

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**A**t the end of his life, having given the Israelites at God's behest 612 commands, Moses gave them the final mitzvah: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:19).

According to the plain sense of the verse, God was speaking to Moses and Joshua and was referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth" (Deut. 32:1). However, Oral Tradition gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a Sefer Torah: Said Rabbah: Even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Sanhedrin 21b)

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be construed as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Second, the passage goes on to say (Deut. 31:24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "That this song may be My witness against the people" – implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32 (Nedarim 38a).

Thus understood, Moses' final message to the Israelites was: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from me. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be periodically renewed.

So it is to this day that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill – as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two

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thousand years ago. In a religion almost devoid of sacred objects (icons, relics), the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to endowing a physical entity with sanctity.

My earliest memories are of going to my late grandfather's little beit midrash in North London and being given the privilege, as a two or three-year-old child, of putting the bells on the Torah scroll after it had been lifted, rolled, and rebound in its velvet cover. Even then, I had a sense of the awe in which the scroll was held by the worshippers in that little house of study and prayer. Many of them were refugees. They spoke with heavy accents redolent of worlds they had left, worlds that I later discovered had been destroyed in the Holocaust. There was an air of ineffable sadness about the tunes they sang – always in a minor key. But their love for the parchment scroll was palpable. I later defined it as their equivalent of the rabbinic tradition about the Ark in the wilderness: it carried those who carried it (Rashi to I Chr. 15:26). It was my first intimation that Judaism is the story of a love affair between a people and a book, the Book of books.

What, though – if we take the command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter – is the significance of the word "song" (shira): "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song"? The word shira appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key word. Why? On this, two nineteenth-century scholars offered striking explanations.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, one of the great yeshiva heads of the nineteenth century) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word shira in Hebrew means both a song and a poem. To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but the Netziv argued that it has two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not.<sup>1</sup> In this brilliant insight, the Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth-century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Kidmat Davar," preface to Ha'amek Davar, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3–23.

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Auerbach contrasts the narrative style of Genesis with that of Homer. Homer uses dazzlingly detailed descriptions so that each scene is set out pictorially as if bathed in sunlight. By contrast, biblical narrative is spare and understated. In the example Auerbach cites – the story of the binding of Isaac – we do not know what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through.

The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasised, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal, remains mysterious and “fraught with background.”<sup>3</sup>

A completely different aspect is alluded to by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the halachic code Aruch HaShulchan.<sup>4</sup> Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the Sages said: “These and those are the words of the living God.”<sup>5</sup> This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called “a song” – because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused/Whose dwelling is the light of

setting suns/And the round ocean and the living air.<sup>6</sup> Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, symbolises the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God’s libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds.

The Torah is God’s song, and we collectively are its singers. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z”l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**"**And Moses wrote this song on that day and taught it to the children of Israel.” (Deuteronomy 31:32) What is the song of the Torah? Moses himself refers to Torah as a “fiery law – esh dat” (Deut. 33:2), which the Midrash graphically describes as black fire atop white fire, the black letters on the white parchment. Both the letters as well as the parchment have laws governing their suitability, and both are therefore sacred. However, the Holy Zohar teaches that the sanctity of the white fire is greater than the sanctity of the black fire. What can this possibly mean? How can the white spaces contain greater holiness than the black letters?

A story of two Rebbes, the Voorker and the Trisker, will illuminate the teaching of the Holy Zohar. The Voorker and the Trisker (late nineteenth century, Poland) were fast friends from early childhood; they attended the same *heder*, they shared the same bench where they studied together and slept side by side, and they shared each other’s very thoughts, dreams, and frustrations. When it came time for each of them to establish his own Court, they vowed to communicate by mail at least every Friday so that their relationship could continue. And so it was that every Friday morning the Voorker Rebbe would give a closed envelope to one of his disciples, who would return some five hours later

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat, introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Eiruvim 13b; Gittin 6b.

<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798” (Favourite Poems [Mineola, NY: Dover, 1992], 23).

with a closed envelope from the Trisker.

This went on for nine years. The disciple became smitten with curiosity. What does one Hasidic giant write to another? He knew there was a serious prohibition established by Rabbenu Gershom many generations before, forbidding the reading of another's mail; "but," rationalized the disciple, "it is Torah, and it is necessary for me to learn it." And so, with trembling fingers, he carefully removed the Voorker's letter from the envelope. To his great dismay, he saw a respectful salutation, an empty page, and a signature. He restored and delivered the letter, received the response, and once again – when he was in safe distance from prying eyes – he removed the Trisker's letter. He experienced the same dismay: a respectful salutation, an empty page, and a signature. What could this mean? Did the holy saints know what he planned to do in advance? But he, himself hadn't decided until the last moment of weakness!

The disciple returned the letters to his Rebbe and spent a guilt-ridden, agonizing Sabbath.

As soon as Sabbath was out he entered the Rebbe's private chamber, confessed his crime, and begged both forgiveness and an explanation. The Rebbe took his disciple's hands in his own. He explained: The Trisker and I love each other. Our relationship is so deep that we only have to look at each other and we know what our friend is feeling. What we must communicate each week is our emotions – and emotions are too profound to be limited by words. That is the meaning of the empty page. If we must discuss a halakic issue or share a personal problem, we ask for a meeting date and see each other during the week.

The Torah contains black letters and white spaces. The black letters are the words of Torah. The white spaces are the song of Torah.

The black letters are the do's and don'ts, the white spaces are the angst and desire. The black letters are the concepts, the ideas, the laws; the white spaces are the love, the joy, and the dream. The black letters are the mind of Torah, the white spaces are the soul of Torah. And the song is the soul... ©2019 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he Torah reading of this week describes our great teacher and leader Moshe as 'going,' though the Torah does not indicate to what destination. This is an indication of the personality and life achievements of Moshe - a person who is constantly growing. He aspires to greatness and pursues this goal. Though he initially attempts to escape from the burden of leading the Jewish people and even tells God, so to speak, to find someone else for the mission, once he actually accepts his role and embarks on his destiny, he is

constantly focused on enhancing his own personal spiritual and mental acumen. He is focused on raising the Jewish people to the heights of becoming a special and holy nation.

As such, we constantly view Moshe as someone who never rests, who makes a point of often reminding the Jewish people that when he was present in heaven in order to receive the Torah, he did not eat, drink or rest during that period of time. The Jewish viewpoint of life is that time is very precious and wasting time is to be avoided at almost all costs. We often hear the phrase that 'enough is enough,' but truly, enough is never enough and there is always a goal that can yet be achieved, a good deed that can still be accomplished, and an inspirational thought that can be absorbed into our personalities.

When King David created the signal with Jonathan as to what their future course would be, when it became apparent that King Saul in his paranoid illness intended to persecute David, Jonathan chose as the message to warn David of the impending danger that "the arrows are still ahead of you." That is also a good lesson for life generally. Our goals and achievements, the arrows that we hope will reach their target successfully, are always still around us and must be pursued and refined.

There are all sorts of artificial and external influences and advice that is meant to give us extended and renewed energy. However, I believe that we are all aware that the true source and driving force of energy in our lifetime lies within our own selves. Ultimately, we are the ones that decide what we will accomplish and what goals that could have been achieved will somehow be neglected and even forgotten.

The greatness of our teacher Moshe lies in the fact that until the last day of his life he was actively pursuing his goals. The Torah records for us that Moshe's vision was not dimmed. He was never tempted to say that 'enough is enough.' He prayed for Heaven to allow him to deal with the new challenge of entering the land of Israel. He remains the inspiration for Jewish life till our very day. ©2019 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

### Shabbat Forshpeis

**I**n the portion of Va-Yelekh, Moshe (Moses) declares that God has not permitted him to enter the land of Israel. (Deuteronomy 31:2) There are specific reasons which explain why Moshe was denied this right. The classical approach is that Moshe sinned when he hit rather than talked to the rock. (Numbers 20:7-13) The Midrash points out that Moshe may have been denied entry for killing the Egyptian who had

attacked a Jewish slave. (Exodus 2:11-12) Moshe, according to the Midrash, could have used less force to stop the Egyptian. But is there a more general message that can be learned from the decision to ban Moshe from setting foot into the land he longs to see?

The classic work on Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, stresses the spiritual growth from Noah to Avraham (Abraham) to Moshe and beyond. (Vayerah 218-220) While Noah remained silent when told by God that the world would be destroyed, Avraham engaged God in debate when hearing that the city of Sodom would be devastated. Moshe takes it to another level. Not only does he intercede when God tells him that the Jews would be "consumed" for building the Golden Calf, but throws his personal lot in with his people: If you do not forgive the people's sin, he says to God, "erase my name from the book You have written." (Exodus 32:32)

The message is clear. Avraham did what Noah could not do. Moshe reaches an even higher level than Avraham. But it can be suggested that even Moshe could not realize all of his dreams. He doesn't enter the land; this is left for his disciple Joshua and future generations. "It is not for you to complete the task," says Rabbi Tarphon, "but neither are you free to refrain from it." (Ethics 2:21) We are all part of Jewish history, and the most crucial aspect of that history is that we are all part of a process.

Perhaps for this reason the Torah uses the expression, "and you will return until (ad) the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 30:2) The word "ad" implies that as high as one reaches spiritually, as close as one comes to God, one never arrives, the goal is never completed, indeed, there are always more steps to be taken.

A delightful tale makes this very point. A rebbe once turned to his disciples and asked, "There is a ladder with 50 rungs. One Chassid is on the 25th rung, another on the 10th. Who is higher?" "Has our rebbe gone mad?" the students asked each other. "Of course, the one on the 25th." "No, my children," answered the rebbe. "It depends on which way you're going."

During these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur whose central theme is growth and transformation, this message deserves consideration. It teaches that the most important element of teshuvah (repentance) is moving in the right direction—reaching higher, higher and higher still. ©2019 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 LEVINE**

## Striving to Return

**M**oshe has spent his last days reviewing the law before the people and warning them about their

future and what he knows will be the challenges that they will face. Now in his last few moments, Hashem chooses to speak with him before the people so that they may also hear His message. The Torah tells us, "And Hashem said to Moshe, behold your days are drawing near to die, summon Yehoshua and both of you stand in the Tent of Meeting and I shall command him, and Moshe and Yehoshua went and stood in the Tent of Meeting. Hashem appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud and the pillar of cloud stood at the opening of the tent. Hashem said to Moshe, behold you will lie with your forefathers but this people will rise up and stray after other gods of that which is foreign in the land in whose midst it is coming and it will forsake Me and it will annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will flare up against it on that day and I will forsake them and I will conceal my face from them and they will become prey and many evils and distresses will encounter it and it will say on that day is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me. And I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did for it had turned to the gods of others."

The Or HaChaim wonders why it was necessary to include the word "hein, behold," in our first sentence. He explains that Moshe stated that "today I am one hundred and twenty years old." The Or HaChaim informs us that in Gemara Sotah it says that Moshe was to live only one hundred and twenty years. Hashem therefore informs Moshe that behold even according to your own words it is time for you to die. The Kli Yakar brings a powerful Midrash concerning this small word, hein. Moshe complained to Hashem, "With the word hein You will end my life? With the word hein I praised You as it says 'behold (hein) the Heavens belong to Hashem your Elokim. Yet with the word hein You punish me with death?' Hashem answered Moshe, 'Remember what you also said with the word hein: 'behold they (the B'nei Yisrael) will not believe me.'" Moshe spoke badly then of the B'nei Yisrael. The Kli Yakar understood that this needs further explanation, because what Moshe said was really true, the people did not believe Moshe. Hashem knew the people were weak in their faith and it was Moshe's responsibility to strengthen that faith. At the Well of Miriam, the people were left with no water and they complained to Moshe. Moshe was told by Hashem to speak to a rock that it should bring forth water. In anger Moshe struck the rock instead. At this time Hashem decreed Moshe's fate, that he would not lead the B'nei Yisrael into the Promised Land. Hashem told Moshe that the reason was "you did not cause them to believe in Me." Moshe failed the people because he did not help them to grow in that faith.

Moshe and Yehoshua were called into the Tent of Meeting, the place where Hashem spoke regularly to Moshe. "And Hashem said to Moshe, behold your days

are drawing near to die, summon Yehoshua and both of you stand in the Tent of Meeting and I shall command him, and Moshe and Yehoshua went and stood in the Tent of Meeting. Hashem appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud and the pillar of cloud stood at the opening of the tent." What appears unusual is the cloud which indicated Hashem's presence standing at the opening of the Tent when it would normally appear inside of that Tent. Hashem normally spoke to Moshe from above the Aron Kodosh, the Holy Ark, but He chose to speak with Yehoshua just inside the Ohel because he was not at the prophetic level of Moshe. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin gives a different reason and explains that Hashem was emphasizing His message to the B'nei Yisrael. Hashem caused his presence to be seen both on the inside of the Tent and the outside of the Tent as He appeared to be leaving the Tent. This was the message to the B'nei Yisrael which He then states clearly: When you turn away from the teachings of Moshe of My Torah, "My anger will flare up against it (the people) on that day and I will forsake them and I will conceal my face from them and they will become prey and many evils and distresses will encounter it and it will say on that day is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me."

Hashem warns that He will turn away from the people because they will have turned away from Him. Hashem will not initiate this action but it will be a reaction to the people's abandonment of Him. There are two stages that will take place: (1) the people will become fat in the land and (2) they will turn to foreign gods that are not part of that land. Many of the meforshim, commentators, ask about our p'sukim: the words, "and it (the nation) will say on that day is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me." It appears from these words that the people are at the stage of Teshuvah where they recognize what they have done wrong and verbalize it. Our Rabbis ask why the next pasuk then says that Hashem will hide His face on that day. It would seem that Hashem would offer assistance to the people as we know He does for us when we turn to Him. HaRav Sorotzkin quotes the Kohein HaKadosh in reading the pasuk differently. The pasuk says, "And I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did for it had turned to the gods of others." He understands this to mean that when the people turn back to Hashem and realize that they had done wrong, Hashem will hide His face from all the evil that had happened from the people and He will renew His covenant with them.

This renewal is not only Biblical but applies to our lives as well. When we strive to return to Hashem and accept our responsibilities towards ourselves and others, Hashem welcomes us and forgives and forgets our transgressions of the past. Many other nations

describe Hashem as a vengeful god, but that is not accurate at all. Hashem's vengeance is delayed as long as possible to enable one to return to Him and His laws. When that happens, there is no thought of punishment and retribution, for that person has already returned to the proper path. May we all do teshuvah and return to that path which Hashem places before us, a path of Truth, Concern for others, Justice, and Love.  
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#### RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

One of my favorite stories is of the house painter who deeply regretted stealing from his clients by diluting the paint, but charging full price. He poured out his heart on Yom Kippur hoping for Divine direction. A booming voice comes down from Heaven and decrees -- "Repaint, repaint... and thin no more!"

Rabbi Avraham Bukspan once shared with me an insight into Yom Kippur -- The Day of Atonement. "Atonement" is a conjunctive of "At One-ment" -- of reconnecting, strengthening the relationship with the Almighty, the reconciliation of the Almighty with each of us. Yom Kippur is our opportunity to reunite our spiritual essence -- our soul -- with the Almighty.

Intuitively, each of us knows that we have a soul -- that part of us which contains our conscience and drive to do the right thing. The Torah tells us, "... and He blew into his (Adam, the first human being) nostrils the soul of life..." (Genesis 2:7). If we realize that our essence is spiritual -- and eternal -- it places a whole different perspective on life. We need to be concerned about our bodies and our health and make every effort to sustain them, but the real importance is the soul, because that is our true self. Yom Kippur is about the soul.

Throughout the year we either bring merit to the soul or sully the soul through our actions and behavior. The 613 mitzvot of the Torah are there to help each of us develop our soul and perfect it. From the beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul through Yom Kippur (40 days) we introspect, review the year and our interactions with the Almighty and our fellow human beings. We work on repairing what needs repairing. Yom Kippur is the culmination.

The Torah gives us special mitzvot, commandments, for Yom Kippur to help us see more clearly that we are souls and to help us relate to life on a soul level. The Torah states, "This shall be an eternal decree: In the seventh month [counting from the month of Nissan] on the tenth of the month you shall afflict yourselves and all manner of work you shall not do, neither the native born nor the convert amongst you... before the Almighty you shall be purified" (Leviticus 16:29-30).

These "afflictions" are ways for us to minimize the body's control over our lives. What are they? There

are five "afflictions" on Yom Kippur (from before sunset Tuesday, October 8th until nighttime -- when the stars come out -- Wednesday evening, October 9th) -- we are prohibited from: eating/drinking, wearing leather shoes, marital relations, anointing the skin with salves and oils, and washing for pleasure.

By negating the body, we give preeminence to the soul. Life is a constant battle -- between the yetzer tov (the desire to do the right thing, which is identified with the soul) and yetzer hara (the desire to follow your desires, which corresponds with the body). The Talmud compares the body to a horse and the soul to a rider. It is always better to have the rider on top of the horse -- to have the rider controlling the horse and not the horse controlling where the rider is going!

Jewish tradition teaches that on Yom Kippur the yetzer hara, the desire to follow your desires, is dead. If we follow our desires, it is only out of habit. On Yom Kippur we can break our habits! Here are three questions to think about on Yom Kippur to help you develop your life plan: (1) Am I eating to live or living to eat? (2) If I am eating to live, then what am I living for? (3) What would I like written in my obituary or on my tombstone?

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the anniversary of the day Moshe brought down from Mount Sinai the second set of Ten Commandments. This signified that the Almighty forgave the Jewish people for the transgression of the Golden Calf. For all times this day was decreed to be a day of forgiveness for our mistakes. However, this refers to transgressions against the Almighty. Transgressions against our fellow human being require us to correct our mistakes and seek forgiveness. If one took from another person, it is not enough to regret and ask the Almighty for forgiveness; first, one must return what was taken and ask for forgiveness from the person and then ask for forgiveness from the Almighty.

In the prayer service we say the Viduy, a confession, and the Al Chet, a list of transgressions between man and God and between man and man. It is interesting to note two things. First, the transgressions are listed in alphabetical order (in Hebrew). This not only makes a comprehensive list, but gives a framework to include whatever transgression you wish to include under the proper letter.

Secondly, the Viduy and Al Chet are stated in the plural. This teaches us that we are one people and that we are responsible for each other. Even if we did not commit a particular offense, we carry a certain measure of responsibility for those who transgressed -- especially if we could have prevented the transgression.

The Rambam, Maimonides, teaches that each individual's life is always on a balance -- like the old-time scales where the weights were put on one side and the produce on the other side -- and that each of us

should think before doing an action that this transgression or that this mitzvah (commandment) could tip the scales.

Likewise, Rambam teaches that each community, each country and ultimately the world is judged in the same manner. Thus, an individual should not only think that his transgression or fulfillment of a mitzvah tips the scale for him alone, but may very well tip the scale for all of mankind!

On Yom Kippur we read the book of Jonah. The lesson from the story is that God readily accepts the repentance of anyone who sincerely desires to do Teshuva, to return to the Almighty and to the path of the Torah -- just as He did with the people of Ninveh.

By the way, if you wish to keep focused that you are a soul and not a body, train yourself to say "My body is hungry" and not "I am hungry"!

May you have a meaningful Yom Kippur and a sweet and healthy year! © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz

### RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

## A New Beginning

**T**he cycle of the Jewish year has already begun. We've approached Almighty G-d and asked him for forgiveness, beseeching Him for a year of health and prosperity. For the Jewish People, the High Holy days represents a time of renewal; a time for a new beginning.

I often wonder how we are able to approach Almighty G-d with the same yearly requests, given the fact that we are essentially the same people we were a year ago and probably didn't change much over the course of the year. Yet we approach G-d as if our slate has been wiped clean and we can begin anew, fresh and invigorated as if this was the first day of our lives. What a remarkable thought!

The possibilities are endless, and the opportunities allow us to envision for our families and ourselves the possibility of erasing our past and starting fresh. This ability to look ahead and not necessarily to look back at the past is truly a G-d given talent; To somehow forget the past and to believe that the future will bring new and exciting possibilities without the influence of our misdeeds of the past; To see a person as good despite his/her past actions; To give them a second chance knowing full well that they might ultimately fail again.

We find this same concept in Jewish Education as well. When we begin the year educators should project the theme of Rosh Hashanah to all their teachers and students- the theme of a new beginning; a chance to start fresh and to right the past. Teachers tend to label children at a young age. Most times this label remains with the children throughout their lives, frequently stifling their growth and more importantly, their ability to change. I often overheard teachers talk negatively about students as early as the first day of

school. Remarks such as "Oh yes I know him very well, he's a handful and he never does his work" resonate when they receive their student rosters. While their comments are meant as friendly warnings to their co-workers, their statements have a profound negative effect on any possibility that there is any hope for change in the future for this child.

Though we know our children intimately, and we know who are studious and who are discipline problems, we owe it to ourselves and our students to look at each student as beginning a new slate. In the past, when I began my first Staff meeting of the year, I often told my teachers that this is the approach we should have when starting the school year. As difficult as this sounds, given the past record of a particular child, it nevertheless becomes incumbent on all educators to make the attempt and to allow the child to feel that he/she is given a new beginning, to start fresh and forge a new path for their future.

Though Judaism holds accountable the past deeds and misdeeds of an adult, they are nevertheless given the opportunity to assemble on Yom Kippur and ask Almighty G-d for forgiveness. Children, as well, must be allowed to feel that there is a chance for them to change despite their past actions. As Teachers and Educators we owe it to them to attempt with all our passion, love and understanding to give them this chance. ©2014 Rabbi M. Weiss - Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vorah live in Efrat. All comments are welcome at [rvmordechai@aol.com](mailto:rvmordechai@aol.com)

#### **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

### **Perceptions**

**"A**nd Moshe went, and he spoke the following words to all Israel." (Devarim 31:1) When a person goes to court in the world of people, it is usually perfectly clear why to all parties involved. They know the basis of the court case, and what it means to win or to lose.

Rosh Hashanah is somewhat different. We know in general what it is about, and every year people get up to define the day of Rosh Hashanah and the judgment that is handed down to give people a better idea about how to use this opportunity. You'd think that after thousands of years we'd already know EXACTLY what to focus on, besides just wanting to be a better Jew.

Interestingly enough, in spite of all the drashos I have heard on the topic, and all the different thoughts that they have offered, I am surprised that none ever referred to this: "Rava said: When man is led in for judgment he is asked, 'Did you deal faithfully [i.e., with integrity], did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, did you anticipate redemption, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand

one thing from another. Even so, if 'the fear of God is his treasure,' then it is good, if not, then not.'" (Shabbos 31a)

True, this section of Talmud is talking about a person's FINAL day of judgment, after they have left this world for the next one. But why should every Rosh Hashanah not be a discussion about the same issues, especially since, as the Leshem explains, Heaven evaluates whether or not a person is already "Ben Olam HaBa," that is, destined for the World-to-Come?

Second question. If fear of God is the most important thing, why not just state this? Why go through the list of six activities first, only to emphasize the importance of fear of God at the end? And what's WITH this list...why have these six things been singled out for Heavenly evaluation?

A similar question can be asked on Parashas Aikev. After Moshe Rabbeinu basically finished teaching all of Torah, all 613 mitzvos, he comes back and says, "After all, what does God want from you, but that you should fear Him!"

That's it? Just fear of God? Only ONE of the 613 mitz-vos, so we can forget about the others?

Not so fast. Do we still have to do ALL 613 mitzvos? So what did Moshe Rabbeinu mean when he said, "only to fear God"? And certainly THAT, as the Talmud points out as well, is no small feat to achieve, and to keep!

The answer to ALL the questions is the difference between "goal" and "means." Fear of God is certainly the goal, and the rest of the mitzvos are the "means" and the measure of fear of God as well. The extent to which a person puts themselves out for a mitzvah, especially when it comes to understanding it and the intention they have while doing it, is the extent to which they are real with the reality of God.

And this particular list of mitzvos is mentioned because they are kind of like group leaders. Each one is a mitzvah that comes to fight back a certain human tendency to play God. For example, why does a person cheat in business, if not because they feel God does not have their back, and isn't giving them all they need through legal means.

What about fixing times for learning? Well, if you really like spending time with someone, you don't leave it to chance. You don't leave each other this time without suggesting a next time. Some people even set up a time to meet each week on a regular basis, just to make sure they don't miss each other.

We learn Torah to meet with God. It's our "common ground." If a person approaches Torah on a casual basis, they act as if they don't really care much about meeting with God, as if they don't NEED Him. Not enough fear of God there.

Procreation is a Godly act, for sure. But playing God when it comes to birth is a common thing, as genetic engineering shows. There is one particular

account in the Talmud that is exactly about this, the story about Chizkiah HaMelech: "What did The Holy One, Blessed is He, do? He brought suffering to Chizkiah and then told Yeshayahu, 'Go and visit the sick,' as it says, 'In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu son of Amotz, the prophet came and said to him, 'So says God, Lord of Hosts: Command your house for you shall die and not live.'" (Yeshayahu 38:1).

"Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?' asked Chizkiah.

"'Because,' answered Yeshayahu, 'you did not have children.'

"'But I saw through prophecy that I would have evil children.'

"'What business have you with the mysteries of God?'" (Brochos 10a)

Birth may be common, but it is also a great mystery. It is also hard to balance between what WE, as PARENTS want for our children, and what GOD Himself wants. And since God does not share His plan with us, we tend to only see things through our own eyes, creating all kinds of tensions and clashes, many of which are quite destructive to both child and parent.

Anticipating redemption is easy when one's life is being threatened on a regular basis. Anticipating it when life is "good" shows that a person realizes that as "good" as exile is for Jews themselves, it is never good for the Shechinah while the nation is scattered, the Temple is unbuilt, and Torah is not official government policy. Then the anticipation of redemption is clearly for, as the Vilna Gaon explains, for the sanctification of God's Name, and not just for personal relief.

"Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, and did you understand one thing from another?" Wisdom is important for many things, but it is most important for being able to look at Creation and see God everywhere. As one pursues increasingly deeper levels of Torah, they are really pursuing God Himself. Climbing the wisdom ladder takes a person from one level to a higher one, on top of which is Ohr Ain Sof, God's Infinite Light.

It's not about being smart. That's just a side benefit. It's not about getting honor from people less bright. And it is not about getting ahead materially in life because of personal genius. It is about being spiritually sensitized so that a person does not lose track of God in their life. This is true fear of God, and this is what we're evaluated for each Yom Kippur. © 2019 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

**RAV SHLOMO AVINER**

## Each to His Own

**A** story appears in the Gemara: "Rav Sheshet said, 'a yeshiva student who sits in fast - a dog has gained his meal'". Yet isn't fasting one of the ways to do teshuvah, both the Torah and prophets

established fast days? But extra fasts are not suited to that student. His repentance must be by adding study, not by fasting. Chazal define his teshuvah: if he was used to studying one page, he should study two pages and so on. This is what Rav Kook wrote too, "A Torah scholar has no correction by teshuvah except with the Torah and via the Torah". Moreover, if a student is a profound thinker, it's not enough that he increases the quantity of his study but his repentance must be by delving deeper into the Torah as well.

On the other hand, the repentance of an irresponsible state worker is not to study two pages, neither is the repentance of a glutton and a drunkard to study two pages, but to fast. Each depends upon the circumstances. Each person has his own service and his own mitzvah. Sometimes the Gemara will emphasize, "What is it you are most careful in?" For each person also has his own personal sin. This is why the expression in Pirkei Avot is "Anyone whose fear of his sin precedes his wisdom...", not that he is sin-fearing but he fears "his" sin. Each person has a particular sin which is his own, from which all his other sins emanate, and that person must make a special effort to overcome that sin. Each person has his own mitzvah, his own sin and his own task.

Obviously the whole Torah belongs to the whole of K'lal Yisrael, yet each individual still has his own special emphasis. This can be compared to a highroad which, although it is a public thoroughfare, has special lanes. Each person has his own teshuvah, each person has his own mission in his world. We end the Yom Kippur prayers with "My G-d, before I was created I was insignificant", Rav Kook explains, "Before I was created - all the unlimited time from the beginning of time until I was created, there was obviously nothing in the world which had any need for me, for if I had been lacking for any purpose or to complete something then I would have been created and since I was not created until then, that is a sign that there was no purpose for my creation until then and there was no need for me except for the time at which I was created. For the time had arrived at which I must fulfill some purpose of completing reality", but, "Now that I have been created, it is as if I had not been created" - for I have not fulfilled my task, even though the task itself has been imposed upon me, I have not achieved it, therefore I am still insignificant.

Let us all strengthen ourselves to fulfill our own task and to complete our own teshuvah, "Each man at his camp and each man at his flag". © 1997 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

