

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In Shoftim, Moses speaks about the great institutions of Judaism: courts, judges, officers, Kings, Priests, Levites and Prophets. In the case of the Prophet, Moses says in the name of God: "I will raise up a Prophet for them from among their own people, like yourself: I will put My words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command him." (Deut. 18:18)

The phrase "a Prophet... like yourself" cannot be meant literally. In the quality and clarity of his communications with God, Moses was unique. He was unique in the miracles he performed. Most importantly, only he was authorised to proclaim Torah: he was Israel's sole legislator. The King and Sanhedrin both had powers to make temporary enactments for the sake of social order. Prophets were given the authority to command specific, time-bound acts. But no one could add to or subtract from the 613 commandments given by God through Moses.

This, therefore, is how Rambam explains our passage: "Why is it said in the Torah: 'I will raise up a Prophet for them from among their own people, like yourself' (Deut. 18:18)? He will come not to establish a religion, but to command them to keep the words of the Torah, warning the people not to transgress them, as the last among them said: 'Remember the Torah of Moses My servant' (Mal. 3:22)." (Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah, Chapter 9)

In other words, the Prophets who followed Moses, from Elijah to Malachi, were not revolutionaries. They did not intend to create something new but to restore something old. Their task was to recall people to the mission Moses taught them: to stay faithful to God, and to create a just and compassionate society.

Eventually, during or after the Second Temple period, most of these institutions came to an end. There were no Kings because Israel had no sovereignty. There were no Priests because it had no Temple. But there were also no Prophets. How important was this? And what happened to prophecy? The Talmud gives two radically opposite opinions. The first: "Rabbi Yochanan said: From the day that the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the Prophets and given to fools and children." (Baba Batra 12b)

We can't be sure what Rabbi Yochanan meant. He may have meant that children and fools sometimes

see what others don't (as Hans Christian Anderson illustrated in the famous story of The Emperor's New Clothes). He may, though, have meant the opposite, that prophecy deteriorated during the late Second Temple period. There were many false prophets, soothsayers, doomsayers, mystics, announcers of the apocalypse, and messianic movements, all confidently predicting the end of history and the birth of a new order of things. There were religious sectarians. There were Essenes expecting the arrival of the Teacher of Righteousness. There were rebels against Rome who believed that their military hero would bring freedom, even the messianic age. It was a fevered, destructive time, and Rabbi Yochanan may have wanted to discredit, as far as possible, any dependence on supposedly divine certainty about the future. Prophecy is the chattering of children or the rambling of fools.

However the Talmud also cites a quite different opinion: "Rabbi Avdimi from Haifa says: From the day that the Temple was destroyed prophecy was taken from the Prophets and given to the Sages... Ameimar said: And a Sage is greater than a Prophet, as it is stated: 'A Prophet has a heart of wisdom' (Ps. 90:12). Who is compared to whom? You must say that the lesser is compared to the greater. (Baba Batra 12a; Since a Prophet must have a heart of wisdom, the Sage, who is wisdom personified, must be greater still).

This is seriously interesting. The early Judges in Israel were Kohanim. (See Deut. 17:9) When Moses blessed the people at the end of his life he said of the tribe of Levi, "They shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your instructions to Israel" (Deut. 33:10). When Ezra taught Torah to the Israelites, he positioned Levites among the people to explain what was being said. All this suggests that when the Sages -- teachers and masters of Jewish law -- traced their intellectual-spiritual lineage, they should have done so by seeing themselves as heirs of the Kohanim and Levi'im. But they did not do so. We see this from the famous Mishnah that opens Pirkei Avot: "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it onto Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly."

The Sages saw themselves as heirs to the Prophets. But in what sense? And how did they come to see themselves not just as heirs to, but as greater than the Prophets. What is more, the proof-text they cite means nothing of the kind. The verse in Psalm 90

says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." The Talmud is playing on the fact that two quite different words sound alike: "navi" (we may gain) and "navi" (a Prophet). In other words, only by suspending our critical faculties is the proof-text a proof.

Something very strange is happening here. The Sages, who valued humility, who knew that prophecy had come to an end in the days of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi five centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple, who believed that the most one could hear from heaven was a bat kol, a distant echo, are here saying that not only are they Prophets, but they are superior to Prophets.

All this to teach us that the Sages took the ideals of the Prophets and turned them into practical programmes. Here is one example. Remonstrating with the people, administering rebuke, was fundamental to the prophetic task. This is how Ezekiel understood the task: "God said: Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me... Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen -- for they are a rebellious people -- they will know that a Prophet has been among them." (Ez. 2:3-5)

Ezekiel must take a public stand. Once he has done that, he has fulfilled his duty. The people will have been warned, and if they fail to listen, it will be their fault.

The Sages had a completely different approach. First, they understood the task of remonstrating as belonging to everyone, not just Prophets. That is how they understood the verse, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbour so you will not share in his guilt" (Lev. 19:17). Second, they held that it should be done not once but up to a hundred times if necessary. (Baba Metzia 31a) In fact you should keep reprimanding a wrongdoer until they hit you or curse you or scold you. (Arachin 16b) All of this, though, applies only if there is a reasonable chance of making the situation better. If not, then we apply the rule: "Just as it is a mitzvah to say something that will be heeded, so it is a mitzvah not to say something that will not be heeded." (Yevamot 65b)

Note the difference between the two approaches. The Prophet takes a heroic stand but does not take responsibility for whether the people listen or not. The Rabbis do not take a heroic stand. In fact, they democratise the responsibility for rebuke so that it applies to everyone. But they are ultra-sensitive to whether it is effective or not. If there is a chance of changing someone for the better, then you must try a hundred times, but if there is no chance at all, better be silent. This is not only a wise approach; it is a highly effective one.

Now consider peace. No finer visions of a world at peace have ever been given than by Israel's

Prophets. This is just one: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them..."

"They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:6-9)

Now consider rabbinic teachings: "For the sake of peace, the poor of the heathens should not be prevented from gathering gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and corners of the field... Our masters taught: for the sake of peace, the poor of the heathens should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the heathens should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the heathens should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel." (Mishnah Shevi'it, 4:3, 5:9, Gittin 5:9, Tosefta, Gittin 3:13-14, Avodah Zarah 1:3; Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 59a-61a)

Once again, the difference is glaring. What for the Prophets was a dazzling vision of a distant future was, for the Sages, a practical programme of good community relations, a way of sustaining peaceful coexistence between the Jewish community and its Gentile neighbours. It was imaginative, gracious and workable.

There are many other examples. The Sages achieved something extraordinary. Throughout the biblical era, the Israelites were constantly tempted by idolatry and foreign ways. The Prophets were often driven close to despair. During the rabbinic era, Jews became a people defined by religion, commandments, learning and prayer, sustained voluntarily and maintained tenaciously against all pressures to convert to the majority faith. That is because the Rabbis did not focus on distant visions. They devised practical programmes. These may have lacked drama, but they worked.

The Sages, perhaps to their surprise, realised this: where the Prophets failed, they succeeded. I believe that institutions like prophecy survive when they are translated from utopian ideals into practical policies. The greatness of the Sages, still not fully appreciated by the world, is that guided by the visions of the Prophets, they gave us the instructions for how to get from here to there. *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

"The Levitic kohanim, the entire tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; the Lord's fire offerings and His inheritance they shall eat. But he shall have no inheritance among his brothers; the Lord is his inheritance, as He spoke to

him.” (Deut.18:1-2) What is the essence of the exalted Hebrew month of Elul, the auspicious 30-day period of time prior to the Days of Awe in which, according to Hasidic philosophy, “The King is in the Field,” when God is, as it were, more accessible to us than throughout the year?

How might we best prepare ourselves to meet the King while He is “in the field”? I believe that the story of Velvel, a Soviet refusenik I met in Riga, Latvia in the month of Elul 5730 (1970), offers an answer to this question.

Due to my intensive involvement on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the late 1960’s, I was summoned to a meeting in Crown Heights (Brooklyn, NY) with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory. The Rebbe, z”l, asked me to be his shaliach (emissary) to establish centers of Torah learning in several cities in the Soviet Union, Moscow, Leningrad, Riga and Vilna, a mission that I felt honored to accept.

I filled my luggage with siddurim (prayer books), tallitot (prayer shawls), tefillin, and other holy objects for the Jews suffering behind the Iron Curtain, and flew, via Vienna, to the lion’s den. During my two-week mission, I surreptitiously distributed these holy items to Jews in Moscow and Leningrad, before arriving in Riga, where I spent Shabbat.

On Friday night, I met a gentleman named Velvel in the city’s main synagogue.* During a long conversation after dinner, Velvel told me with deep sincerity that there was nothing in the world he wanted more than a new tallit, since the tallit that he had received when he turned Bar Mitzvah was in tatters. Armed with my remaining supply of Judaica, I gave one to him discreetly, which brought an ear-to-ear smile to his otherwise forlorn face.

The next day, during Shabbat morning services at the synagogue, Velvel entered the sanctuary proud as a peacock in his brand-new, sparkling blue and white tallit. I was mortified, as the KGB agents who had accompanied me to the synagogue would surely surmise that I, the outside agitator, was the source of this tallit.

As the cantor led the Torah processional through the cavernous, mostly empty sanctuary, Velvel drew near, and lifted the tzitzit (ritual fringes) of the tallit, in order to touch them to the Torah scroll and then kiss them.

The cantor, seeing Velvel, dramatically stopped the procession. A frosty silence overcame the sanctuary. Time seemed to freeze. Velvel’s arm, outstretched in the direction of the Torah scroll, hung in mid-air suspended. The cantor stared at Velvel with disdain. Velvel reciprocated, keeping his arm extended in the direction of the Torah scroll.

The minute-long staring match went on for what seemed forever, with neither the cantor (who it turns

out was also a KGB agent) nor Velvel giving an inch. Abruptly, Velvel screamed at the cantor in Yiddish: “Ich hob nit kein moyreh!” (I am not afraid!) You’ve already taken everything that you can take away from me! When I began to come to shul and I lost my job as a result, my wife left me and she took the children with her. I have no job; I have no family. The only thing I have is my Jewish tradition. The only thing I have is this tallit. Ich hob nit kein moyreh. I am not afraid!”

The cantor, lowering his eyes in acknowledgment of Velvel’s sacrificial position, resumed the procession. Slowly and triumphantly, Velvel touched the Torah with the tzitzit and delicately kissed them. He had made a profound statement to everyone present: ultimately, we have nothing in life except for God, His Torah, and His commandments. Nothing else truly matters.

This unforgettable, chilling story provides an invaluable insight into an enigmatic law of the Torah found in this week’s reading. Shoftim stipulates that the Levites are to have no share in the inheritance of the Land of Israel. This seems rather unjust! In fact, Maimonides (Hilchot Shmittah v’Yovel, 13:12) asks and answers why this should be the case: Why did the Levites not receive a portion in the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael...like their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister unto Him and to instruct people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments...He provides for them, as [Num. 18:20] states: “I am your portion and your inheritance.”

This is the main lesson taught by my friend Velvel and the fundamental lesson of the month of Elul. This splendid time comes to remind us of our true purpose on this earth, to live a life dedicated to God. In the final analysis, nothing else matters. This does not require that we adopt an ascetic lifestyle alone on a mountaintop; on the contrary, a true life of holiness involves interacting with and relating to others.

Nevertheless, as Velvel demonstrated in Elul 5730 (1970), and as Maimonides wrote, to live a life dedicated to God is to acknowledge that ultimately, all we have is God, His Torah, and His commandments. Everything else is transitory and illusory. It is no wonder that it is precisely during this season that people are more prepared than usual to internalize this message. Perhaps this is because, indeed, “The King is in the Field.” Let us go out to greet Him.

* A full account of the incident involving Velvel and the tallit in Riga can be found in my book, *Listening to God (Maggid)* pp 249-251. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It can be said that the Torah is in favor of law and order. In this week’s reading, the Torah prescribes a system of judges, courts, and police. The Torah

apparently takes it for granted that no society can really function without these institutions of law and protection. The Torah warns us that these institutions must be ones of righteousness, fairness, and even altruism, but they must exist for society to function.

Amongst the ideological foes of Jewish life and values, the idea of anarchy – no government, no police, no courts – ranks as one of the most pernicious and evil of enemies. The nature of people is to be contentious, protective, and zealous of one's own property, personal rights, and privileges. Since, by nature, human beings always encounter other human beings which is the basis for all commerce and social interaction, disputes will certainly arise when one's rights butt up against the perceived rights of others. How are these matters to be settled?

In a lawless society, brute strength and violent behavior would always prevail. But the Torah constantly reminds us that we are to protect and enhance the rights of the poor and defenseless, the widow and the stranger, those that are, somehow disadvantaged by the process of general society. And it becomes the task of the legal system that is established in Jewish society, to protect these individuals. Judges and police, courts and bailiffs are not only necessary for society, but are also the agents of Godly intent.

All human history has shown us that all legal systems established by human beings are inherently flawed and subject to manipulation. We read in the book of Psalms of the complaint that evil can be easily constructed by legal means. Even a cursory study of the prophets of Israel will reveal the extent of their condemnation of the perverse practices and corruption of the court systems and the judges of their generations.

It is hard, if not well-nigh impossible .to find people who are completely incorruptible. All of us have human weaknesses that can be exploited by others and manipulated by any form of legal system that we will devise. Our great teacher and leader, Moshe, could not find, even in his generation, judges and tribal leaders that would meet all the requirements that were set for them by Yitro and confirmed by heaven itself. He, so to speak, had to settle for what was available to him in Jewish society at that time.

There is a lesson in this for us - that we should not allow our search for perfection to disqualify people who otherwise could serve as competent and efficient judges and administrators of Torah law. That is what the Talmud meant when it said that Yiftach in his generation was the equal of Samuel in his generation. We can only deal with what exists before us. The Torah cautions us that the only judge that you have is the judge that exists in your generation. Thus, the basis of all legal systems is practicality, and the Torah is the most practical of all disciplines. ©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

There is controversy whether appointing a king is obligatory or optional. (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) Whatever one's position, it is clear that the Torah places limits on the king's power, specifically:

- The king must limit the numbers of horses at his disposal so military power not go to his head.
- The king must limit his number of wives so passion not sweep him off his feet, leading him to make wrong decisions
- The king carries a Torah everywhere to recognize he is not above the law

Thus, while the king is the leader, he is still subservient and a subject of God. In the end, it is the Lord who is the true King, the Ruler of rulers.

This may explain the seemingly odd rule that the king cannot return the people to Egypt. Egypt is the place where the Pharaohs insisted they were God. Upon leaving Egypt, the Israelites committed themselves to the principle that no one, even their leader, even their king, is God.

The tension of allowing for a monarch while at the same time advancing the idea of the kingship of God was constantly felt throughout our history. When the Jews asked Samuel for a king, Samuel is upset, fearing the intention was to distort the unique Torah definition of kingship where the king remains beholden to God. (Samuel 8)

With all of its complexities, kingship has positive features. In the time of the Judges, Israel was led by individuals who, by and large, represented their respective tribes. As a result, there was little unity.

With the advent of kingship, Israel was led by one authority whose major task was to unite the entire nation, to speak for all and act on their behalf.

Tragically, during the kingship, there was rarely any unity. The kingdom of David is split in two, and in the end, both the north and south kingdom were destroyed.

And secondarily, the introduction of kingship may have been an attempt to peacefully transition power – as the eldest son automatically took the reins.

This, too, did not work, as very often the eldest son was not a worthy successor.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, we are in a position to repair the failed kingship. This idea is enunciated by Rabbi Kook, who writes that in the absence of the biblical king, the people vote. The leadership they democratically elect then has the status of the biblical kingship of Israel. (Mishpatei Cohen, n.144) ©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

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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Battle Within

Seder Devarim takes place just before the B'nei Yisrael enter the Land of Israel which was promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Part of the future which awaited the people was the conquering of the land from the nations which refused to accept Hashem's decree that the land would be transferred to His people. Moshe described those steps which the people would have to follow when waging war against the inhabitants of the land. He also described for them several steps which would take place should the B'nei Yisrael in the future decide to do battle with nations outside of the land. Battles which were fought in the land for conquering it were called a Milchemet Mitzvah, a war of obligation. A war which was not decreed by Hashem but was chosen by the people and approved by Hashem was called a Milchemet R'shut, an unobligated war.

The Torah tells us the words of Moshe, "When you go out to battle against your enemy, and you see horse and chariot, a people more numerous than you, you shall not fear for Hashem, your Elokim, is with you, Who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. It shall be that when you draw near to the war, the Kohein shall approach and speak to the people. He shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, you are coming near to the battle against your enemies, let your heart not be faint, do not be afraid, do not panic, and do not be broken before them. For Hashem, your Elokim, is the One Who goes with you to fight for you with your enemies, to save you.' Then the officers shall speak to the people saying, 'Who is the man who has built a new house and has not as yet dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will dedicate it. And who is the man who has planted a vineyard and not as yet redeemed it, let him return to his house lest he die in the war and another man shall redeem it. And who is the man who has betrothed a woman but as yet has not married her? Let him return to his house lest he die in the war and another man will marry her.' And the officers will continue to speak to the people and say, 'Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him return to his house and let him not melt the heart of his brother like his heart.'"

Throughout this paragraph the B'nei Yisrael are told that they should not be afraid because Hashem will fight for them against their enemies. Rashi explains the connection between this passage and the passage which immediately precedes it which discusses both false witnesses and being righteous in judging the people. If the people are careful to avoid false witnesses and to judge the people fairly and precisely according to the law, then Hashem will deem them worthy of saving in any battle and will fight for them.

Rashi compares this to the statement of King David, "I have practiced justice and righteousness, do not leave me to my oppressors." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains this as a shift from internal affairs of the State to foreign policy. This is also why the words "you go out", is used, since it indicates a war fought outside of the land instead of within its boundaries. This speaks of a milchemet r'shut. A milchemet mitzvah is not necessarily fought against an oppressor. When the B'nei Yisrael entered the land, they were not being oppressed by the people there. Their responsibility was to clear the land of idols and places of idol worship as well as the people involved in that practice so that the land which they were to inherit would be free of those practices forever. The land would be Holy and Blessed.

Rashi explains another pasuk which enlightens us to Hashem's willingness to help the B'nei Yisrael. The Kohein M'shuach Lamilchamah, the Kohein who was specifically designated to lead the people into battle and give them encouragement, would say to the people "Sh'ma Yisrael, Hear O Israel." This is not the Sh'ma which we say twice daily in our prayers though these words do constitute the second means by which the people would be saved. Rashi explains that even if our merits were only that we say the Sh'ma prayer twice daily, that would be sufficient for Hashem to save His people in battle. The Kli Yakar explains that this is referring to the Sh'ma passages which are written and placed into the tefillin shel rosh, the phylacteries which are placed on the head. This is what would frighten the enemies of the B'nei Yisrael when they would see the tefillin on the heads of the Jewish soldiers as they went into battle. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the statement of Rashi is a quote from Gemara Sotah (42b) from Rebbi Yochanan quoting Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the saying of the Sh'ma twice daily accomplishes not only the mitzvah of prayer but also the mitzvah of "you shall not cause the words of the Torah to disappear from your mouths." Hashem protects those who are filled with the study of Torah.

There is a fourth category of soldiers who are requested to leave the battleground and return to their homes. "And the officers will continue to speak to the people and say, 'who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him return to his house and let him not melt the heart of his brother like his heart.'" Here we are talking about a soldier who fears that his sins are so great that Hashem will not protect him should he enter the battle. The Shotrim are concerned that they not embarrass this soldier because all would know that he is returning home because of his sins. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that this is the reason that the Shotrim save this statement until the end. If the person can qualify under any of the other categories of excuses, it will save him from the embarrassment that

he is afraid because of his sins.

There is one further explanation which must be given here which is singularly appropriate for this time of year. We are beginning the month of Elul, a month devoted to evaluating our lives and making corrections where we have chosen poorly. We are encouraged to do teshuvah, return to Hashem, and we atone and make restitution for sins which we have done to our fellowman. We fight against the evil inclination that convinces us that our wants and desires are more important than those which Hashem wants for us. In light of this, we must look at the explanation of this passage from the Or HaChaim. The Or HaChaim explains that this battle is really talking about the battle that we have with the evil inclination. Our enemies' horses that we see are the evil actions which we have done, the chariots are the desires which drive us away from the proper path, from the words of Torah, and the mighty people with whom we do battle are the strength of the evil which we face. We are afraid, fearful that we cannot overcome these powerful forces in our lives and we are discouraged. Yet we are told that nothing is impossible, for Hashem will fight for us once we choose to join in the battle. May Hashem give us the strength to win our personal battles so that we may serve Him.

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ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Home Dedication

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Dedicating a home in Israel is a mitzva. This becomes clear in the following verse, which addresses the question of who goes out to fight in wartime and who is sent home: "Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it (*chanacho*)? Let him go back to his home" (*Devarim* 20:5). Commentators explain that the verse is referring to a home that there is a mitzva to dedicate, and this must be in a place where there is a mitzva to live, namely the Land of Israel.

Dedicating something (*chinuch*) is usually associated with a beginning. So, when the verse says that the person "has not dedicated it," this means he has not started living there. More specifically, according to *Targum Yonatan*, it means he has not yet put up a *mezuzah*, while the Radak says that it means he has not yet had a meal there.

Some believe that a meal served at a home dedication or house-warming is not considered a *seudat mitzva* unless there are *divrei Torah* (words of Torah). Others maintain that in Israel, the meal of a home dedication is automatically a *seudat mitzva*, even without accompanying *divrei Torah*. It is only in the Diaspora that *divrei Torah* are required in order to transform the meal into a *seudat mitzva*.

Since buying a new item of clothing requires reciting the blessing of *Shehecheyanu*, it would

certainly seem that buying a new home should require it as well. However, *Shehecheyanu* is recited only when the person is the only beneficiary of the new item. In general, a person buys a home for himself and his family. Therefore, *Shehecheyanu* is not recited. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And you shall say, "I will place upon me a king, like all the nations that are around me." (*Devarim* 17:14) While some commentaries say that it is an actual mitzvah to articulate the desire for a king, others say that the word "v'amarta" is similar to the one used by "and you will say "I wish to eat meat,"" meaning that it is foretelling a future desire that the Jews would have. They would say this to themselves, not as a specific ritual. Though ultimately the intent was for the Jews to have a king, the timing thereof was not set by the Torah and, in fact, when we asked for a king at the time of Shmuel Hanavi, it was condemned by Shmuel.

If it was a mitzvah, then why did Shmuel oppose it? The almost universal explanation on this posuk is that though the Jews were supposed to have a king, the reason for that king was important. It was not to be, as stated here, "like all the nations around me." We do not look for a sovereign government to compete with the other countries of the world. Rather, a Jewish king is for an altogether different purpose.

Our Parsha begins with the words, "Shoftim v'Shotrim, Judges and Police." We are to establish a means for maintaining order in the world and specifically in our own communities. No longer do we have what once was – "each man what is proper in his eyes shall he do." Now, we are to follow what Hashem has told us.

The judges are there to identify what is right, while the police are there to enforce it and ensure that we behave as we are supposed to. This is the role of a Jewish king as well, to ensure that the people are following Hashem's word. While the governments of other nations are trying to protect their citizens' rights, the Jewish ruler sought to protect their responsibilities.

The personal desire and need to ensure that we did what we were supposed to would ideally be the motivator for wanting a king. Because we want to do the right thing, we ask for someone to help us follow through, much as someone would hire a coach or trainer.

We find that in the desert, Moshe appointed tens of thousands of judges, one for every 7 people or so. Were they so litigious? No. The purpose of the judges then was because each person was trying to live up to what he owed his fellow man and they were constantly seeking guidance. This is the nature of the Jew in the world. We don't fight for what is ours, but we

battle to do what is right and what we ought. The king we seek will lead that charge; may he arrive speedily and in our days.

One Shabbos, during a break in an Agudah Convention, a certain gadol went for a walk with another Rav to get some fresh air. As they approached the boardwalk, the sage asked the younger rabbi to hold his hand.

When the younger man asked for an explanation, the older Rosh Yeshiva said, "There are immodestly-dressed women here and I want to close my eyes as I walk."

Surprised that the sage, who had been a senior citizen for many years, would be concerned about this, the fellow asked, "What about me? Shouldn't I have to close my eyes as well?"

"I don't know YOUR Yetzer Hara," replied the gadol, "I only know mine." ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

You should be tamim with Hashem your G-d." Be'er Mayim Chaim: "What is the sense of the word tamim? It has been translated at times as 'perfect' and 'blameless.' Surely, though, the Torah is not simply telling us that we should always be completely free of all sin. That is simply unattainable for most people. For the small number who can comply, the instruction would be gratuitous, because the Torah's prohibition of each aveirah would suffice without any further exhortation."

Chazal (Pesachim 113B) apply the pasuk to probing the future through various means like astrology. According to them, we should probably translate tamim as "wholehearted." Temimus would imply that a person not concern himself with what the future might have in store for him. His wholehearted devotion to Hashem assures him that he is in good hands, and whatever the future will bring is supervised by Hashem's providence.

We can try something different. Chazal (Berachos 54A) tell us to serve Hashem with both of our inclinations, both the good and the bad. Just how are we to serve Hashem with the yetzer hora?

We recognize that the yetzer hora is bound up with the lower animal soul. This nefesh is the source of all unseemly personality traits, and of desires of ephemeral delights. Within it are the tendencies to pride, haughtiness, and anger; to lust and gluttony and theft; to improper forms of speech; to sloth, laziness, and depressed spirit. The yetzer tov, on the other hand, is related to the higher, rational soul. Through it we long to serve Hashem, and to observe all His mitzvos. This higher soul, however, stands upon the animal soul. So long as that animal soul is not purged of evil traits, the higher soul cannot lead a person to effective avodah.

"When Hashem favors a man's ways, even his

foes will make peace with him." (Mishlei 16:7) Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 54:1) teach that the foe of this pasuk is none other than the yetzer hora itself, which at times can be utilized to accomplish much good. This must be so. Nothing exists only so that it can be banished. A spark of kedushah empowers everything in existence -- even what we call "evil." Without this kedushah, it could not exist. This spark means that the evil can be used to our advantage. (We are reluctant to write too much about this, for fear that students whose learning is not fully leshem Shomayim will draw the wrong conclusions.)

The Zohar (Shemos 93B) offers a source for this, and some examples. It observes that between the "Do not" and what follows in a few of the dibros is a trop-mark that puts a break between words, rather than unites them. It is as if the Torah said, "No! Do steal!" (Shemos 20:13) At times, theft becomes not only permissible but desirable to "steal a person's presumption." In other words, a sitting judge must sometimes use deception in order to ascertain the true facts in a case. The sparks of kedushah within theft animate its use for a constructive purpose.

Because these sparks are scattered in places quite distant from Hashem, one who succeeds in utilizing them and restoring them to their Heavenly source of kedushah brings great joy, kivayachol, to Hashem. Mishlei (3:6) says, "In all your ways you must know Him." The gemara (Berachos 63A) applies this even to aveirah! The gemara's point is that otherwise evil traits (there is no greater aveirah than harboring them!) can be used for good purpose.

Of all midos, the worst is pride. Yet, sometimes a person must attribute great importance to himself! We are supposed to tell ourselves, "The world was created for me." Attributing such importance to oneself would seem to run counter to our pursuit of humility, but it is important that at times we make this assertion to ourselves, if only to counter the guile of the yetzer hora. Our implacable enemy will sometimes offer us high-minded mussar, not for the right reason, but to demoralize us. When we realize how far off the mark we are, we devalue our avodah. We treat it as insignificant and worthless. We then balk at advancing in learning; even the mitzvos whose performance we are committed to we begin to perform mechanically, without feeling. We feel hypocritical when we insist on preparing ourselves properly for davening. Who are we to act with greater punctiliousness than those who came before us?

The antidote to all this negativity is for us to understand how important we really are, to feel confident in our self-worth. To do this we employ a sanitized version of the yetzer hora of gaavah. We remind ourselves of the worth of every mitzvah, even those performed by the least significant person. How could it be otherwise? If HKBH desired only the avodah

of tzadikim, He would not have had to wait as long as He did to give Man the Torah. Great tzadikim were available before Klal Yisrael grew to 600,000 souls. Apparently, Man's avodah cannot be accomplished by the great tzadikim acting alone. Rather, it depends on the small contributions of many ordinary people, all taken together. The contribution of each individual is crucial to the effort. In that sense, it is fully appropriate for a person to tell himself that the world was created for him!

And the chutzpah to tell ourselves this gets a boost from our new friend, the yetzer hora! (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Devarim 18:13) ©2014 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Battle Cry of the Jew

Approaching war correctly may be more difficult than waging war itself. In order to prepare Klal Yisrael for war a series of queries were presented to them. Soldiers who were newlywed or had recently built new homes or planted new vineyards were told by the officer in charge to leave the army and return home. Furthermore, soldiers who were faint of heart morally or spiritually were asked to return home so as not to weaken the hearts of others in battle.

But war must begin with encouragement. So before the officers ask the questions that may relieve some soldiers from active duty, the kohen gives a moral boosting speech. The kohen opens with Judaism's most famous words, "Sh'ma Yisrael -- Hear Oh Israel! You are about to approach battle on your enemies. Let your hearts not wither and do not fear, tremble, or be broken before them. For Hashem who will go with you, fight with you, and save you" (Deuteronomy 20:3-4).

Rashi comments on the hauntingly familiar expression of "Sh'ma Yisrael -- Hear oh Israel!" Those words are the national anthem of the Jewish nation whose doctrine of belief is contained in the declarative that follows. "The L-rd our G-d the L-rd is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Rashi connects the pre-battle pep-talk in Parshas Shoftim with the famous words read week's earlier in Parshas Va'eschanan. He explains that the expression, "Hear oh Israel" used in the kohen's prologue is actually used as a hint to Hashem. The kohen is in essence reminding Hashem of the unofficial anthem that Jews recite twice daily, world-over. The kohen is in essence declaring that "even if the Jewish people have only the merit of the words Hear oh Israel, they are worthy to be victorious and saved (from the ravages of war)."

I was wondering. Isn't the kohen talking to the people? If Rashi tells us that with this choice of words there is a subtle message to Hashem, can we not also presume that there is perhaps, an important, if only subtle message to His nation as well?

Refusenik Yosef Mendelevitch, imprisoned in a

work camp by Soviet authorities refused to give up his religious convictions. He made a kipah, which he wore proudly in the work camp.

Once the KGB colonel in charge of the camp heard of Mendelevitch's behavior, he summoned him to his office and threatened him.

"Take that off your head or I will kill you!" he demanded.

Mendelevitch was not moved. "You can kill me, but I will not take it off." The officer was shocked by Yosef's calm attitude. In desperation he grilled him. "Are you not afraid to die?"

Mendelevitch just smiled softly. "Those who will die by the commands of Brezhnev are afraid of death. However those who believe that our death will be by the command of G-d are not afraid of His command."

Perhaps the symbolism of using the words of the Sh'ma Yisrael, which connect to our sincere faith in the oneness and unity of the Almighty is profoundly significant.

The kohen is commanding the Jews to enter the battlefield without fear. There is no better familiar declaration than that of Sh'ma Yisrael. Those words kept our faith and calm-headedness throughout every death-defying and death-submissive moment throughout our history. During the Spanish inquisition, it was on our lips. During the Crusades it was shouted in synagogues about to be torched. And during the Holocaust Sh'ma Yisrael was recited by those who walked calmly to meet the Author of those hallowed words that captured the faith of Jewish souls more resolutely than the fetters that held the frail bodies.

The Chofetz Chaim would urge soldiers to constantly repeat the paragraph of the Sh'ma Yisrael during battle. It would sustain their faith as it would calm their fears. And the words Sh'ma Yisrael remain the battle cry of the simple Jew who maneuvers through a world filled with land-mines of heresy and temptation.

It is the battle-cry of our faith and in encouraging a nation to be strong and remembering that Hashem is with us. And no matter what the message is, there is no better introduction than, Sh'ma Yisrael. And there are no better words during the battle either. ©2017 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

