the people -- the men, and the women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities -- so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they shall fear Hashem your G-d and be careful to perform all the words of the Torah." [Devrarim 31:12].

The Talmud teaches [Chagiga 3a] an intriguing idea about Hakhel: "It was the week when it was the turn of Rav Elazar ben Azariah to give the lesson and the topic being discussed that day was the mitzvah of Hakhel. What did he expound? He expounded as follows: 'Gather the nation, the men, the women and the children...' We understand that the men came to learn and the women came to listen, but what purpose was there to bring the children? In order to give reward to those who brought them!"

The Mei HaShiloach and other commentaries as well expound on this idea of "to give reward to those who brought them". Is it just a question of getting reward for "schlepping" the kids? Perhaps for the same reward, the parents could have been commanded to carry along with them a sack of potatoes? It clearly means something more than that. The Mei HaShiloach interprets "giving reward to those who brought them" to mean that exposing one's children to the events of Hakhel is going to make an impression on the children and eventually the parents will reap the reward of having children who in their youth were impacted positively by the Hakhel ritual.

Imagine what a sight that was!

The closest thing we have to Hakhel today also comes out approximately every 7 years -- every seven and a half years to be exact -- the Siyum HaShas. When my children were younger, I made a point of taking them. It is an amazing sight. Even if they are only out there in the concourse buying their kosher hot dogs, seeing tens of thousands of Jews

together is impressive. It makes a lasting impression.

A person can ask himself afterwards "Was it worth it? I schlepped him, I took him out of school, I took him on the train, it cost me money. Was it worth it?" The Talmud teaches "to bring reward to those who bring them". Exposing children to such a gathering DOES make an impression. In the long run, it will certainly be worth it! Eventually the parents will realize reward for these efforts.

I know someone who made his own Siyum HaShas (marking the personal completion of studying the entire Babylonian Talmud). I asked him why he made a Siyum HaShas and he told me "My father made a Siyum HaShas when I was a boy and I saw what a big deal it was! I said to myself then, 'When I get older I want to do that also!'"

A parallel Mechilta in Parshas Bo quotes the same story as the Gemara in Chagiga with Rav Elazar ben Azarya, the mitzvah of Hakhel, and the explanation of why we bring the children -- "in order to bring reward to those who bring them." However, the Mechilta adds at the end, "Rav Yehoshua states 'Happy is our Patriarch Avraham who can count Rav Elazar ben Azaryah as one of his descendants.'" Why, we might ask, is Rav Yehoshua singling out Avraham Avinu in this statement? Should not Moshe Rabbeinu have nachas from Rav Elazar ben Azarya? What about Yakov Avinu, Dovid HaMelech, or Shlomo HaMelech? What is so special about Avraham Avinu and his connection to Rav Elazar ben Azaryah?

The answer is that the Almighty told us something about Avraham Avinu -- why He chose him and why Hashem refers to as 'Avraham the one I love' [Yeshaya 41:8]. The Chumash provides the answer. It is no mystery. "For I have cherished him (ki yeda'ativ), because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice..." [Bereshis 18:19]. The Ramban interprets ki yeda'ativ to mean, "For I have chosen him". I have chosen him, the Almighty testifies, because I know that he will give over the mesorah [tradition] to his children! Therefore, he is the first "patriarch"; he is the first 'Av'. He knows how to preserve Yiddishkeit -- he does it by commanding his children and household.

When Rav Elazar ben Azariah makes the same observation and teaches, "Why did the children come to Hakhel? It is to bring reward to those who bring them!" he is echoing the teaching of the Patriarch Avraham. This is exactly the tradition Avraham instituted in Klal Yisrael. Therefore "Happy are you Avraham Avinu to be able to count Rav Elazar ben Azarya as one of your descendants." ©2016 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

