

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Something remarkable happens in this week's parsha, almost without our noticing it, that changed the very terms of Jewish existence, and has life-changing implications for all of us. Moses renewed the covenant. This may not sound dramatic, but it was.

Thus far, in the history of humanity as told by the Torah, God had made three covenants. The first, in Genesis 9, was with Noah, and through him, with all humanity. I call this the covenant of human solidarity. According to the sages it contains seven commands, the sheva mitzvot bnei Noach, most famous of which is the sanctity of human life: "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God did God make man" (Gen. 9:6).

The second, in Genesis 17, was with Abraham and his descendants: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and have integrity, and I will grant My covenant between Me and you... I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout the generations as an eternal covenant.'" That made Abraham the father of a new faith that would not be the faith of all humanity but would strive to be a blessing to all humanity: "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

The third was with the Israelites in the days of Moses, when the people stood at Mount Sinai, heard the Ten Commandments and accepted the terms of their destiny as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Who, though, initiated these three covenants? God. It was not Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or the Israelites who sought a covenant with God. It was God who sought a covenant with humanity.

There is, though, a discernible change as we trace the trajectory of these three events. From Noah God asked no specific response. There was nothing Noah had to do to show that he accepted the terms of covenant. He now knew that there are seven rules governing acceptable human behaviour, but God asked for no positive covenant-ratifying gesture. Throughout the process Noah was passive.

From Abraham, God did ask for a response -- a

painful one. "This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. This shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Gen., 17:10-11). The Hebrew word for circumcision is milah, but to this day we call it brit milah or even, simply, brit -- which is, of course, the Hebrew word for covenant. God asks, at least of Jewish males, something very demanding: an initiation ceremony.

From the Israelites at Sinai God asked for much more. He asked them in effect to recognise Him as their sole sovereign and legislator. The Sinai covenant came not with seven commands as for Noah, or an eighth as for Abraham, but with 613 of them. The Israelites were to incorporate God-consciousness into every aspect of their lives.

So, as the covenants proceed, God asks more and more of His partners, or to put it slightly differently, He entrusts them with ever greater responsibilities.

Something else happened at Sinai that had not happened before. God tells Moses to announce the nature of the covenant before making it, to see whether the people agree. They do so no less than three times: "Then the people answered as one, saying, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Ex. 19:7). "The people all responded with a single voice, 'We will do everything the Lord has spoken'" (Ex. 24:3). "The people said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do and heed'" (Ex. 24:7).

This is the first time in history that we encounter the phenomenon enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, namely "the consent of the governed." God only spoke the Ten Commandments after the people had signalled that they had given their consent to be bound by His word. God does not impose His rule by force. At Sinai, covenant-making became mutual. Both sides had to agree.

So the human role in covenant-making grows greater over time. But Nitzavim takes this one stage further. Moses, seemingly of his own initiative, renewed the covenant: "All of you are standing today before the Lord your God -- your leaders, your tribes, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, the strangers in your camp, from woodcutter to water-drawer -- to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God and its oath, which the Lord your God is

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making with you today, to establish you today as His people, that He may be your God, as He promised you and swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Deut. 29:9-12)

This was the first time that the covenant was renewed, but not the last. It happened again at the end of Joshua's life (Josh. 24), and later in the days of Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:17), Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29) and Josiah (1 Kings 23: 1-3; 2 Chron. 34: 29-33). After the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah convened a national gathering to renew the covenant (Nehemiah 8). But it happened first in today's parsha.

It happened because Moses knew it had to happen. The terms of Jewish history were about to shift from Divine initiative to human initiative. This is what Moses was preparing the Israelites for in the last month of his life. It is as if he had said: Until now God has led - in a pillar of cloud and fire -- and you have followed. Now God is handing over the reins of history to you. From here on, you must lead. If your hearts are with Him, He will be with you. But you are now no longer children; you are adults. An adult still has parents, as a child does, but his or her relationship with them is different. An adult knows the burden of responsibility. An adult does not wait for someone else to take the first step.

That is the epic significance of Nitzavim, the parsha that stands almost at the end of the Torah and that we read almost at the end of the year. It is about getting ready for a new beginning: in which we act for God instead of waiting for God to act for us.

(Of course, the Babylonian Talmud argues that at Sinai God did impose the covenant by force, namely by "suspending the mountain" over the people's heads. But the Talmud then immediately notes that "this constitutes a fundamental challenge to the authority of the Torah" and concludes that the people finally accepted the Torah voluntarily "in the days of Ahasuerus" (Shabbat 88a). The only question, therefore, is: when was there free consent?)

Translate this into human terms and you will see how life-changing it can be. Many years ago, at the beginning of my rabbinical career, I kept waiting for a word of encouragement from a senior rabbinical figure. I was working hard, trying innovative approaches,

seeking new ways of getting people engaged in Jewish life and learning. You need support at such moments because taking risks and suffering the inevitable criticism is emotionally draining. The encouragement never came. The silence hurt. It ate, like acid, into my heart.

Then in a lightning-flash of insight, I thought: what if I turn the entire scenario around. What if, instead of waiting for Rabbi X to encourage me, I encouraged him? What if I did for him what I was hoping he would do for me? That was a life-changing moment. It gave me a strength I never had before.

I began to formulate it as an ethic. Don't wait to be praised: praise others. Don't wait to be respected: respect others. Don't stand on the sidelines, criticising others. Do something yourself to make things better. Don't wait for the world to change: begin the process yourself, and then win others to the cause. There is a statement attributed to Gandhi (actually he never said it, but in a parallel universe he might have done): 'Be the change you seek in the world.' Take the initiative.

That was what Moses was doing in the last month of his life, in that long series of public addresses that make up the book of Devarim, culminating in the great covenant-renewal ceremony in today's parsha. Devarim marks the end of the childhood of the Jewish people. From there on, Judaism became God's call to human responsibility. For us, faith is not waiting for God. Faith is the realisation that God is waiting for us.

Hence the life-changing idea: Whenever you find yourself distressed because someone hasn't done for you what you think they should have done, turn the thought around, and then do it for them.

Don't wait for the world to get better. Take the initiative yourself. The world is waiting for you. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even every person of Israel." (Deuteronomy 29:9) Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanhuma, explaining the connection between the multitude of grim warnings (tokhaha) unloosed in the prior portion of Ki Tavo, and this week's opening words: You are standing. Our sages teach: since the Israelites heard one hundred curses minus two, in addition to the forty-nine in the book of Leviticus (chapter 26), their faces turned green and they didn't understand how they would be able to stand up to so many chastisements (curses). Moses thus began to comfort them: "You are standing here today. You have greatly angered the Almighty [after all, you constantly

complained in the desert, you worshipped the Golden Calf, you refused to conquer Israel] but nevertheless you have not been destroyed and behold you are standing here today.” In effect, therefore, our opening has to be taken as a divine statement of consolation: You may well suffer, but you will never be destroyed!

Rabbi Yedidya Frankel, the late Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, asks three significant questions on this Midrash.

First of all, why did it take the second set of chastisements to cause the Israelites to “turn green,” when the first set of forty-nine could hardly be described as benign experiences? Here is an example from Leviticus: “I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish, and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it” (Lev. 26:16).

Secondly, the Jewish people seem to be recoiling at the massive number of curses – forty-nine from Leviticus plus another ninety-eight from Deuteronomy. But the fact is that last week’s portion goes out of its way to point out that the specific number of curses is hardly relevant because Israel will suffer every possible blow imaginable: “Also every sickness and every trauma, and every plague which is not written in this book of law, God will bring about against you until He destroys you” (Deut. 28:61).

And, in fact, the entire span of Jewish history bears out the horrible truth of this verse. For example, where in these warnings are the gas chambers of Auschwitz mentioned? And yet we were subjected to them! Hence why does the added number of curses cause them to turn green?

Finally, asks Rabbi Frankel, from a stylistic point of view, why does the Midrash not utilize parallel language? If, with reference to Deuteronomy, the sages speak of “one hundred minus two” curses, apparently being interested in a round number, why with reference to the curses in Leviticus do they not say “fifty minus one”? Why then do they speak of forty-nine?

Rabbi Frankel brilliantly answers all of his questions by suggesting another interpretation of “one hundred minus two.” It is not another way of representing the number ninety-eight. If we go back to the initial set of chastisements in Leviticus (Parashat Behukotai), we discover that, after the curses and the warnings are presented, the Torah then includes two comforting promises: “Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the land” (Lev. 26:42). Two verses later we read, “And even this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, and I will not abhor them, to destroy them utterly in order to nullify My covenant with them” (26:44). They were to be punished, but they would remain alive as a people and would be restored to the Land of Israel.

What prompted the Israelites to turn green with fright was that when they heard one hundred additional curses in Deuteronomy, they were “minus two” – devoid of any comforting ending, without the two guarantees they had received with the prior set of curses. And if the chastisements of the book of Leviticus refer to the destruction of the First Temple and its subsequent exile, and the chastisements of the book of Deuteronomy refer to the destruction of the Second Temple and its subsequent exile (see Nahmanides, Lev. 26:16), the Israelites feared that there might not be a return and redemption after the second destruction. They feared that they would then be destroyed as a nation totally and irrevocably. To this end, Moses comforts them: “Atem Nitzavim – You are standing here,” aren’t you, despite the Egyptian exile and enslavement, despite your miserable backsliding in the desert! You are the people of an eternal covenant – and God’s guarantee as to your eternity as a nation holds true for as long as world and history remain.

The second Roman exile caused our nation to be scattered all over the world and endured for close to two thousand years. And although it is true that there is no immediate guarantee of restoration – indeed, the restoration was long in coming – the opening words in Nitzavim, barely one chapter later, promise our eternal survival, following our national repentance, and our ultimate Triumph:

“And you shall return to the lord your God and hearken to His voice according to everything I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul...”

Even if you will be scattered to the ends of the heaven, from there will the Lord your God gather you and from there will He take you up. And the Lord your God will bring you to the land which your fathers have inherited, and you shall inherit it, He will cause you to do well, and you shall be more numerous than were your ancestors. (Deut. 30:2–5) And this is what we are experiencing in our generation! ©2018 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

After centuries of enslavement in Egypt and decades of wandering in a trackless and forbidding desert, our teacher Moshe points out the obvious. Namely, that the Jewish people are still standing strong and resilient and about to embark on the great adventure of creating Jewish national sovereignty in the land of Israel. However, often in life the obvious is not so obvious and we are unable to see what actually lies so clearly before us.

To my mind I would think that the greatest puzzle -- even miracle -- in human history is the survival of the Jewish people over these centuries of dispersion and persecution. When so many great and powerful

nations have disappeared completely, even after ruling over vast amounts of territory and people for centuries, how is it that the Jewish people, not numerous and for the most of its history, powerless and stateless, has somehow been able to survive and even thrive?

And yet the fact of this survival is undeniable, obvious for all the world to see and witness. In fact, the world credits us with much greater numbers than we have, as well as with much greater power and influence over world events than we can ever exercise. In short, this comment of Moshe that headlines the Torah reading of the week, that you are all as a people somehow standing and existing, is the most extraordinary prophecy of his entire career. It marches down the corridors of history and its obvious truth should have a great impact upon our lives and thoughts.

Moshe will complain later that the Jewish people are a feckless and foolish nation. This complaint is based simply on the fact that there always was and is a tendency within the Jewish world to ignore the obvious. King Solomon said that the Lord created us, that we should think and act in a straightforward manner but that we have always chosen to look for devious motives and overly clever behavior.

In our time, the Jewish people, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, have accomplished wonders in rebuilding the nation after the desolation of World War II. And we have done so rapidly and over a very short period of time. The existence of the Jewish state in the land of Israel has been a main catalyst for this remarkable resilience and resurgence.

With this physical rebirth there has also arisen a spiritual renewal that exists among many sections of the Jewish world and is not restricted only to certain groups. The prophet long ago foresaw that there was to arise a spontaneous hunger for spirituality, Torah values and knowledge and the study of the laws and tradition of the eternity granted to us at Sinai.

That path was long ago stifled by circumstances and foreign ideas -- even foreign gods -- that infiltrated the Jewish world. However, in spite of the awful problems of assimilation and intermarriage, ignorance and delusional thinking that plague our generation, there is a feeling within us that somehow the great search for God and Torah continues within the Jewish people and will only increase in time to come. ©2018 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 ELIAKIM KOENIGSBERG

TorahWeb

Parshas Nitzavim is always read right before Rosh Hashana. At first glance, the connection between

the two seems to be the fact that at the end of the parsha the Torah mentions the mitzvah of teshuva. The posuk says, "This mitzvah that I command you today is not difficult for you... it is in your mouth and your heart to do it (30:11, 14)." The Ramban explains that this refers to the mitzvah of teshuva. It seems logical that before the Day of Judgement we should read a parsha that mentions the concept of teshuva. But perhaps there is another connection between Parshas Nitzavim and Rosh Hashana.

In the beginning of the parsha, the Torah discusses the concept of arvus -- that each member of Klal Yisrael is responsible for his fellow Jews. The posuk says, "The hidden aveiros are for Hashem, but the revealed ones are for us and our children forever (29:28)." Chazal explain that this means that if a Jew does an aveirah publicly, and others can stop him but they do not, then they are also held accountable." Kol Yisrael avreivim zeh bazeh -- all Jews are responsible for each other (Shavuos 39a)."

This is one application of the concept of arvus. But the concept of arvus extends far beyond this situation. In its ultimate sense, arvus means that every Jew must take responsibility for the welfare of every other Jew. The first example of arvus in the Torah is when Yehuda tells Yaakov Avinu that he will take responsibility for Binyamin. "I will personally guarantee him; from my hand you can demand him (Mikeitz, 43:9)." Yehuda was willing to risk his own future to protect Binyamin. That is what arvus means in the fullest sense of the word -- to care about another Jew to the extent that one is even willing to sacrifice for him. The principle of arvus requires that a Jew should never see himself as just an individual. But rather, he should always view himself as part of Klal Yisrael.

This mindset -- seeing oneself as part of the tzibbur -- is the kind of perspective a person should have on Rosh Hashana. In Sefer Melachim II, the Navi describes how the Isha HaShunamis (the woman from Shunaim) provided for Elisha HaNavi's needs. At one point, Elisha asked her if he could do her a favor in return. "Can I speak to the king on your behalf? (4:13)" The Zohar (Noach, Beshalach) explains that Elisha spoke to her on Rosh Hashana and he was asking if he could daven for her. He was saying, "Can I ask something of the Melech HaMishpat (the King of Judgement) on your behalf?" But the Isha HaShunamis responds, "No, please don't do anything special for me. I would just like to be amongst my people." Chazal praise the Isha HaShunamis for this statement, because it showed that she understood that in times of crisis, it is always better to be part of a tzibbur.

This idea is echoed by the Gemara (Brachos 30a), "A person should always join together with the community." The Gemara explains that for this reason, Chazal formulated tefilla in the plural form -- "Remember us for life...inscribe us in the Book of

Life...purify our hearts to serve You in truth." Chazal instituted that we use the plural form in tefilla so that a person should never stand alone.

Why is this so important? One answer is that when a person joins together with the community and expresses his tefilla as part of the community, he acquires the merits of the community. The Meshech Chochmah writes (Beshalach 14:24) that an individual is punished more than a tzibbur. Only an individual is subject to the punishment of kareis, not a tzibbur. When there is unity in a group, the individuals of that group can be saved from punishments they would have been worthy of as individuals. Similarly, when a person connects to a community, his individual faults are considered insignificant compared to the merits of the community. That makes it easier for him to merit a favorable judgement.

This is one goal of davening in the plural form -- to put oneself together with the tzibbur. But there is another purpose as well. By formulating tefilla in the plural form, Chazal wanted to remind us that we should daven not only for ourselves, but for others as well. It is not enough to simply daven together with the tzibbur. To truly connect with the tzibbur, we must daven for other members of Klal Yisrael as well. That is why Chazal instituted that we conclude the Shemoneh Esrei during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva by saying, "We should be remembered and inscribed before You in the Book of Life, we and Your entire people, the House of Israel." We emphasize that we care not just about ourselves and our families. We care about all of Klal Yisrael.

This is the ultimate level of arvus -- to empathize with another Jew, to care for him and to share his pain. When we daven for other Jews and we show that we care about them, we truly unite together with the tzibbur of Klal Yisrael, and that can help us tap into the merit of the tzibbur.

May each one of us be inscribed this Rosh Hashana -- we and all of Klal Yisrael -- for a year of health and happiness and much bracha. ©2018 Rabbi E. Koenigsberg & TorahWeb.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

Note the sentence "V'shav Hashem...et shevutkha" which is often translated "then the Lord your God will bring back your captivity." (Deuteronomy 30:3) The term used here is not "ve-heishiv" which means God will "bring back" your captivity, rather it is "ve-shav" which literally means that God "will return with" your captivity. The message according to the

Midrash is clear. When we are in captivity God is in exile with us. (Rashi, Deuteronomy 30:3) Thus, when we return, God returns with us as He, too, has been exiled.

Similarly, God first appears to Moshe in a burning bush telling him to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:2) The Midrash points out that God purposely appears in the lowly bush to teach that He felt the pain of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt. As we were lowly, so did God feel that lowliness. God is one in our suffering, empathizing with our despair. (Rashi, Exodus 3:2)

This idea teaches an important message. God is a God of love who cares deeply for His people. Hence, when we are cast aside, God suffers with us and is cast aside as well.

This concept finds expression in the mourning process. When leaving someone sitting shiva, we recite the formula of "ha-Makom yenaheem etkhem - may God comfort you." But suppose there is only one mourner? Should we use the word etkhem (you, plural) rather than otkha or otakh (you, singular).

Many rabbis insist that we still use the plural form. According to this view, it can be suggested that even when one mourns alone, one is not alone. God feels our loss to the extent that He is sitting shiva with us, hence etkhem. From this perspective, God is the comforter and the comforted. And so we recite, may God comfort you-with the you including God.

No wonder then, when reciting kaddish, we begin with "Yitgadel, ve-yitkadesh" which means "may God become great, and may God become holy." With the death of a human being, with a family in bereavement, God, as it were, is not fully great and holy as He suffers with us. Thus, these words are in the future tense. Indeed, the kaddish may be interpreted as our words of comfort to God Himself.

As we participate in the teshuvah process on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this idea teaches that God is one with us, caring, leading and carrying us from step to step, higher and higher. As we return to God, God returns to us. ©2018 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

The Mitzvah of Hakhel

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

"Gather your nation, the men, women, children and the stranger in your midst, in order that they will learn, hear and fear Almighty G-d" (Devarim 31:10-12). This is the Mitzvah of "Hakhel", which occurs on Succot at the conclusion of the "Shmittah" year. The Torah designates who this Mitzvah is incumbent upon.

With regards to women, initially they would be required to fulfill the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" once in seven years, even though it is a Mitzvah based on time (which women are exempt). However, women are also essentially exempt from the Mitzvah of "Reiyah (coming to Yerushalayim on the festivals), since one must own land in Israel to fulfill this Mitzvah and generally women don't own any land. Hence ipso facto they would be exempt from the mitzvah of "Hakhel".

Regarding children, there are those sages that state that even a nursing child must attend "Hakhel". Others state that the children must be of educable age. What is interesting is that if we ascribe to the view that women are exempt from the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" because they don't own land, then while their husbands would be attending "Hakhel" the children who are in the category of exemption, would be supervised since their mothers (if they wish) would be available to tend to their needs. © 2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Message of Teshuvah

The first three sections of this week's parasha, Parashat Nitzavim, contain the history of the B'nei Yisrael since leaving Egypt and its tie to the responses of the tribes that would be said on Har G'rizim and Har Eival. Finally, in the fourth section (r'vi'i) we find a change. HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch describes this section: "Now follows the great goal to which the whole sequence of the dark centuries of Jewish sufferings, so full of trials, will ultimately lead." Hirsch is referring to the Redemption and the end of Jewish exile. Moshe had already forecast the exile and now focuses on the gathering of those who are in exile and their redemption and forgiveness by Hashem.

The Torah tells us, "And it will come to pass that when all of these things come upon you, the blessings and the curses, then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem your Elokim has dispersed you. And you will return unto Hashem, your Elokim, and listen to His voice according to everything that I command you today, you and your children with all your heart and with all your soul. Then Hashem your Elokim will return you from your captivity and have mercy on you and He will gather you in from all of the peoples to where Hashem, your Elokim, has scattered you. If your dispersed will be at the ends of the Heavens, from there Hashem, your Elokim will gather you in and from there He will take you. And Hashem, your Elokim will bring you to the land of which your forefathers took possession and you shall take possession of it, He will do good to you and make you more numerous than your forefathers. Hashem, your Elokim will circumcise your heart and the heart of your children to love Hashem your Elokim with all your heart and all your soul that you may live."

The Kli Yakar explains the difference between

the terms "where He dispersed you", and the term "where He scattered you." The term "scattered" speaks of scattering the Jews around to all the nations of the world. This was the exile. But there was a different kind of exile also. The "dispersing" was a dispersing of the Jews among the nations and away from the mitzvot. They were influenced by other gods and worshipped them. They forgot about their covenant with Hashem and they forgot about the punishments which would occur should they not fulfill the covenant. The Kli Yakar sees this message to the people: you chose to separate yourselves from the mitzvot of Hashem so Hashem continued and furthered that separation until which time you will turn again to the mitzvot and desire to serve Hashem completely.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the pasuk reminds us of the blessings and the curses, but we must not understand them solely as reward and punishment for our behavior. Through studying Sefer Yehoshua and Sefer Shoftim we see that at no time was the behavior of B'nei Yisrael exemplary. We rushed to perform mitzvot while at the same time we rushed to sin at every opportunity. The blessing that we received of the Land of Yisrael and the good that was to be found within its borders were a magnanimous gift from Hashem. Once we were living in the Land, the Land reacted to our behavior and brought the curses that finally led to our exile. Our return to Israel depends on our Teshuvah. The Ramban stresses that the only Teshuvah that Hashem can accept from us is the commitment to fulfill all of the commandments of Hashem. This does not mean that each person will be successful in fulfilling the mitzvot but that each person will accept this commitment as a responsibility.

Nechama Leibovits explains that the word "return" occurs seven times in the first few sentences in Chapter 30, the p'sukim which we quoted. Nechama explains that the differences between the word ad, towards, and the word el, unto, does not seem to be significant, but this enables our commentators to focus on a distinction in the process of Teshuvah. The Malbim explains that "the first stage of religious awareness is ...the turning towards (ad) Hashem, when man directs his attention to the right path and is ready to listen." The final stage is the "turning unto (el) Hashem and not merely focusing himself in the right direction." Rav Kook explains that, "When people sincerely desire to come back to Hashem they are held back by numerous hindrances such as confused thinking, weakness or inability to remedy those matters pertaining to relations between man and his neighbor. Admittedly these hindrances constitute a very serious barrier requiring the complete mastery and conquest of man's feelings in the face of the Supreme duty devolving on him to mend his ways." Because of those difficulties, Hashem is prepared to accept even the glimmer of teshuvah as a sign of hope and encourages

and assists man to accomplish this goal.

We are quickly approaching Rosh Hashanah and the beginning of the Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah, the ten days of returning to Hashem. Though Parashat Nitzavim speaks of teshuvah, it is generally agreed that we are speaking here of the teshuvah of a nation not only of individuals within that nation. We are witness today to the phenomenon of the State of Israel where Jews are constantly returning to Hashem and their homeland. Our suffering has not ended and as yet we do not have Mashiach, but we are in our land instead of in exile. Yet the lessons of teshuvah which we learn here also apply to us as individuals. All of us face individual temptations which we find difficult to overcome. We place ourselves into a form of individual exile in which we are separated from Hashem by these temptations. Hashem, though, is with us and is only looking for a spark of our willingness to change so that He can enable us to do so. We must take the first baby step and Hashem will lengthen our stride until we have placed distance between us and that temptation. Moshe, with Hashem's agreement, has promised us that we will do teshuvah and we will return to Hashem. May we double our efforts this Rosh Hashanah for Hashem awaits our efforts. May we take the first, small steps to return towards Hashem. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"This is in order to elevate you today as a people to Him, and so that He may be to you God, as He promised you, and swore to your fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov." (Devarim 29:12) I learn daily with an elderly gentleman of British origin. Every year he reminds me of something he feels is a general misunderstanding about Rosh Hashanah. He has heard many people over the years say that Rosh Hashanah is the time we coronate God as our King, which is simply wrong. God is King all year round, he points out, and has been ever since He created "subjects."

A coronation is what happens when someone goes from NOT being a king to BEING a king. Coronation, from the word "corona," means "crown." Since God is ALWAYS king, we do NOT need to coronate Him or proclaim His kingship. Something else has to be happening on Rosh Hashanah.

There are many things that allude to what that "something" is, but the best hint is the change of brochah from "HAKEL HaKadosh," the "Holy ALMIGHTY," to a "HAMELECH HaKadosh," the "Holy KING (in the Shemonah Esrai). We do this for the entire 10 days until the end of Yom Kippur, but not the rest of the year. The question is, why NOT, if God IS the "Holy KING" all year round?

This is tied to another question. A person can and SHOULD do teshuvah all year round, not just

during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah -- the 10 Days of Repentance. The Rambam answers this question by saying that, yes, you CAN do teshuvah all year round, but you WON'T. At least not the way you CAN do it from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. Therefore, use the time well.

Of course. The pressure and atmosphere of this time of year tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. All the time we spend in shul praying from machzorim tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. Everyone praying for the same thing and doing teshuvah together, tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. What else do you need to bring the teshuvah "out in us"?

If you don't know the answer to this question, then you also won't figure out the answer to the first question, because they are the same. Furthermore, if you don't know what this "extra" element is, you can miss the opportunity to use it, as so many people do year-after-year. This is why few people change that much after the High Holidays, and the Jewish people as a whole are still very much in exile.

We'll answer this with an example. A king may rule a very large kingdom, but most of his subjects may never see his face, or at least see him in person. They'll believe the king is actually there in the palace, and they'll swear loyalty to him. But, being so far away from the king, they will have difficulty EMOTIONALLY relating to him, and it will affect their reverence and loyalty for him.

What happens though if, one day, the king decides to travel his kingdom and allow his subjects to actually SEE him IN PERSON? Even modern day leaders, as much as we disrespect them, and even abuse them, still draw people out to see them, if only because of the power they represent. Even EVIL leaders, as much as they are to be reviled, also evoke a certain sense of awe because of what they control.

What happens AFTER the people see the leader, even if only from a distance? It changes them. It makes the king more real to them. It actually creates an emotional connection that may not have previously been there. As a result, even after the king leaves, people remain "connected" to him. They may have made fun of the king before, but may feel awkward doing it henceforth.

This is what Elul is about. We add the prayer "L'Dovid Ori" twice a day, and blow the shofar from Rosh Chodesh onward. Elul is the announcement that the King is coming to "town," and the time to make all the preparations befitting His arrival. When He finally arrives, we want the "town" to be ready, and to have secured a good vantage point from which to "see" Him.

This is what puts the AWE into the "Days of AWE." We get to glimpse the King, not with our physical eyes, but with our MIND'S eye. We're able to make a connection to God as King, like at no other time of the year, intellectually AND emotionally.

Without this experience, God is only "HaKel HaKodesh," the "Holy Almighty" to us. He is hidden from us, and we don't relate to him the same way emotionally. We don't maintain the level of awe necessary to call Him "HaMelech HaKodesh," even if we say the words. We may KNOW it is true, but we don't FEEL its truth.

This affects our level of teshuvah as well. When people are in the presence of greatness, they sense their OWN potential for greatness, which tends to also point out their weaknesses and shortcomings. If the person is sincere, which they tend to be at this time of year, feeling the "gaze" of God on them, this will inspire them to aspire to more personal greatness. The teshuvah then will take care of itself.

It is far more impactful to confess one's mistakes out of a desire to be BETTER, than simply because we know we have done wrong. The consequence of punishment, believe it or not, is a far less effective tool of improvement than a person's desire to be greater. We can rationalize around the belief that we might be punishable. We CANNOT rationalize around a sense of falling short of personal expectations.

The King is coming to town, and He is the GREATEST King ever. It should inspire a person to be an even GREATER subject. ©2018 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The Torah calls the day of Rosh Hashana "a day of blowing" which signifies the pivotal importance of the shofar to the Day of Judgment. The shofar is the seminal mitzvah around which everything else evolves. This is somewhat baffling. Against the awesomeness of the Day of Judgment, the shofar would seem to be a minor ritual. Why then the special status and fanfare attached to it?

The commentaries tell us that the shofar calls to mind the story of the akeida in which our patriarch Avraham, after attempting to fulfill Hashem's request to offer up his beloved Isaac as a sacrifice, found an alternate way to give expression to his overflowing love of his Creator.

Avraham noticed a ram caught in the bushes and offered it up as a sacrifice in place of Yitzchok. [Far from being a 'chance' occurrence, the ram had been placed in that very spot by Hashem. One of its horns will one day be used to announce the arrival of Moshiach, our sages tell us.] With the blowing of a ram's horn on Rosh Hashana, we recall the historic event of the akeida in which Avraham rose to unparalleled spiritual heights.

Yet, the precise connection between the mitzvah of shofar-blowing on Rosh Hashana and the gripping story about Abraham's devotion and self-

sacrifice remains elusive. What does this story have to do with the awesome Day of Judgment?

The Torah tells us that G-d created mortal physical man from earth and dust collected from four corners of the earth, and invested within him a living spirit by blowing into his nostrils "a breath of life" (Genesis 2). As a result of the blend of the physical and spiritual components of his makeup, man is a hybrid; part physical matter and part G-dly.

We struggle with the innate conflict of our bodily desires and yearnings with our spiritual strivings throughout our earthly sojourn. Each person must decide for himself which force he will make the predominant one in his own life. Are we material creatures seeking to better our physical standard of living, climbing the ladder of financial success, and ensuring that we have more glitter than our neighbors? Or, is our primary drive focused on giving expression to the neshama within us, the vibrations of our conscience that direct us heavenwards towards an eternal bond with our Creator?

Our neshama yearns to connect to its creator while assigning the body to a secondary role in our time here in this world. On Rosh Hashana, as we commit ourselves to a new year, we reinforce our determination to allow the needs of our neshama to take center stage. We reconnect our soul-implanted in man with the 'breath of life' from the Creator-with its heavenly source.

How can one translate these spiritual impulses into a medium that speaks to the concrete and physical part of our existence? How can we "kiss" the Divine, so to speak, and find Him in both the oppressive monotony and the churning maelstrom of day-to-day existence?

The shofar is the ideal expression of the soaring impulses that overtake us on the Day of Judgment. Avraham was willing to sacrifice his closest and most beloved son with unflinching devotion. When he was restrained from doing so, he expressed his love with the sacrifice of the ram. Part of that ram-the symbol of fierce love of G-d-remains with us: the horn we blow each Rosh Hashana. The shofar is the conduit through which we lovingly demonstrate our willingness to transform the breath of life with which Hashem animated us-our souls-into our predominant life force, while the body assumes an accessory role.

The shofar is thus the perfect instrument through which we can "pour back" our essence to its heavenly source. Like our forefather Avraham, we use this instrument to demonstrate that for the coming years, our goals and ideals will align with spiritual imperatives, rather than physical ones.

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