

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Over the past few months I've been having conversations with leading thinkers, intellectuals, innovators and philanthropists for a BBC series on moral challenges of the 21st century. Among those I spoke to was David Brooks, one of the most insightful moralists of our time. His conversation is always scintillating, but one remark of his was particularly beautiful. It is a key that helps us unlock the entire project outlined by Moses in Sefer Devarim, the fifth and final book of the Torah.

We had been talking about covenants and commitments. I suggested that many people in the West today are commitment-averse, reluctant to bind themselves unconditionally and open-endedly to something or someone. The market mindset that predominates today encourages us to try this, sample that, experiment and keep our options open for the latest version or the better deal. Pledges of loyalty are few and far between.

Brooks agreed and noted that nowadays freedom is usually understood as freedom-from, meaning the absence of restraint. We don't like to be tied down. But the real freedom worth having, in his view, is freedom-to, meaning the ability to do something that's difficult and requires effort and expertise. So, for example, if you want to have the freedom to play the piano, you have to chain yourself to it and practise every day. (This is similar to, though not identical with, Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom, in his famous essay, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' reprinted in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Oxford University Press, 2002, 166-217.)

Freedom in this sense does not mean the absence of restraint, but rather, choosing the right restraint. That involves commitment, which involves a choice to forego certain choices. Then he said: "My favourite definition of commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behaviour

around it for the moment when love falters."

That struck me as a beautiful way into one of the fundamental features of Sefer Devarim specifically, and Judaism generally. The book of Deuteronomy is more than simply Moses' speeches in the last months of his life, his tzava'ah or ethical will to the future generations. It is more, also, than Mishneh Torah, a recapitulation of the rest of the Torah, a restatement of the laws and history of the people since their time in Egypt. (This was the original rabbinical name for the book. The name Deuteronomy, from the Latin meaning "second law," was an attempt to capture the sense of the book as a restatement of the laws.)

It is a fundamental theological statement of what Judaism is about. It is an attempt to integrate law and narrative into a single coherent vision of what it would be like to create a society of law-governed liberty under the sovereignty of God: a society of justice, compassion, respect for human dignity and the sanctity of human life. And it is built around an act of mutual commitment, by God to a people and by the people to God.

The commitment itself is an act of love. At the heart of it are the famous words from the Shema in this week's parsha: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). The Torah is the foundational narrative of the fraught, sometimes tempestuous, marriage between God and an often obstinate people. It is a story of love.

We can see how central love is to the book of Deuteronomy by noting how often the root a-h-v, "to love," appears in each of the five books of the Torah. It occurs 15 times in Genesis, but none of these is about the relationship between God and a human being. They are about the feelings of husbands for wives or parents for children. This is how often the verb appears in the other 4 books:

Exodus 2
Leviticus 2
Numbers 0
Deuteronomy 23

Again and again we hear of love, in both directions, from the Israelites to God and from God to the Israelites. It is the latter that are particularly striking. Here are some examples:

The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than



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other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you... (Deut. 7:7-8)

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set His affection on your ancestors and loved them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations -- as it is today. (Deut. 10:14-15)

The Lord your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you. (Deut 23:5)

The real question is how this vision is connected to the legal, halakhic content of much of Devarim. On the one hand we have this passionate declaration of love by God for a people; on the other we have a detailed code of law covering most aspects of life for individuals and the nation as a whole once it enters the land. Law and love are not two things that go obviously together. What has the one to do with the other?

That is what David Brooks' remark suggests: commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behaviour around it to sustain that love over time. Law, the mitzvot, halakhah, is that structure of behaviour. Love is a passion, an emotion, a heightened state, a peak experience. But an emotional state cannot be guaranteed forever. We wed in poetry but we stay married in prose.

Which is why we need laws, rituals, habits of deed. Rituals are the framework that keeps love alive. I once knew a wonderfully happy married couple. The husband, with great devotion, brought his wife breakfast in bed every morning. I am not entirely sure she needed or even wanted breakfast in bed every morning, but she graciously accepted it because she knew it was the homage he wished to pay her, and it did indeed keep their love alive. After decades of marriage, they still seemed to be on their honeymoon.

Without intending any precise comparison, that is what the vast multiplicity of rituals in Judaism, many of them spelled out in the book of Deuteronomy, actually achieved. They sustained the love between God and a people. You hear the cadences of that love throughout the generations. It is there in the book of Psalms: "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry

and parched land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). It is there in Isaiah: "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed" (Is. 54:10). It is there in the siddur, in the blessing before the Shema: "You have loved us with great love / with everlasting love." It is there, passionately, in the song, Yedid Nefesh, composed in the sixteenth century by Safed kabbalist Elazar Azikri. It remains there in the songs composed year after year in present-day Israel. Whether they speak of God's love for us or ours for Him, the love remains strong after 33 centuries. That is a long time for love to last, and we believe it will do so forever.

Could it have done so without the rituals, the 613 commands, that fill our days with reminders of God's presence? I think not. Whenever Jews abandoned the life of the commands, within a few generations they lost their identity. Without the rituals, eventually love dies. With them, the glowing embers remain, and still have the power to burst into flame. Not every day in a long and happy marriage feels like a wedding, but even love grown old will still be strong, if the choreography of fond devotion, the ritual courtesies and kindnesses, are sustained.

In the vast literature of halakhah we find the 'how' and 'what' of Jewish life, but not always the 'why.' The special place of Sefer Devarim in Judaism as a whole is that here, more clearly than almost anywhere else, we find the 'why.' Jewish law is the structure of behaviour built around the love between God and His people, so that the love remains long after the first feelings of passion have grown old.

Hence the life-change idea: if you seek to make love undying, build around it a structure of rituals -- small acts of kindness, little gestures of self-sacrifice for the sake of the beloved -- and you will be rewarded with a quiet joy, an inner light, that will last a lifetime. *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

"Comfort you, comfort you, My People" (Isaiah 40:1) The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is known as the Shabbat of Comfort, a phrase taken from the first verse of the prophetic reading from Isaiah. Additionally, a most fascinating festival day—one which is unfortunately not very well known—falls just about one week after the bleak fast for the destruction of both of our Holy Temples. An analysis of this festival, known as Tu B'Av, "the 15th day of Av," will reveal a striking similarity between it and the Shabbat of Comfort.

The conclusion of the last Mishna of tractate Ta'anit (26b) teaches as follows: "Rabban Shimon ben

Gamliel said, 'There were no greater festive days in Israel than the fifteenth day of Av and Yom Kippur, when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white dresses so as not to embarrass those who didn't have their own. They would go out and dance in the vineyards. What would they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see whom you wish to choose for yourselves. Do not cast forth your eyes after beauty, but cast forth your eyes after family. "False is grace and vanity is beauty; a woman who fears the Lord is the one to be praised"; and the Scriptures further states, "Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her in the gates."'"

The Talmud then cites the Tosefta, which provides a more descriptive picture: "The beautiful ones among them, what would they say? Cast forth your eyes after beauty, for woman was only created for beauty. The ones with good pedigree, what would they say? Cast forth your eyes after family, because woman was only created for children. The plain ones, what would they say? Take your wares for the sake of heaven, as long as your adorn us with gold (and then even the plain-looking women will appear to be beautiful)."

Apparently, the 15th day of Av was a kind of Sadie Hawkins day, when the women would entice the men to marry them; and each woman would emphasize her particular quality: beauty, family or "for the sake of heaven." And, as the Mishna concludes, it is chiefly the attributes of fear of God and performance of good deeds which truly count in assessing the proper wife.

The Talmud adds, "It is clear why Yom Kippur is a Festival, since it brings forgiveness and absolution, since it is the day when God gave the second tablets [as a sign of His forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf]; but what is the reason for the joy of the 15th Av?" The Talmud then gives seven possible reasons, from the suggestion that on that day members of the tribes were permitted to marry one another, to the opinion that on 15 Av, the desert generation stopped dying, to the astronomical fact that from that day on, the sun begins to lose its strength and the days begin to be shorter.

Permit me to add another possible reason, one which would also explain the unique manner in which we are to celebrate the 15th of Av.

It would be logical to assume that as Jews witnessed Jewish sovereignty going up in flames and God's very throne smoldering, they tore their garments and sat on the ground, sitting shiva not only for the lost lives, but also for the disappearing dream of at-hand redemption.

If the seven-day mourning period began on 9 Av, it must have concluded on 15 Av, the seventh day, about which our sages rule that "partial mourning on that day is accounted as if one had mourned the complete day."

Hence they rose from their shiva on 15 Av, Tu

B'Av.

It was precisely on the day that their shiva concluded that our Sages ordained the merriment of Tu B'Av. This parallels the joy when the High Priest emerged unscathed from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur; a sign that Israel had indeed been forgiven! The Holy Temple may be burning to the ground, but the Jewish nation remains alive and God's commitment to His eternal covenant remains intact (as is clear from this week's reading, which we also read on Tisha B'Av. (Deut. 4:25-32)

As the Midrash teaches, God exacted punishment from the wood and stones of a physical edifice, albeit a holy one, but He demonstrated His ultimate forgiveness by keeping His nation alive and His covenant operational. This is why and how 9 Av will one day be a day of great celebration.

God ordains Tu B'Av as a day of weddings; Judaism sees every wedding ritual as a ringing confirmation of the future of the Jewish people, as a personal commitment to continue the nation and the faith because "there will yet be heard on the streets of Judea and in the great plazas of Jerusalem, sounds of gladness and sounds of rejoicing, sounds of grooms and sounds of brides." (Jeremiah 33: 11)

Not only has our generation not been disappointed, but it is presently rejoicing in Israel's rebirth. God has not forsaken us, and is even allowing us a glimpse of redemption! ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The text of the review of the Ten Commandments that appears in this week's Torah reading differs slightly from the text that appeared previously in the book of Shemot. As you can well understand, there has been much commentary and explanation over the centuries of Jewish scholarship regarding these differences in words, even though the basic ideas of the Commandments remain constant in both versions of the text.

The Talmud assigns some of the differences in the text to the Godly revelation at Sinai where miraculously the Lord, so to speak, uttered two words in a simultaneous fashion, something that is beyond human ability and comprehension. Other differences in the text are explained through halachic and agadic interpretation.

Over the centuries many of the great commentators of Israel have added their insights and interpretations of these texts and their eternal meanings and messages. It has been suggested that to convey these sometimes hidden and misunderstood nuances, Moshe in his review of the events of his 40 years as the leader of Israel in the desert of Sinai purposely restates, albeit with minor differences, the text of the

basic principles of human and Jewish civilization.

There is fascinating discussion over the centuries as to what the text that was inscribed on the tablets of stone actually stated. There is also discussion as to what type of Hebrew font was used -- that of ancient Hebrew called 'ktav ivri' or the font that we are all familiar with from our scrolls of the Torah, 'ktav ashuei.' The Torah has always proved itself to be a never-ending source of inspiration, fascination, wonder and questions.

The ability for human society to exist and prosper is always in doubt, through the centuries of violence and war, exploitation and cruelty and in the norms of so-called civilized society. All of this is rooted in the unfortunate tendency of human beings to disregard the tenets and spirit of the Ten Commandments.

Respect for human life and for the property of others, a system of fair justice and law enforcement, respect for elders and, above all, the appreciation of the universal God that creates and guides all of us, are the bedrock principles of Judaism as reflected in the Ten Commandments. The abhorrence of sexual immorality and of falseness and untruths shine forth from the eternal words of the commandments. Without these principles being followed and appreciated humankind is always only a step away from being essentially an extension of the animal kingdom.

All the preaching that goes on in the world about higher values and human freedoms are of little benefit without a commitment to the observance of the Ten Commandments. There are all sorts of moral ideals and organizations that flood our modern world. But, without the existence of the realization of God in our personal and national lives, these moralities will always be inadequate and insufficient to prevent the descent into barbarism and destruction. We should pay close attention to the text of the Ten Commandments that we will hear read from the Torah this Shabbat. ©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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Mountain of Faith

There is a fascinating sequence of verses in this week's portion which tell us that it is our responsibility to remember more than just the Commandments, but the manner in which they were given. Moshe exhorts the nation, "Now, Israel, listen to the decrees and the mandates that I teach you to observe. You shall not add to them nor subtract. See I have taught you decrees and ordinances as Hashem commanded me." Moshe warns the nation to "safeguard and perform them, for they are your wisdom

and discernment in the eyes of the nations who will hear all the decrees and declare that surely this is a wise and sagacious nation" (cf. Deuteronomy 2:1-9). What follows is a warning to remember the scenario of Sinai. And though its remembrance would seem much less significant than that of the observance of the laws themselves, the Torah uses stronger terminology in reminding us. "Only beware for yourselves and heed your very souls, lest you forget the words that your eyes saw and lest you remove them from your heart. You must make them known to your children and your children's children the day you stood before Hashem at Chorev" (Deuteronomy 2:9-11). Moshe continues to remind the Jews of the fiery scenario and the awe-filled events of the revelation at Mount Sinai.

What bothers me is a simple question. If Moshe already impressed upon his nation the importance of the actual laws, if he already explained to them that it is those commands that will inspire other nations to marvel at the brilliance and veracity of the Jews, then why is the scene at Sinai such an integral part of the faith? Why is the warning both to the Jews and their souls seemingly stronger concerning the revelation scenario, greater than that of the admonition to obey the complex laws of the Torah?

A prominent Rosh Yeshiva lived next door to the simple clerk of his celebrated yeshiva. The Rabbi had scores of people visiting him asking him advice for the most difficult complexities, Talmudic or otherwise. The clerk did his job in the yeshiva office and attended to the needs of the Rosh Yeshiva, faithfully and devotedly.

Both of them had sons. The revered Rabbi's son did not follow in his father's footsteps. He became a professor, in a secular university, something that brought consternation to his father. As a young man he began to shine in the yeshiva world and was well on his way to become a Torah luminary.

One day, after the Rosh Yeshiva's son, attired in the casual uniform of a secular intellectual, visited his father at the Yeshiva, an intellectual debate ensued between the two. When the professor left, the Rosh Yeshiva had let out a short sigh of frustration, whispering something about the difficulty in raising children to follow one's ideals.

One of the rabbis in the Yeshiva approached his mentor. "Rebbe," he meekly began. "I don't understand. The secretary of the Yeshiva merited to have his children become brilliant and devoted Torah scholars. What did he do so special that his sons are so strongly committed to Torah study?"

The Rosh Yeshiva did not let him continue. "I do not know for sure," he answered. "But one thing I can tell you. At my Shabbos table I was discussing questions on Maimonides writings and Talmudic difficulties. He was singing zemiros (songs of faith and devotion)."

The Torah exhorts us to keep the laws as they will inspire others to marvel at Jewish wisdom. But Moshe adds the finality of the argument. Do not ever forget that we stood at Mount Sinai, saw the fire and heard G-d's voice! The intellectual analyzing, even actual observance, is, of course, of utmost importance. But nothing supercedes the simple faith of the G-d fearing Jew who traces his steps to the foot of the mountain. The Chasid Rav Yosef Ya'avetz, one of the great rabbis who was exiled during the Spanish Inquisition, writes that Jews whose observance was based on intellectualism withered in the face of Torquemada's torments. The simple Jews with simple faith remained loyal and steadfast throughout. It is obviously important to think, to rationalize and to perform. But Moshe tells us to watch ourselves and our souls lest we forget what really happened some 3,300 years ago. Because when look for the bottom line, it's at the bottom of the mountain. ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Moshe (Moses) in this weeks' portion implores God for permission to enter into Israel. In the end, the request is denied. Even as Moshe uses every possible argument, God declares that He would never ever step foot into the Holy Land.

Not only is Moshe destined never to come to Israel, even his remains, his bones, would not be buried there. This in glaring contrast to Yosef (Joseph). Although Yosef died in Egypt, when the Jews leave that country, they carry Yosef's bones for burial in Israel.

One wonders why? Why is Yosef buried in Israel while Moshe is not. The Midrash takes up this question and responds: Yosef while in Egypt was always identified as a Jew. Note that when the butler suggests to Pharaoh that Yosef could interpret his dreams, he refers to Yosef as the na'ar ivri—the Hebrew lad. (Genesis 41:12) Having been identified as a Jew, Yosef was deemed worthy for burial in Israel.

Moshe on the other hand was not identified as a Jew. In fact, Yitro's (Jethro) daughters tell their father that ish Mitzri – an Egyptian man, saved us from the shepherds who were harassing us. (Exodus 2:19) Not being identified as a Jew, Moshe is denied burial in the Holy Land.

For me this Midrash brings to mind the days I spent visiting Israeli soldiers during the 1982 Lebanon War. One soldier, Shimon ben Tzion from Kiryat Arba was burnt from head to toe. Every day when visiting, I'd ask him to share a dvar Torah with me. Finally, on the last day there, he offered to me the Midrash cited above.

Looking into my eyes between his bandages, he asked: "but why should Moshe have been punished for telling the truth? Unlike Yosef who was born in

Israel and, therefore, is identified as a Hebrew, Moshe was born in Egypt. Thus, Moshe being identified as an Egyptian should not cast poor light upon him."

Turning himself even more to me, Shimon quoted Rabbi Kook of blessed memory, that no matter where a Jew is born, he is born in Israel. This was Moshe's mistake. Although born in Egypt, he was existentially a sabra, born in Israel. Here was this courageous soldier's way of telling me as I was about ready to leave for the United States, to remain connected to Israel.

Years later, our son Dov interviewed Avital Sharansky for his elementary school class report. Avital spent her Sabbath with our family during the days when she advocated on behalf of her imprisoned husband Natan. Dov asked Avital, "Where were you born?" Avital answered, "Israel." My young Dov was flabbergasted. "But you're from Russia, everyone knows that." Avital answered, "every Jew, no matter where born, was born in Israel. And every Jew, no matter where that Jew is, is in Israel."

An important message to consider, especially during these days, when so many of our people feel afraid to travel to the Holy Land. It reminds us of our challenge, to remain linked, to remain meshed with Israel, our homeland, especially during these difficult times. ©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

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Warning & Promise

Parashat V'etchanan is filled with many important topics for discussion from the second telling of the Ten Commandments to the Shema, the phrase which marks Judaism as a monotheistic religion: "Hear, o' Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One." We must note, however, that the words of this parasha are still part of the rebuke that Moshe gives the B'nei Yisrael prior to their entering the land. Here we find an extremely discouraging prediction by Moshe which he shares with the people. We will see from this section why Moshe's actions here were not only for the purpose of a warning to the people but also a solace for them.

The Torah reports Moshe's warning: "When you beget children and grandchildren and you will have been long in the land, you will grow corrupt and make a carved image of the likeness of any thing and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem, your Elokim, to anger Him. I call the Heavens and the Earth this day to bear witness against you that you will surely perish quickly from the land which you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of, you shall not have lengthy days upon it for you will be destroyed. Hashem will scatter you among the peoples and you will be left few in number

among the nations where Hashem will lead you. And you will there serve gods, the handiwork of man, of wood and stone which do not see and which do not hear and which do not eat and which do not smell.”

The Kli Yakar (1550-1619) explains that Moshe is warning the people that they will make a terrible mistake in their judgment of Hashem. They will be in the land for an extended time and they will see that, although they have strayed from Hashem, Hashem is not swift in carrying out punishment with them. They will sin and they will be deceived because Hashem is slow to anger. They will believe that “if Hashem desired to make (them) perish, He would not keep silent to such a degree.” They will build on that feeling and assume that they are without culpability. Moshe warns the people that although Hashem “extends His ire for a long time, then (even at) the end of days He brings packaged troubles one against another in an urgency.” The Kli Yakar says that Moshe wanted to furnish them with a rationale for Hashem’s slowness to anger. Hashem does not wish to punish the people immediately when they produce an idol. He wishes to allow the destruction to come in great force at a later time so that the people will seek protection from the tragedies from those idols and realize on their own that idols cannot protect them. A swift retribution from Hashem would not have taught this lesson.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch deals with the idea that Moshe did not foresee problems occurring for the people until at least the third generation of Jews was in the land. It is the third generation that has no memory of a time when they did not possess the land. They have no experience of giving thanks to Hashem for the land in which they dwell. They have no concept of yearning for a land that was not as yet their own but was to become the fulfillment of the promise that Hashem had made to our forefathers. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the second generation in the land also had no experience of Hashem’s importance within the land, but they at least had heard the stories from their fathers who had witnessed these events. The third generation did not hear the stories from witnesses nor did they experience the conquering of the land for themselves so it was more difficult for them to identify with Hashem’s presence. Hirsch explains that just as in the desert the sight of Hashem’s presence in the form of the Pillar of Cloud and the daily appearance of the Manna became so familiar that it no longer appeared miraculous, so too the time that the Jews lived in Canaan into the third generation caused that familiarity to cloud the importance of Hashem in their survival.

Moshe continued from this point to give some comfort to the B’nei Yisrael. “When you are in distress and all these things have befallen you, at the end of days you will return to Hashem, your Elokim and listen to His voice. For Hashem, your Elokim, is a Merciful

Elokim, He will not loosen His hold on you and He will not destroy you and He will not forget the covenant of your forefathers that He swore to them.” Moshe promises the people that Hashem will never totally destroy the Jewish people even after seriously diminishing their number because He will not forget the promise that He made to their forefathers that He would bring them into the land and they would inherit it forever. The B’nei Yisrael is the only nation that Hashem continues to protect and keep alive, for we have seen that through the centuries other nations have been destroyed or simply disappear. Still it requires our repentance to turn His attention back to the B’nei Yisrael and to end the suffering that we are experiencing because of our straying from His path of Torah.

It is clear from this passage why it was chosen by our Rabbis as the section of the Torah which we read on Tish’a B’Av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples and a series of other tragic events for the Jewish people. We have seen the history of the Jews in Canaan (present day Israel) and we have suffered through the two-thousand-year exile for those sins. Yet we also see that we can return to Hashem and He will always greet us for we are His people and we will serve Him “with all (our) heart and all (our) soul”. We are living in amazing times when our return to this land is taking place. We struggle with our daily lives and we are constantly concerned for our enemy-neighbors, but we are here and we are in our promised homeland. But our responsibility does not end with our return for we know that one exile ending does not preclude another beginning. In order to guarantee our complete return and our permanence in the land we must dedicate ourselves to serving Hashem in whatever capacity that we can. We must be able to end our bickering with each other and become unified again as we were when we entered the land. And most importantly we must renew our study of His Torah so that we will be worthy of being the generation which will begin our People’s true inheritance of the land. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

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

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Perhaps the most famous sentence in the Torah is found in this week's Torah portion -- "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Deuteronomy 6:4). Interestingly, the last letter of the Hebrew word for "Hear" (Shema) is enlarged in the Torah scroll (Ayin), as is the last letter of the Hebrew word for "One" (the Daled in Echad). Among the many possible explanations, one understanding of the combination of these two letters (Ayin and Daled) may reveal why the text calls specific attention to them: The letters Ayin Daled can be read "ade" which means "to bear witness." In reading the "Hear O Israel" one is in effect testifying that God exists.

This Shabbat being the first of the seven weeks leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, one more thought comes to mind: Maybe the letters are large to teach us that even the smallest of changes could pervert the meaning of the text. For example, if one would read the Shema as having an Aleph as its last letter instead of the Ayin (after all the Aleph and Ayin are both silent letters) the word Shema would mean "perhaps" (sheh-mah). This would change this firm declaration of belief into an expression of doubt. And if the Daled would be mistaken for a Reish (after all, there is only a slight difference in the writing of a Daled and Reish) -- the word echad (One) would be read acher (other). This would change the critical Jewish belief in One God into a belief in two gods. If

baseball is a game of inches, the Torah is a guide of millimeters -- sometimes the smallest thing makes all the difference. As we move towards Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, all of us ought be careful with every word, every gesture and every action, because you never know where the smallest changes may lead you. ©2018 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This weeks parsha, Va'eschonon, begins with Moshe pleading with Hashem to allow him to enter Eretz Yisroel. "Va'eschonon el Hashem ba'eis ha'hee laimore" (3:23) -- and I pleaded with Hashem at that time saying...

As could be expected, this parsha, the name of which means tfilah (prayer), teaches us the proper way to pray. The Ohr HaChaim enumerates four conditions necessary in order for tfilah to be accepted:

1) One must approach tfilah as a pauper knocking upon the door of a potential benefactor. Realizing that he is totally dependent on this person and, on his own, is powerless to help himself.

2) One must beseech Hashem's mercy, recognizing that all and any merit that he might have, has been inundated by the tov (good) that he has already received in his life. True, he has attached a mezuzah to his doorpost, but who gave him the house? True, he has tzitzis on the corners of his garment, but who gave him clothing? True, he wears tfilin on his arm, but who gave him that arm and the rest of his body?

3) One must daven (pray) at the proper times designated for tfilah. This, of course, does not preclude spontaneous cries and supplications to Hashem. However, there are designated times for tfilah which compel us to reach out to and place our trust in Hashem at crucial junctures of our daily cycle. Ignoring these designated times exhibits a certain degree of casualness in our approach to our Creator. That is clearly not an effective mode for tfilah.

4) One must clearly express what he is davening for. Although Hashem is very precisely aware of our needs without our mentioning it, (we've discussed previously that) tfilah is necessary for us to recognize the source of all that we have. Only through clear delineation in tfilah is that point driven home.

Moshe's fulfillment of each of these conditions are seen from the very first passuk of our parsha.

1) "Va'eschonon" -- and Moshe pleaded, as a pauper at the door.

2) "El Hashem" -- the tetragrammaton (the four lettered name of Hashem) refers to the attribute of mercy.

3) "Ba'eis ha'hee" -- at that time. Moshe, the greatest prophet of all time was able to determine the premium time for tfilah.

4) "Laimore" -- saying. He clearly voiced his

tfilah.

With all of his pleading, Hashem denied his wish. {A person once approached a Ruv, complaining that Hashem doesn't answer his prayers. The Ruv told him that Hashem most certainly is answering his prayers... He's just saying "no"! Sometimes "no" is the best possible answer we can receive.} "Rav lach" (3:26) -- you have enough! Don't continue to speak to me about this matter!

The medrash draws a parallel between Hashem's curt answer to Moshe and Moshe's curt answer to Korach. When Korach complained to Moshe that he had taken the high positions for himself and for his brother, Moshe responded: "Rav lachem" (Bamidbar 16:3) -- you have enough.

How can these two seemingly disparate events be connected? Korach approached Moshe spurred on by jealousy and a lust for honor. Moshe approached Hashem spurred on by a pure desire to enter Eretz Yisroel and to elevate himself, the nation, the land and the world, by performing those mitzvos unique to Eretz Yisroel. What was Hashem teaching Moshe about the way he had answered Korach, by using the same term to answer him?

It is true that Korach was motivated mainly by jealousy and honor. However, he was demanding a position closer to Hashem. Even though he was ineligible for that position and Moshe needed to refuse his claim, Moshe should not have used a term such as "enough"! When one wants a heightened degree of spirituality, our response can never be enough! Considering the tremendous amount to be accomplished in this world, the enormous potential we are given and the limited time that is granted to accomplish this, there truly never is enough!

Hashem needed to highlight this slight lack of sensitivity that Moshe, on his level, should have been tuned in to. Hashem told Moshe, when he wanted to scale this new spiritual height by entering Eretz Yisroel, "Rav lach" -- enough.

At times it is very difficult when we see friends or relatives moving past the point that we are comfortably sitting at. We feel challenged and uncomfortable that 'our' Judaism seems insufficient or less than first class to others. We learn from our parsha that we must be very wary of our initial, reflex response of "Rav lach" -- enough -- chill out!

Our parsha also contains "Shema Yisroel", the quintessential prayer of our nation, the declaration and the testimony of our belief in Hashem. "Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokainu Hashem echad (6:4)." Accept, Yisroel, Hashem who is Elokainu (our G-d), Hashem is One. The testimony that all that occurs in this world (Elokainu) is coming from Hashem.

The last letter of the first word of shema -- 'ayin', and the last letter of the last word (echod) --

'daled', are larger than the other letters. These two letters together spell the word 'eid' -- witness. The Kli Yakar writes that this alludes to the concept that we are the witnesses of Hashem in this world. We, the founders of monotheism, through our beliefs and the way that those beliefs act upon our lives, serve as witnesses to Hashem's intimate involvement in this world.

Moshe asked Hashem to show him His presence (Shmos 33:18). The medrash explains that Moshe wanted to see the reward of the righteous in this world and the next. Hashem answered that he could see Him from behind but not from the front. The gemara (Brachos 7:) explains that Hashem showed Moshe the keshet (knot) of His t'filin shel rosh (worn on the back of the head).

The Kli Yakar explains that the t'filin contain the 'shakai' name of Hashem, spelled 'shin', 'daled' and then 'yud'. The letters 'shin' and 'yud' are before Him. The 'shin' is on the front of the t'filin shel rosh and the 'yud' is the keshet of the t'filin shel yad (worn on the hand). This spells 'yesh', something, reality. This refers to the reward of the next world which is true being and existence. The epitome of 'yesh'. That could not be shown to Moshe. That no eye can see. He was only able to see the back of Hashem, the keshet of the t'filin shel rosh. That is in the shape of the letter 'daled'. That exemplifies the reward of this world. That which is gathered from the four (daled) corners of the earth.

This, too, is alluded to by the large 'ayin' and 'daled' in shema. The 'ayin' (eye) can only see the 'daled', the reward of this world. However, the reward of the next world, the 'yesh', the 'yud' and the 'shin', the first letters of the words 'Shema Yisroel', that is not available to the domain of the 'ayin', the eye, rather, that is in the domain of hearing. That, we Yisroel, can only hear about.

Countless members of our nation have been willing to die for the sake of 'Hashem Elokainu Hashem echad' and left this world with the words Shema Yisroel on their lips. We, who would be willing to die for that, must be willing to live for that. May we, through our actions, our words and our thoughts carry the banner of Hashem's existence and involvement in this world. Living testimony to the world and to ourselves that Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echad.

May this Shabbos Nachamu herald the ultimate consolation of the building of the Beis HaMikdash.

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