

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

ADINA CIMENT

Evil Decrees

One of the most famous prayers in the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur davening is the prayer of “Unesaneh Tokef.” The prayer describes exactly what God writes on Rosh Hashana, and what He seals on Yom Kippur. The words provide a menu of ways to die – from stoning to drowning, from plague to hunger – and a description of other negative events that may befall you. Your fate for the year is pretty much written in the books during these high holy days.

The final line of the prayer, though, reminds us that nothing is set in stone: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil decree. It’s a simple three-step-process to making sure we are written in the Book of Life, and that whatever decree was meant for us can be averted through our good deeds.

At least, I used to think that was what the prayer was about.

Maybe it was a bit of confirmation bias and the years of Yeshiva Day School that always taught me what the final line said. But this year, I actually read it carefully and noticed that the last line of the prayer does not say anything of the sort. Translated exactly, the final line reads: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil of the decree. We’re not averting the decree itself, just the evilness of it.

It’s a subtle difference that changes the entire meaning. Looking back into the text at the list of ways to die, the new reading seems to imply that there is no way to escape the decrees of death and destruction. But it isn’t as fatalistic as it sounds. The text doesn’t say “You might drown. You might die by plague.” It says that God decides “who” that will happen to, me and you being two of those possibilities. The poem is simply stating an obvious idea. Death, pain, suffering – these are things that we are all going to experience this year. We can’t escape it. If it is not us, it will be someone we know. Something we will witness.

The last line then, the one about repentance,

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prayer and charity, is not a line giving us a recipe to make it all go away. Bad things will always exist in this world. Instead, it’s giving us tools for how to cope with the evil that we may experience. It’s telling us that to get rid of the evil of the decree, we need to do three things: look inward to ourselves, look up to God, and give back to our community. By looking inward, I can examine what this experience has done to me, what I can get out of it. How I can change from it. By looking up to God, I have someone to rail at, to duel with, to question. And by giving to my community, I can turn my experience into a positive. I can create a legacy. I can turn tragedy into positive action.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are days that focus on those relationships. It’s a communal meditation on ourselves, God, and our friends. What the poet is telling us in this universal prayer is that we are not going to escape trauma and pain. We can’t stop that from happening. But those experiences do not have to destroy us, our relationships, and our connections.

I have seen that happen to people I love who have experienced tragedy and pain. I have also been on the other side, the receiver of evil decrees, and I know the struggle to make sense of hardships when there is no answer for suffering.

It isn’t easy.

The prayer for the new year is not a message of false hope, of a year without pain, but rather a guide for that weariness, a reminder of the tired expression that while pain is inevitable, suffering is a choice. These inescapable painful decrees can lose their destructive evil nature, and instead become catalysts for change and growth, if we heed the words of the poet: look inward, reach upward, branch outward. ©2020 A. Ciment. Adina Ciment is the English Department Chair at Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida and has been an educator for over 25 years. Her essays have been published by various outlets including HuffPost, Kveller, the Jewish Press, Aish.com and Tailslate. You can follow her on Twitter, Instagram and on her personal blog, writingelves.com.

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In majestic language, Moses breaks into song, investing his final testament to the Israelites with all the power and passion at his command. He begins dramatically but gently, calling heaven and earth to

witness what he is about to say, words which are almost echoed in Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, "The quality of mercy is not strained".

"Listen, you heavens, and I will speak; / Hear, you earth, the words of my mouth. / Let my teaching fall like rain / And my words descend like dew, / Like showers on new grass, / Like abundant rain on tender plants.' (Deut. 32:1-2)

But this is a mere prelude to the core message Moses wants to convey. It is the idea known as *tzidduk ha-din*, vindicating God's justice. The way Moses puts it is this: "He is the Rock, His works are perfect, / And all His ways are just. / A faithful God who does no wrong, / Upright and just is He." (Deut. 32:4)

This is a doctrine fundamental to Judaism and its understanding of evil and suffering in the world -- a difficult but necessary doctrine. God is just. Why, then, do bad things happen?

"Is He corrupt? No -- the defect is in His children, / A crooked and perverse generation." (Deut. 32:5)

God requites good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us, it is because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but within ourselves.

Moving into the prophetic mode, Moses foresees what he has already predicted, even before they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. Throughout the book of *Devarim* he has been warning of the danger that in their land, once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens, they will bring disaster on themselves: "Yeshurun grew fat and kicked -- / You became fat, thick, gross -- / They abandoned the God who made them / And scorned the Rock their Saviour... / You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; / And you forgot the God who gave you life." (Deut. 32:15-18)

This, the first use of the word *Yeshurun* in the Torah -- from the root *Yashar*, upright -- is deliberately ironic. Israel once knew what it was to be upright, but it will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a ravening wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. This is a stark and terrifying message.

Yet Moses is bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been present from the beginning. God, Creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally good: the word that echoes seven times in the first chapter of *Bereishit*. It is humans, granted freewill as God's image and likeness, who introduce evil

into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses' insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The shortcomings are ours, His children's, shortcomings.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation. If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people?

This is the question asked not by sceptics, doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham's plea, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" We hear it in Moses' challenge, "Why have You done evil to this people?" It sounds again in Jeremiah: "Lord, You are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jer. 12:1).

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the *kinot*, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and its echoes continue to reverberate in memories of the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the only one to which God did not give an answer. (*Brachot 7a*) The simplest, deepest interpretation is given in Psalm 92, "The song of the Sabbath day." Though "the wicked spring up like grass", they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast, "flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon." Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, whereas the righteous are more like trees. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King said in the spirit of the Psalm: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. There are three: The first is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. *Homo hominis lupus est*, "Man is wolf to man". As Thucydides said in the name of the Athenians: "The strong do as they want, the weak suffer what they must." History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in *Not In God's Name*, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the

many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the Sages, who called it *shtei reshuyot*, "two powers or domains" (Brachot 33b) were right to reject it utterly.

The third alternative, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the World to Come, in life after death. Although this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanach is on this world, and life before death. For it is here that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanach almost never takes this option. God does not say to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice, so characteristic of Judaism, would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect through history of leading us to say: if bad things have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. I believe it was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like Jacob after his encounter with the angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.

I believe that out of such humility, a momentous strength is born. *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 climax of Yom Kippurim is its closing Ne'ilah prayer when the sun is beginning to set, when the day is beginning to wane and when we are nearing our last chance for the opportunity to receive God's loving forgiveness for the year. The excitement of these last moments is palpable within the synagogue. The prayers are at a much higher pitch and the voices are filled with intensity. During the periods of our national sovereignty, with the closing of the day, the holy Temple doors would close as well. Post Temple,

with the setting sun, the very heavens, the pathway to the Divine Throne, and the gateway to God seems to be closing. "Don't lock me out" says the Jew during Ne'ilah. Don't close the doors or the gates in my face as long as there is still time, let me come in.

But there is another way of looking at this, a very opposite way. "Don't lock me in!" cries the Jew during Ne'ilah. Yes, I've been in the Temple, or I've been in the synagogue almost the entire day. I've truly felt God's presence and I've truly been warmed by His loving embrace. I feel God's divine and gracious acceptance and His total forgiveness. I've spent an entire twenty-five hours in His house, in which I've seen the sweetness of the Lord and visited in His tent.

But now, as the doors to His house are closing, I don't want to be locked in. After all, I began this penitential period with Rosh HaShanah, the day of God's kingship. The prayers on Rosh HaShanah taught me that God did not choose Israel to live with Him in splendid and glorious isolation; He chose Israel to be a "kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation" to bring the message of compassionate righteousness and moral justice as a blessing for all the families of the earth. We are meant to be a light unto the nations, a banner for all peoples.

It goes without saying that we need our moments of quiet contemplation, of anguished repentance and of personal outpouring to the God who gave us life and Torah. But the ultimate purpose of this day of divine fellowship is for us to be recharged to bring God's message to the world, a world crying out for God's Word of love, morality and peace. We must leave the ivory tower of Yom Kippur and descend into the madding and maddening crowd in the world all around us.

And so, just four days after Yom Kippur we go out into the Sukkah; indeed, walking home from the synagogue, one will be able to hear many people already beginning to build their family Sukkah. And the Sukkah is the next best thing to living within the bosom of nature, feeling at one with the world around you. The walls are usually flimsy and even see-through, and the vegetation- roof must enable you to see through the greens up above to the sky. We pray together with the four species- the citron, the palm branch, the myrtle and the willow which all grow near the refreshing waters of the earth- and we pray during this week not only for ourselves or for Israel, but for all seventy nations of the world. Indeed, we are Biblically mandated in Temple times to bring seventy bullocks during the week of Sukkot on behalf of all the nations of the world.

The Sukkah teaches us one more lesson, perhaps the most important of all. The major place for us to feel God and His divine presence – after the heavy dose of Yom Kippur – is not in a Temple or a synagogue, but is rather in our familial homes. In order

to go out into the world, we must first go out into our family.

The homes we build need not be that large, that spacious, or that fancy. You don't need chandeliers in the bathroom in order to feel the warmth of your home. It can be an exceedingly simple dwelling place but it must have two critical ingredients. First and foremost it must be suffused with love, love of God, love of family and love of Torah. The meals must be permeated with gratitude and thanksgiving to the God who gave us food, with words of Torah and with the realization that it is ultimately not the walls of the home which provide our protection, but it is rather the grace of the God who gives us life. And the major guests in our home are not to be Hollywood idols or sports heroes. We should invite into our home the special Ushpizin guests: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Devorah and Rut (as you can see, in my Sukkah we add Ushpizot!).

And you will remember that the Biblical reading for Rosh HaShanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world was not the story of the Creation; it was rather the story of the first Hebrew family, the family of Abraham. Yes, we have a mandate to teach and perfect the world. But at the same time, we must remember that the first and most real world for each of us is our own individual family. We must begin the new year of reaching out to the world with a renewed reaching out to our life's partners, our children and grandchildren- and then to our neighbors and larger community and then to include the other and the stranger as well. ©2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Yom Kippur is the quintessential and unique Jewish holy day of the year. All the other holidays that our God has given to us as a faith and as a people have their parallels in non-Jewish society. All societies have days of national independence, harvest festivals of Thanksgiving, celebrations of victories and historic moments of salvation and national preservation. Naturally, our holy days of this genre are far different than others, in that they are accompanied by specific biblical commandments as to how the day is to be commemorated and what holy rituals, special foods and unique prayer services are to be attached to and are an integral part of the commemoration of that day.

We can see that the concept behind these days such as Pesach. Shavuot. Succot. Chanuka and Purim have characteristics that are universal, that can be said to apply to other nations in the world. This is even true of Rosh Hashana. since every culture has some sort of day to begin the new year, whether it be on the solar or lunar calendar.

But Yom Kippur is different in every way and has no equal anywhere in human civilization or history. There is no other day on the calendar that commands the attention of Jews to the relationship between the God of Israel and the people of Israel, as does the day of Yom Kippur. The day of Yom Kippur is a gift from God to the people of Israel, and in all the millennia of its existence it has remained an exclusively Jewish concept and holiday.

The very concept of forgiveness per se is itself a novel and even surprising one. After all, whatever a person has done has a finality to it, and there always are consequences that are derived and emanate from human behavior. It is almost illogical to think that, somehow, the past can be undone, that wrongs can be righted, foolishness and sin are erased as though they never happened. These consequences are true in human terms.

Humans have the power to forgive, but never the power to retract or correct what was done before. But heaven is operating in a manner that is far beyond our understanding or our ability to judge. The unlimited power of the Almighty seems to include the retroactive ability to erase what happened before, and, the capacity to change the consequences that previous behavior may have ordained and were deemed to be immutable.

This idea is the expression of the will and mercy of heaven, extended to us as put forth in the words of the great prophet Yechezkel: "The Lord does not wish for the death of human beings due to their sins, but rather wishes that they repent of their evil ways and thereby live." The Lord is the master of second chances. This is a rare and uniquely Jewish idea. It opens the way for regrets and rehabilitation, restoration, and accomplishment. Without such ideas, and without such an understanding of the Creator, we would truly be bereft of hope and confidence in our future and in our very lives.

But this great gift must be earned. The Torah does not offer us a free lunch under any circumstances. Yom Kippur comes with a list of requirements, not just for the day, such as abstaining from food and drink etc., but it also requires a complete change of heart and attitude, and true regret on our part for the missteps of our past, and certainly of the past year.

We have all been sorely tested in this past year, with unexpected plagues and tragedies, and a complete change in our societal lives and even our economic fortunes. The events of the past year should certainly have humbled us and made us think twice before we again boast of our abilities and achievements. It, hopefully, has made us less arrogant and dampened our egos. And that should be viewed as a good thing, for the beginning of repentance is always the feeling of humility and a certain degree of helplessness. We are, after all, but flesh and blood,

mortal and frightened, alone and powerless before forces over whom we exert no influence or power.

We can only ask the Lord that mercy and patience should be extended to us, and that we will try in this coming year to live up to the great challenges and demands that Jewish life imposes upon us. Additionally, that we will view these challenges and demands as opportunities, and not as negative trials. ©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

Our parsha ends with Moshe (Moses) being told he would not enter Israel. “From a distance you shall see the land, but you shall not enter there, into the land which I gave to the children of Israel.” (Deuteronomy 32:52)

God’s refusal seems unfair. Why is God so unrelenting in his decision to ban Moshe – the man who led the Jews out of Egypt and introduced them to revelation at Sinai – from ever setting foot in the land he longed to see?

Two rabbinic teachings offer insights into the matter. In one midrashic dialogue, a desperate Moshe argues that as *av hanevi'im*, the prophet of prophets, he deserves to live forever.

“You are human,” God replies, “and all people die.”

“I’m better than the others,” Moshe insists, pointing out that Adam had disobeyed God by eating from the tree, that Noah failed to intercede on his doomed generation’s behalf, and that Avraham (Abraham) sired an evil son. In contrast, Moshe argues, he always listened to God, intervened on behalf of Israel after they made the golden calf, and his sons were not evil.

God then tells Moshe, “But you killed an Egyptian, the one who was smiting a Jew.”

“I killed one Egyptian. Look how many You have killed,” retorts Moshe.

“Moshe, I give life, I can take life,” God explains. “You, Moshe, are not God. You do not give life; you therefore cannot take life.”

Moshe had to be reminded that he was mortal. Only God is eternal.

A second thought emerges from the classic work on Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, which stresses the spiritual growth from Noah to Avraham to Moshe and beyond.

Noah remains 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 not only intervenes when God tells him that the Jews would be “consumed” for building the

golden calf, but throws his personal lot in with his people: “and if you do not forgive the peoples’ sins,” 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 even Moshe couldn’t realize all of his dreams. He doesn’t enter the land. It is left for his disciple Yehoshua (Joshua) to lead the Jewish people into Israel.

“It is not for you to complete the task,” says Rabbi Tarfon, “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 – a continuum extending through the generations.

Process is more important than achieving the goal. The journey is more important than arriving at our destination – indeed, the quest for redemption is more important than redemption itself. ©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

Haziv Lach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

No, this title is not the beginning of a liturgical poem recited on Shabbat Shuvah (the Shabbat before Yom Kippur). In fact, *Haziv Lach* is an acronym that tells us where to start each *aliyah* of Parshat Ha’azinu.

The *Kohen aliyah* starts from the letter *Heh* of the word “*ha’azinu*” and is 6 verses. The *Levi aliyah* starts from the *Zayin* of “*zechor*” and is six verses. The third *aliyah* starts with the *Yud* of “*yarkivehu*” and is five verses. The next *aliyah* starts with the *Vav* of “*va-yar*” and is ten verses. The fifth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Lamed* of the word “*lu*” and is 11 verses. The sixth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Kaf* of “*ki esa*” and is four verses, which takes us to the end of the poem. The seventh and final *aliyah* is nine verses and ends the *parsha*.

This division is codified in *Shulchan Aruch* 428:5. (There is an alternate division of Ha’azinu, which still follows the acronym of *Haziv Lach*.) Thus, we cannot readily add *aliyot* or divide the *parsha* differently. The most we can do is split the final *aliyah*.

The Rambam states that the reason to divide the *parsha* according to *Haziv Lach* is to rebuke the people so that they will repent (*Hilchot Tefillah* 13:5). It’s not clear what he means, since all of Ha’azinu is about rebuke. Some explain that what the Rambam has in mind is the rule that we follow the rest of the year, namely to avoid beginning or ending an *aliyah* with words of rebuke. The custom of *Haziv Lach* does

exactly what we usually avoid! The Rambam is justifying the custom by saying that it may bring about repentance on Shabbat Shuvah, which is focused on repenting. Alternatively, perhaps it is thinking about the acronym of *Haziv Lach* that can help bring about repentance. For the phrase itself means “Glory (*ziv*) is yours (*lach*),” a reminder that we have great potential to repent.

If this second reason is correct, perhaps it is necessary to follow the division only on Shabbat Shuvah itself (when we read the entire *parsha* and the entire acronym is spelled out), but not at the shorter Torah readings beforehand (on Monday, Thursday, and the previous Shabbat Mincha). This is a subject of disagreement among the *poskim*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

Let My doctrine drop as the rain, and my speech distill as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb.” (Devarim 32:2) The song of Haazinu speaks of the Torah and how it should be received. In this posuk, it is compared to the waters of growth: rain and dew. Just as these sustain life, so does Torah sustain life. Just as these clean, strengthen, and promote growth in plants, so does Torah do this for Mankind.

This verse also speaks of different kinds of precipitation and different kinds of vegetation. The Gemara in Taanis lists various types of precipitation such as snow, rain, drizzle, and driving rains, and the various types of plants and land areas where these are most beneficial.

If that is the case, then we can extrapolate to Torah and people. There are different kinds of Torah. There is halacha; there is agada (more “story”-type teachings); there is logic and there is emotion. Chumash, Mishna, Gemara, Midrash, Kabbalah and more, they all have their place. People are different as well, and each person will react and grow best from different types and segments of the Torah.

We don’t need to be identical, but we all have an identical need and opportunity to grow from Torah. Some will be teachers, and some will be scholars. Some will be righteous and some will be pious. Just as there are many different types of grass and vegetation, there is a whole spectrum of uniqueness for each of us. This is our life force and our connection to Hashem. Without it, we wither and die. With it, we grow, flourish, and produce!



“One lot for Hashem and one lot for Azazel.” (Vayikra 16:8)

An integral part of the Yom Kippur service was the drawing of lots over two goats. One would be offered as a sacrifice on the altar and the other would

be for “Azazel,” cast over a craggy mountain in the desert and dashed upon the rocks.

There is something very interesting about this process. Normally, when one chooses lots to decide between two things, he choose one and the remainder is chosen by default. When a winning ticket is drawn, the ones left in the box are automatically losing tickets. Here, however, the Kohain would choose a lot with each hand, to correspond to each goat.

The striking lesson here is that nothing happens by itself. A choice to do a mitzvah is also a choice to avoid a sin. A choice to come closer to Hashem is a choice to grow farther from what Hashem despises. Sadly, a choice to sin is also a choice to push Hashem away. On Yom Kippur, and every day, we must be methodical and purposeful in our choices because every one tips the balance one way or the other.

When R’ Yisrael Meir HaKohain Kagan z”l published the sefer whose name he would become forever known by, the Chofetz Chaim, (Who Loves Life?) and its companion, the sefer Shmiras HaLashon (Guard Your Tongue,) it was the first time the laws of Lashon Hara, evil and prohibited speech, were codified and laid out systematically in one place. Some people complained to him. “Your laws are too voluminous, too difficult to follow. Now, with your book, we can never open our mouths to speak!”

“On the contrary,” replied the sage. “Until now, you should have been afraid to open your mouths for fear of transgressing one of the myriad prohibitions and sins. My book finally allows you to successfully navigate this dangerous road and avoid the pitfalls that are so easy to fall into. Only now do you finally have the ability to speak freely, knowing that you know what to watch out for.”

Chazal tell us that one who eats on Erev Yom Kippur for the sake of Heaven is considered to have fasted two days, the 9th and the 10th. That is because “doing the right thing” is much more powerful than “not doing the wrong thing.” Judaism should not be looked at as a bunch of “Thou shalt nots,” but as a plethora of opportunities to “Make it so.” ©2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Eagle and its Young

This week is the first parasha of the new year. Parashat Ha’azinu begins with a song that the B’nei Yisrael were told to memorize in last week’s parasha. Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, “And now write for you this song and teach it to the B’nei Yisrael, place it in their mouths in order that it will be a witness for the B’nei Yisrael.” Most of our very brief parasha consists of this song. Some wish to say that the word “song” here refers to the entire Torah, yet we know that the Torah is written in regular prose whereas the “song”

is written as poetry. This is emphasized by the physical spacing of the words into visible columns indicating a poetic form.

A section of the poem or song in Ha'azinu discusses the unique relationship of the B'nei Yisrael to Hashem. "When the Supreme One gave nations their portion, when He separated the children of man, He set the borders of peoples according to the number of the B'nei Yisrael. For Hashem's share is His people, Ya'akov, the portion of His possession. He found him in a desert land and in the wastes of a wilderness, He encircled him He made him comprehending, He guarded him like the pupil of His eye. Like an eagle arousing his nest hovering over his young, he spreads his wings, he takes it, he carries it on his pinions. Hashem alone guided him and there was no foreign god with Him."

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch says that "Hashem did not allow the children of Israel to grow into a nation in the land destined for them to live in and to develop and grow under the influence and conditions of that land. In contrast to all other nations, he let them become a nation without a land, and then to take possession of the land destined for them which had already been fully cultivated and built up by others." This was done to make the B'nei Yisrael realize that they were a nation which would be known as the "People of Hashem" and only then as the inhabitants of a particular land. Other nations were entirely dependent on the land for their identity; they had no existence outside of their land. The B'nei Yisrael were formed with the understanding and appreciation of Hashem and His Torah which they brought into the land, and through that made the land a part of Hashem in their eyes. "Israel is to bring its spiritual, moral and social culture, as formed by Hashem, with it into the land, is not to subject itself and the life of its people to the land, but to subject the land to itself and the life of the people as fixed by Hashem."

The Torah tells us, "He found him in a desert land and in the wastes of a wilderness, He encircled him, He made him comprehending, He guarded him like the pupil of His eye." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin understands this sentence to be a discussion of the B'nei Yisrael in Egypt and only later to be the time in the desert. He starts with the going down into Egypt for Ya'akov and his children, the seventy souls we discussed earlier. They were still all part of one family and only later were they blessed with becoming many families as descendants of the original seventy. In Egypt, for the first time, they were referred to as an am, a people. Par'oh referred to them as "behold here is the people of the children of Israel." This people left Egypt and went into the desert where they received the Torah and grew in their Faith in Hashem. The Ramban explains that two other descendants of Avraham went into the desert and did not grow: Yishma'eil and Eisav.

They did not grow and change when they were in the desert and they were not given the Torah along with Avraham's other descendants. The Kli Yakar explains that this pasuk is praise for the B'nei Yisrael. It comes to tell us that "even in a land of wilderness that was a land of waste, the B'nei Yisrael were willing to follow after Hashem as it says, "walk after Me in the desert, a land that is not cultivated."

The comparison of Hashem to an eagle is expressed in many different ways in the meforshim. Rashi explains that the first part of the pasuk, "like an eagle arousing his nest hovering over his young, he spreads his wings," indicates the caution with which the eagle approaches his sleeping young so as not to frighten them. He does not fly to them and wake them instantly but flits from branch to branch, tree to tree, flapping his wings, and gently arouses his young before greeting them. The Or HaChaim explains that this is the same way that Hashem confronts any sins and their punishment to His children, the B'nei Yisrael. As with the sin of gossip, Hashem first brings the discoloration of the punishment on the walls of a house and then on the cloth of a garment before He brings this discoloration on an individual. This is the gentle approach which is intended to awaken the sinner to return to the proper paths of Hashem before a more serious punishment is given. The Kli Yakar refers to the second half of the pasuk, "he takes it, he carries it on his pinions," and explains that the eagle places its young on top of its wings to protect it from its enemies among the birds as well as any arrows from his human enemies. This protection continues throughout the life of the eagle (Hashem) as its young (Israel) is referred to as first a daughter, then sister, and finally as a mother. Rashi explains that just as the eagle wishes to protect its children from the arrows of its enemy by saying that it is better that the arrows go in me rather than in my children, so the angel of Hashem moved between the Egyptians and the B'nei Yisrael at the Red Sea in order to destroy any arrows that were fired against His people. Thus we see the special relationship of Hashem with the B'nei Yisrael and the reciprocated special relationship that the people had with Hashem. Hashem personally took responsibility for His people in the desert and they formed a unique connection to Him in their response of the Shema.

This parasha is always read around the time of Yom Kippur. The lessons that we learn from this section demonstrate the special relationship that we have with Hashem. Hashem is here with us just as He was with the B'nei Yisrael in the desert. Hashem sees us today as His people just as He viewed our ancestors so long ago. That closeness deserves from us a commitment to study His Torah and to perform His mitzvot. As we approach Yom Kippur, may we dedicate our lives to the study of Torah and the observance of the mitzvot that are our responsibility

towards our relationship with Hashem. May we grow to see that Hashem is still our Eagle and that He will protect His young from all their enemies. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Call to Arms

Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of repentance, has the Jewish nation simultaneously praying, fasting and asking for forgiveness. It begins with the somber, quiet, and melodious intonation of Kol Nidrei and ends with the entire congregation shouting Hashem hu HaElokim (G-d is the Al-Mighty) seven times after various requests of forgiveness. It seems that at the time when our strength is waning our greatest and loudest pleas are spent. Shouldn't we begin the day with the strong requests for forgiveness and save the subdued prayers for when our bodies are weak from hunger and our lips parched from lack of water?

Rav Eichenstein, the Ziditchover Rebbe, tells the following story: One Friday, a man entered the study of the Tchortkover Rebbe with a request that was very common in those days.

"My son was drafted into the army," the man began. "However, we have a way out. On Sunday, we are going to a doctor who will falsely declare him unfit for service. This way he will be spared certain misery, perhaps even death in that terrible army. Rebbe," he asked, "I need your blessing that he evade the draft."

The Rebbe quietly told him that Shabbos was nearing and he could not concentrate on blessings. The man should return to him on Friday evening after his tisch (ceremonious chasidic table).

The man did so. After most of the chasidim had left, the man repeated his request, almost verbatim. Again the Rebbe was non-committal. "Return to me after the morning service."

Unperturbed, the man noted that he would really like to resolve this matter before Sunday morning.

Shabbos morning, after services, the man approached the Rebbe again. Calmly he repeated the predicament. "Sunday morning I am going to a doctor who will falsely declare my son unfit for military service. Please pray that we will evade conscription." The Rebbe was not moved. Again, he deferred until the afternoon.

At the third Shabbos meal, the scene repeated again, precisely the way it had the previous three times. "I understand that you are leaving Sunday morning. Come back to me late Saturday night," said the Rebbe. "By then I will have an answer for you."

By this time, his Chasidim's curiosity was piqued. They had never seen their Rebbe so reluctant to mete a blessing, especially when it was one that would save a Jewish soul from the frightful Polish army.

Saturday night a large crowd gathered as the man approached with his request. Frustrated and

disgruntled, the man, once again, repeated his story, almost verbatim, for the fifth time.

Immediately, the Rebbe sprung from his chair and began to shout. "What are you asking me? Why would one even try to evade the service of our wonderful country? How dare you ask me for a blessing of that sort? Your son would make a fine soldier for our country. I wish him the best of luck in the army!"

The man quickly scurried from the room and left town. The Chasidim stood shocked and bewildered. Never had they heard such an uncharacteristic outcry from the Rebbe.

"I will explain," said the Rebbe. "The man was a fraud. He had no son, and if he did, he wanted him in the army. He was sent by the government to test our loyalty. Thank G-d we passed the test."

"But, Rebbe!" cried the chasidim, "how did you know?"

"Simple," explained the Rebbe. "I watched the level of intensity. From the moment he met me until tonight there was no increase in intensity nor feeling of desperation with each request. The moment I heard his request tonight and it contained no more passion or desperation than his first request on Friday night, I knew he was a fraud."

We stand a whole entire day in prayer, and end with a ne'ilah prayer, after nearly 24 hours of pleading. The litmus test of our sincerity comes as the heavenly gates are being closed. As the sun begins to set, our pleas should intensify. That crescendo assures our sincerity. It also should assure us a Happy & Healthy Sweet New Year. © 2020 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

