

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, "Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel." Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two -- "I am the Lord your God," and, "You shall have no other gods beside Me," (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) -- the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself. (Makkot 23b-24a)

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and "Now write for yourselves this song" (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing

themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah -- our written constitution as a nation -- must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people -- men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns -- so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King. (This rule was broken by some of the Hasmonean Kings, with disastrous long-term consequences.)

This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides (Mishneh Torah Haggigah 3:4-6) describes the actual ceremony: "Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God."

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai -- "as on the day the Torah was given," "as though he had heard it from the mouth of God" -- and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses' description of the Giving of the Torah in Va'etchanan: "The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.'" (Deut. 4:10)

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called "the devotion of your youth" (Jer. 2:2)

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no

Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah). (See R. Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parshot ha-Shevua*, 2nd series, 2009, vol. 2, 442-461.)

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites. (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim 141:4, and commentary of Levush ad loc.)

According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibbur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual. (This is the view, regarded by most as normative, of Ramban. See e.g. *Yalkut Yosef*, *Hilchot Keriat ha-Torah*.) So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as "the Reading of the Torah" but as "the Proclaiming of Torah." It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget "the devotion of our youth," the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Behold, I give before you this day the life and the good, the death and the evil... blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your seed..." (Deut. 30:15, 19) What does it mean, to choose "life"? Is it really an individual choice as to whether one lives or dies? I

believe it worthy of note to raise another linguistic curiosity within this context: the Hebrew word hayyim (life) is a plural noun, ending in the two Hebrew letters yod and mem to signal the plural case. I do not know of any other language in which the word for "life" is a plural form; Why is it so in the Hebrew language? Hassidim have a cute play on words which provides an interesting insight explaining the composition of the Hebrew word for "life": on an occasion of joy such as an engagement, marriage or birth it is customary to celebrate with a "drink," but only when drinking wine or liquor do we call out, le'hayyim, "to life." Why not also say le'hayyim when drinking water, which is so basic to the formation of life (remember the amniotic fluids which "break" before an impending birth) and to the continuity of life which is impossible without water ?!

Their answer that the Hebrew word for wine, yayin, has two yods, as does the Hebrew word for liquor, yash (literally yayin saraf, "fiery wine"). The Hebrew letter yod is phonetically and homiletically tied to Yid (Yehudi), or "Jew"—a toast usually being invoked to celebrate two Jews coming together in marriage, in joining for a birth celebration, or generally within the familial context of kiddush on Friday evening. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, has only one yod, and God Himself has declared that "it is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Hence, say the Hassidim, the Hebrew word for life consists of four letters, the exterior letters being het and mem, spelling hom, warmth, love—surrounding two yods completely together and not separated by any other letter. And the beverages which go along with the toast also require two yods (Jews) together as in the Hebrew words yayin and yash.

Despite the sweetness of this explanation, allow me to present an alternative interpretation, which proves a profound theological truth at the same time. In attempting to pictorially describe the creation of the human being, the Bible states: "And the Lord God had formed the human being [Adam] of dust from the ground, and He exhaled into his nostrils the soul [breath] of life, making the human a living being" (Gen. 2:7) Apparently the Bible is here explaining in more graphic language the difficult term tzelem Elokim, image of God, used in the first creation chapter, "And God created the human being [Adam] in His image, in the image of God created He him..." (Gen. 1:27). The Sacred Zohar adds a crucial dimension to the imagery of God's exhalation into the nostrils of the clay-dust form: "Whoever exhales, exhales from within himself," from the innermost essence of his existential being.

What this teaches us is arguably the most important insight into the essence of the human being defined by the Bible, the one element which qualitatively separates the human from all other creatures of the earth: a "portion" of God from on High resides within every human being, to which the Tanya

(written by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, late 18th century, known as the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement) adds: mamash, really, palpably, within the very physical human being "resides" the spiritual essence of the Divine, the eternal and transcendent soul.

This idea has enormous ramifications as to how we see the human being, as to how we look upon ourselves. The human being is indeed a composite creature; homo natura and homo persona (see R. Soloveitchik, Family Redeemed), a part of the natural world with many of the instincts and limitations of the other physical creatures, but at the same time apart from the natural world, endowed with a portion of Divinity which enables him to create, to change, to love, to transcend both himself as well as the physical world into which he was created; the portion of God within the human being lives eternally just as the God without and beyond is eternal, and empowers the human being to perfect God's world and redeem God's world.

The challenge facing each of us is which aspect of our beings we choose to develop, the bestial or the celestial. Idolatry idealized the physical, the bestial: power (Jupiter), speed (Mercury), physical beauty (Venus), a golden calf; Judaism commands that we idealize the spiritual, the celestial: love, compassion, loving kindness, truth... The good news is that to help us in this existential struggle within ourselves is that very portion of God from on High who dwells within us, and that the human being is never alone, that God is always with us, within us, the still small voice which we must listen for and hearken to. Yes, God is Above, but even more importantly God is also Within!

That is why the Hebrew word for life, hayyim, is a plural noun; the "soul of life" is the God who resides within each of us, the essence of our personalities to whom we must return and with Whom we must live our conscious lives if we are to realize our truest human potential, if we are to truly live eternally, together with our partners and progeny in a perfecting world. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**H**ashem uprooted them from their land with anger and rage and great fury, and cast them to another land, as it is today." (Devarim 29:27) Moshe now warns the Jewish People about what would ensue in the future when the Jews would not serve Hashem properly, and seek out other gods and powers. Then, the nations of the world would take note on that day and realize that the reason calamities happened to us was because of the disruption of our relationship with Hashem. [On a personal note, we can learn the lesson that if others cause us pain and harm, that, too, is due to something lacking in our relationship

with Hashem.]

The Gemara in Sanhedrin discusses this expulsion of the Jews from the Land of Israel. The Mishna quotes a difference of opinion regarding the Ten Tribes of Israel (who sinned in Avoda Zara.) R' Akiva says that they will not return, while R' Eliezer says they will. They both bring a proof from this posuk.

R' Akiva says, "like today" teaches that just as today will go and never return, so will the Ten Tribes never return. R' Eliezer says that the comparison of "like today," tells us that just as the day darkens and then dawns anew, so will they have a time to come back renewed.

The Gemara then goes on to say that R' Akiva holds they don't even have a share in the world to come. R' Shimon bar Yehudah of Akko then spoke up and quoted R' Shimon that the words, "like this day," teach us that if their actions are like today, meaning they haven't changed, then truly, they will not return and they will have no share in Olam Haba. However, if they do teshuva, and repent of their ways, then they will return from exile and they will have a share in the World to Come.

This is a very heartening message for us as we approach Rosh HaShana. How far gone are the Ten Tribes? Totally. So far gone that they have no portion in the world to come, something that even the worst sinners have. How long have they been that way? For millennia! They've been gone for over 2500 years. And yet, says R' Shimon, they can come back. How? By changing themselves. How much? That's the kicker.

If today they are not like yesterday; if they have made moves to correct their misdeeds and rectify themselves, then that is enough. We can never get today back, R' Akiva is right. But R' Eliezer is right, too, that the day which was darkened can brighten again.

We cannot change what we did yesterday. It's gone and done. What we CAN do, though, is transform that dark day into one of light, by using it as a stepping stone in our journey to change ourselves for the brighter. If the misstep we took before now teaches us what not to repeat in the future, then we've polished that tarnished day and turned the dark to light.

We are ending one year and beginning anew. The days that have come and gone cannot be gotten back. However, by repenting and returning to Hashem with love today, we can transform them all and be worthy of all the good Hashem has in store for His people.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 98a) relates that R' Yehoshua ben Levi met Eliyahu HaNavi. He asked him, "When is Moshiach coming?" Eliyahu replied, "Ask him yourself," and gave him instructions on finding Moshiach. "Peace unto you, my Master," said R' Yehoshua ben Levi. "When are you coming?" Moshiach responded, "Peace to you, son of Levi. I am coming "hayom," today."

Excitedly, R' Yehoshua returned to his place, but Moshiach did not arrive that day. He went back to Eliyahu the Prophet who asked him what Moshiach had told him. "But he lied to me!" said R' Yehoshua. "He said, 'I am coming today' but he did not come!"

"He spoke the truth," said Eliyahu. "He meant, as it says in Tehillim, (Psalm 95) 'Today! If you would only heed [G-d's] voice!' Mankind's actions TODAY, can bring Moshiach." ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The very two words that signify the titles of the two portions of the Torah that we will hear in the synagogue this Shabbat are, at first glance, contradictory. Nitzavim signifies a solid stance, and unwavering presence, and a commanding appearance. It reflects an unchanging nature, and the necessary ability to stand one's ground, no matter what the circumstances of life.

On the other hand, the word Vayelech signifies motion, progress, change and a forward thrust in behavior and concepts. It seems that these two Torah readings cancel each other out, for one signifies unchanging steadfastness while the other champions progress, change and motion. Such an understanding of Torah and Judaism is very superficial and erroneous.

Rather, the two traits indicated in the opening words of these two Torah readings essentially complement each other. They do not come to point out a disagreement, one with another, but to point out that Judaism requires both traits to be present within every Jewish individual and the Jewish people as a whole, in order that Torah and tradition will survive and prosper in Jewish society.

An important and necessary part of our Jewish character and that of Jewish society, is our stubbornness -- our refusal to abandon what we have been commanded by the Lord to observe and practice. This commitment can never be modified or adjusted, acceding to the passing social norms, and changing human mores.

We are witness, in our times, how quickly acceptable human behavior and ideas can rapidly change, so that what was unthinkable and perverse a few short decades ago is today not only acceptable, but behavior that should be championed, admired, and, in some cases, even enforced legally against one's wishes.

At the same time, Jewish society cannot remain eternally frozen and incapable of adjustment to new situations and differing societal changes. Our recent experience with the Coronavirus, with the various halachic responses to it concerning prayer services, study sessions and personal behavior, testify to the adaptability that the Torah and Jewish tradition, dating

back to Sinai, has built-in in order to be able to deal with all possible situations, no matter how unforeseen.

The only question that remains is how to achieve a proper balance between Nitzavim and Vayelech. We are witness to the fact that helter-skelter progress and the adoption of new norms leads to spiritual destruction and is an enormous danger to Jewish survival. On the other hand, we certainly need to recognize that 21st-century Israel or the United States is not the same as 19th century eastern and central Europe. Every individual, as well as every group within Jewish society, must feel its way slowly and carefully, to try and find the proper balance that fits them, and allows them to retain the blessings of tradition and faithfulness, while still dealing with current problems and situations. Understandably, this process is an ongoing one, and it is one of great delicacy and nuance. Nevertheless, it is part of our drive for eternity and the enhancement of our religious society. ©2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

For Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, teshuva does not deal with a specific wrong.

Rather, it has to do with a general feeling of despondency and estrangement from God. Teshuva means a return to the self, to the godliness inherent in every human being. Of course, we must assume responsibility for our actions, but on a spiritual level, the human being possesses inner purity.

Not coincidentally, the instrument used to rally us to repent is the shofar. The sound of the shofar comes from the inner breath; it is a reversal of the breath God breathed into Adam – “And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” (Genesis 2:7) The shofar sound releases the breath of God breathed into Adam, breathed into all of us. In the words of Sefat Emet: “The mitzvah of shofar [is the following]...through teshuva we can stir the inner voice found in the souls of the Jewish people.” (Rosh Hashanah 5651)

A beautiful legend reinforces this idea. A short apple tree grew beside a tall cedar. Every night, the apple tree would look up and sigh, believing that the stars in the sky were hanging from the branches of its tall friend. The little apple tree would lift its branches heavenward and plead, “But where are my stars?”

As time passed, the apple tree grew. Its branches produced leaves, passersby enjoyed its shade, and its apples were delectable. But at night, when it looked to the skies, it still felt discontented, inadequate; other trees had stars, but it did not.

It happened once that a strong wind blew, hurtling apples to the ground. They fell in such a way

that they split horizontally instead of vertically (the way apples are normally cut). At the very center of each apple was the outline of a star. The apple tree had possessed stars all along; it just required a different approach to find them. The inner core had always concealed the celestial.

If this is true for apples, it is all the more so for human beings, who are created in the image of God. Every person has an inner star, an inner nitzotz, an inner spark. If we could only find the way to ignite the light.

Once a person returns to his or her inner godliness, Rabbi Kook explains, “one can immediately return to God.” The primary role of penitence is return to oneself, to the root of one’s soul. It is only from that place that the individual can then return to God.

Many centuries earlier, Joseph Ibn Saddiq presented it this way: “By man knowing his own soul, he will know the spiritual world from which he can attain some knowledge of the Creator.” (Ha-Olam Ha-Katan)

Thus, teshuva contains two steps: the move inward, the return to one’s inner goodness and godliness; which then catapults him or her to move upward to God, to encounter Him.

This idea is based on a passage from Deuteronomy: “When all these things befall you – the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you take them to heart... And you will return to the Lord your God, and you and your children will heed His voice and all that I command you on this day, with all your heart and soul.” (Deuteronomy 30:1, 2)

The first part of the sequence of teshuva describes how one returns inward to one’s heart. Only then does the Torah speak of returning to God. ©2020 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

Hakhel

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather (*hakhel*) the people – the men, women, children, and the strangers in your midst, in order that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your G-d” (*Devarim* 31:12). This refers to the mitzva of *Hakhel*, which takes place on Sukkot at the conclusion of the *Shemita* year. The Torah specifies the categories of people who are obligated to attend. Nevertheless, the verse’s inclusion of women may be limited, as we shall see.

Our initial assumption would be that women are not obligated in *Hakhel*. Since it takes place once every seven years, it seems to be a positive time-bound commandment (from which women are exempt). Yet the Mishnah tells us that *Hakhel* is an exception to the



rule. There is another reason why women would might still be exempt. According to many opinions, the obligation of attending *Hakhel* is connected to the obligation to travel to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals. Only property owners are obligated to do so. Someone who does not own land is exempt from both the pilgrimage and *Hakhel*. Thus, it is possible that the verse's inclusion of women in *Hakhel* is limited to the small minority of women who own land.

There is a disagreement about who is included in the category of children (*taf*) for this purpose. Some say that even the smallest children, namely nursing babies, must be brought to *Hakhel*. Others maintain that only children of educable age must be brought. According to this second opinion, who is watching over the little ones when all the parents are gathered in the *Beit HaMikdash*? If most women are exempt because they do not own land, this problem is solved. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the whole nation gathers to hear and study the word of G-d, while leaving all the little children to run wild (or under the supervision of non-Jews, or impure Jews who are forbidden from entering the Temple. This is further support for the possibility that most women stayed at home for *Hakhel*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

How do we Choose Good?

Parashat Nitzavim is most often combined with Parashat Vayeilech. These parshiot are combined because of calendar considerations, this year being unique in that there is no Shabbat in the middle of Sukkot nor will there be at Pesach time either. This year, both Nitzavim and Vayeilech are read together before Rosh Hashanah, again an unusual occurrence.

This Torah portion presents Man with a choice: "See that I have placed before you today life and good and death and evil. That which I command you today, to love Hashem your Elokim to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes, and His ordinances and you will live and multiply and Hashem your Elokim will bless you in the land in which you come to take possession of it. But if your heart will stray and you will not listen and you are led astray and you prostrate yourself to the gods of others and serve them. I tell you today that you will surely be lost, you will not lengthen your days in the land that you cross the Jordan to come there to take possession of it. I call the heavens and the earth today to bear witness against you, I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse, and you shall choose life so that you may live you and your children. To love Hashem your Elokim to listen to His voice and to cleave to Him for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'akov to give them."

Rashi explains this choice in reverse: if you will do what is good you will have life and if you do what is evil then you will have death. The Ramban stresses the fact that both good and evil are paths which only we can choose. According to the Ramban, Moshe tells the people that "there are two courses in their hands and it is in their power to walk in whichever they desire, and there is no power below or above that will withhold them or stop them." The ibn Ezra defines "the life" as the length of days, and "the good" as the wealth, health, and honor which is due a person who follows Hashem's commandments. The Kli Yakar understands that it is by doing what is good that one receives life, yet the Torah places life before good. He explains this problem in the following way: "to caution us not to seek out to do good in order to live but instead to live in order to do good."

Moshe explains to the people that Hashem has given the B'nei Yisrael the perfect formula of life, the mitzvot, which include different forms of law. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains the first of these mitzvot, "to love Hashem." "... Moshe summarizes the conception of this 'living' in loving Hashem, which wishes for nothing else but to obey Him and in joy and sorrow, in life and death, close and intimately to remain bound to Him." Hirsch quotes the Gemara in Nedarim (62a), "Do all the tasks of your life for the sake of Him Who sends them, speak about them for their own sakes, do not do them for self-aggrandizement, nor use them for a spade wherewith to dig." With this in mind it is easy to understand why Moshe begins the mitzvot with His Statutes. A Chok (Statute) is a mitzvah which is beyond our comprehension, however this mitzvah is performed because it is a commandment from Hashem. It is performed out of love with the understanding that it is part of the path on which Hashem has chosen. His Ordinances are easier for man to understand as mitzvot which derive from our everyday experiences. Rashi uses this order of doing the mitzvot and then receiving life as proof that one performs mitzvot in order to be rewarded with life.

Moshe now turns to the second path that Man has the ability to choose. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Hashem has shown Man the proper, straight path and if Man chooses to stray from that path, it is done with the *leiv*, the heart, which here is referring to the emotional aspect of the heart rather than the intellectual aspect which is also attributed to the heart. If one pushes away from Hashem, "I tell you today that you will surely be lost, you will not lengthen your days in the land that you cross the Jordan to come there to take possession of it." The Land of Israel is a collective reward to the B'nei Yisrael and can only be achieved with a dedication of the nation to the service of Hashem. It should be noted that Moshe does not say that when the people will perform the mitzvot that Hashem will grant them the land. The land was given

to the people prior to them proving themselves and could only be lost by them if they did not meet Hashem's challenge.

HaRav Sorotzkin analyzes this entire section in terms of two different forces which confront mankind. He speaks of the forces of artziyut, land based, and nishmat ru'ach chayim, a spiritual based seeking of shamayim, the Heavens. There is a constant battle in man between these two forces for man must live on this earth but must strive for something which may be beyond his grasp. This is the battle between Heaven and Earth and perhaps for that reason the two are chosen as our witnesses. HaRav Sorotzkin questions how Man, who must deal with the needs of basic survival daily, can fight against that artziyut and reach for shamayim. He answers that the same One who created our neshamah, our soul, has given us the Torah and the mitzvot which can enable man. When one studies Torah, it is as if he brings the Shechinah (that part of Hashem which dwells among us) down to join us and help our neshamah to do battle for that which is good. When one is involved with performing mitzvot and studying Torah, it strengthens our neshamah and enables us to withstand the temptations of the world which may cause us to stray. In this way our choosing of Torah becomes our ability to choose good.

It is highly appropriate that this is the Torah portion that we will read before Rosh Hashanah. This is the time of year when we must examine ourselves and determine whether we have sufficiently withstood the temptations which cross our paths daily and are part of this battle of good and evil. We are given the solution to our shortcomings. If we renew our dedication to the mitzvot and to the study of Torah, we will see the growth which we can accomplish to become better individuals. May we choose chayim, life, and may Hashem grant us that life so that we may serve Him through the study of Torah and the performance of His commandments. ©2020 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Insights

This week we read the double parsha of Nitzavim and Va'yelch. Being that it is the last week before Rosh Hashana, it is quite fitting that the parsha of t'shuva {repentance} is found in our reading. "Because this mitzva {commandment} that I am commanding you today is not hidden from you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens... It is not across the ocean... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and your heart to do.[30:11-14]"

The Kli Yakar, among other commentators, explains that these passukim {verses} are referring to the mitzvah of t'shuva {repentance}. How does the sequence of these passukim pertain to t'shuva?

The Talmud [Yuma 86B] teaches that proper repentance is when one encounters the same situation with the same people in the same place and yet resists the temptation which he succumbed to previously. If so, the Kli Yakar explains, one might mistakenly think that if he sinned during a trip across the ocean, the only way to rectify that sin is by again crossing the ocean in order to encounter that same scenario. The passuk addresses that misconception by teaching that t'shuva is in fact very close to you. It's right by your mouth--it's sufficient to verbalize and confess the sin in prayer. It's right by your heart--it's sufficient to regret that which was done. Even though our mouths and hearts are very close, it's not always so easy to honestly feel regret over things that we have or haven't done...

I was studying with a boy who had returned for a second year. By now he is committed to mitzvah observance, although that certainly was not the case when he first came to the Yeshiva. As we began to discuss Rosh Hashana, he expressed to me that he was having major difficulty with this whole t'shuva idea. How can I regret what I did during my high school years? I didn't know much about Judaism and I cared even less but I made some great friends and I had a blast! Am I supposed to regret not wearing t'fillin? I didn't appreciate the importance and beauty of t'fillin so it only made sense that I didn't wear them. Now that I know, I have been wearing them and I plan to continue wearing them, but I don't regret not having worn them. Isn't the fact that I'm doing it now good enough? Doesn't that show that I'm accepting that this is the right thing to do? Do I really have to regret not having done something that made no sense to me at the time?

I asked him what he thought. He responded that someone had tried to answer him in the following way: Imagine that at a time in your life you were very insensitive to other people's sensitivities. You said things to them that deeply insulted them. You spoke in a way that really offended them. At the time you had no clue that you weren't being the perfect gentleman but a few years later you also developed those sensitivities. Looking back you wouldn't simply say that I acted according to what I then knew and I couldn't have been expected to have acted differently. Even though at the time you didn't know any better, now, with your newly developed sensitivities, you'd empathize with what you had put them through and you'd regret having acted in the way that you did.

He then explained that he didn't like that answer since it only really covered things done between man and man. However, G-d, who knows exactly where each person is coming from and where he's presently at, should not have gotten insulted if we messed up in regard to Him. He should understand and accept that now, as we gained an understanding in Judaism, we've changed our ways. So for not wearing t'fillin, there should be no regrets necessary...

Seeing this wasn't going to be easy I tried a different angle. Let's say, theoretically speaking of course, one used drugs heavily during a certain time in his life. In the neighborhood he was in, with the friends he'd hang with, his involvement was perfectly understandable. However, years later when he cleaned up his act and tried to get on with his life, he found that he had irreparably 'fried' about a quarter of his brain. During that care-free time in his life he had harmed himself eternally. Granted, then he didn't know any better but now that he does, wouldn't he regret his previous actions?

I was pretty happy with that but this guy was one tough customer. He countered that according to that he can see how one can regret it but not how one is obligated to. In the example that I gave, the person sees the harm that was done and he therefore regrets. However, when it comes to mitzvos, although we might learn that one causes himself eternal damage or deprives himself of the gratification of a spiritual level that had been within his grasp, we don't really see it tangibly in front of us. Therefore, how can he be obligated to regret not having worn his t'fillin?

I explained that we're obligated to study about the importance of mitzvos and to realize that their other-worldly repercussions are much more powerful than any harm we could imagine. "Too intangible to obligate me to regret," he maintained.

I tried one last salvo. Let's say that some crazy long-lost uncle approaches you and says: You're not going to believe this but I've been filming you since the day you turned thirteen. I've got it all on videotape. No, don't worry, I'm not going to show it to your mom, but I am going to give you a hundred dollars for every day that you put on t'fillin. Honestly, I asked him, would you then regret the days that you missed?

Yes, he conceded, then I'd feel some regret.

Maybe, just maybe, I said to him, our t'shuva and regret needs to be that, in our minds, the mitzvos we've missed out on aren't worth a hundred bucks...

I don't know Rabbi, maybe...

Like I said, one tough customer. ©2020 Rabbi Y. Ciner & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Sputterless

This week's portion begins with the words, "and Moshe went. And he spoke to the children of Israel saying." The Torah tells us that he went and spoke. It does not tell us where he went. It just tells us, "Moshe went." It does tell us, however, what he said. "I am 120 years old, and I can no longer come and go, as Hashem told me that I may not cross the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 31:1-2).

I don't get it. If Moshe wasn't going anywhere, if he, in fact, was telling the people that he can no longer come and go, then why open the portion with the words

"and Moshe went"? If not contradictory, they are certainly superfluous!

If I were to write the narrative, I would have begun Moshe's swan song with the words, "and Moshe told the nation, 'I am 120 years old, and I can no longer come and go, as Hashem told me that I may not cross the Jordan.'" Even more paradoxical, the name of the portion is Vayeilech, And he went. The portion that describes Moshe's final stay is entitled, "and he went"?

The yeshiva world has semesters, each is called a zman. Winter zman begins on Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan and ends Rosh Chodesh Nissan and summer zman begins on Rosh Chodesh Iyar and ends on Tisha B'Av.

Breaks are referred to as Bain HaZmanim, between the zman. Though never called a vacation (Torah study has no vacation), it is analogous to baseball's off-season. It is a time to rest up from the previous zman and prepare for the upcoming one.

When I learned in the Ponovez Yeshiva in B'nai Berak, a friend of mine was getting married in England the day after Rosh Chodesh Nissan. I figured that on my way home to America, I would stop in England attend the wedding. I also planned to spend a few days touring the historic sights of the kingdom.

I approached the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Dovid Povarski, for permission to leave a few days before the zman ended. That way I would be able to tour England, attend the wedding and spend almost a full month in the United States before returning to Israel. Rabbi Povarski looked surprised at my request. How could I leave Yeshiva a few days early? After all the zman was still in session.

"But Rebbi," I retorted. "It's already after Purim and I'm only leaving three days before Rosh Chodesh Nissan." Then I added what I thought would be the convincing argument. "Anyway, it is not the middle of the zman. -- it's the end of the zman."

Rav Povarski looked at me very sternly. Then he smiled dejectedly while shaking his head as if the situation was hopeless.

"Back in Europe in the Mir," he said, "there was the zman and there was bain hazman (between the zman). That was all there was. It was either zman or not zman. The Americans came and invented a new concept -- the end of the zman."

The Torah is teaching us the greatness of our leaders. They are always moving. They are exerting the most excruciating efforts in going forward. They are about to tell us that it is all over. But until the moment they are still going forward. There is no sputtering or dying down. The same enthusiasm that Moshe had in leading his people through the desert, the same vigor Moshe had when ordering Pharaoh to let the Jews leave Egypt was still with him until the last moments of his life -- until the very end. Until Moshe stopped -- Moshe went. ©2020 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org