

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

Buried inconspicuously in this week's parsha is a short sentence with explosive potential, causing us to think again about both the nature of Jewish history and the Jewish task in the present.

Moses had been reminding the new generation, the children of those who left Egypt, of the extraordinary story of which they are the heirs: Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4:32-34)

The Israelites have not yet crossed the Jordan. They have not yet begun their life as a sovereign nation in their own land. Yet Moses is sure, with a certainty that could only be prophetic, that they were a people like no other. What has happened to them is unique. They were and are a nation summoned to greatness.

Moses reminds them of the great Revelation at Mount Sinai. He recalls the Ten Commandments. He delivers the most famous of all summaries of Jewish faith: "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deut. 6:4) He issues the most majestic of all commands: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deut. 6:5) Twice he tells the people to teach these things to their children. He gives them their eternal mission statement as a nation: "You are a people holy to the



Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the

earth to be His people, His treasured possession." (Deut. 7:6)

Then he says this: The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples. (Deut. 7:7)

The fewest of all peoples? What has happened to all the promises of Bereishit, that Abraham's children would be numerous, uncountable, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, and the grains of sand on a seashore? What of Moses' own statement at the beginning of Devarim? "The Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Deut. 1:10)

The simple answer is this. The Israelites were indeed numerous compared to what they once were. Moses himself puts it this way in next week's parsha: "Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Deut. 10:22). They were once a single family, Abraham, Sarah and their descendants, and now they have become a nation of twelve tribes.

But -- and this is Moses' point here -- compared to other nations, they were still small. "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations -- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you..." (Deut. 7:1). In other words, not only were the Israelites smaller than the great empires of the ancient world. They were smaller even than the other nations in the region. Compared to their origins they had grown exponentially but compared to their neighbours they remained tiny.

Moses then tells them what this means: You may say to yourselves, "These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?" But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. (Deut. 7:17-18)

Israel would be the smallest of the nations for a reason that goes to the very heart of its existence as a nation. They will show the world that a people does not have to be large in order to be great. It does not have to be numerous to defeat its enemies. Israel's unique history will show that, in the words of the Prophet Zechariah (4:6), "'Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit,' says the Lord Almighty."

In itself, Israel would be witness to something greater than itself. As former Marxist philosopher Nicolay Berdyaev put it: "I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint... Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny." (The Meaning of History, Transaction Publishers, 2005, pg. 86)

Moses' statement has immense implications for Jewish identity. The proposition implicit throughout this year's Covenant & Conversation is that Jews have had an influence out of all proportion to their numbers because we are all called on to be leaders, to take responsibility, to contribute, to make a difference to the lives of others, to bring the Divine Presence into the world. Precisely because we are small, we are each summoned to greatness.

Y. Agnon, the great Hebrew writer, composed a prayer to accompany the Mourner's Kaddish. He noted that the children of Israel have always been few in number compared to other nations. He then said that when a monarch rules over a large population, they do not notice when an individual dies, for there are others to take their place. "But our King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He... chose us, and not because we are a large nation, for we are one of the smallest of nations. We are few, and owing to the love with which He loves us, each one of us is, for Him, an entire legion. He does not have many replacements for us. If one of us is missing, Heaven forbid, then the King's forces are diminished, with the consequence that His kingdom is weakened, as it were. One of His legions is gone and His greatness is lessened. For this reason it is our custom to recite the Kaddish when a Jew dies." (Quoted in Leon Wieseltier, Kaddish, London: Picador, 1998, pg. 22-23.)

Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Gandhi said: "A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." (Harijan, 19th November 1938) That must be our faith as Jews.

We may be the fewest of all peoples but when we heed God's call, we have the ability, proven many times in our past, to mend and transform the world. *Covenant and Conversation 5781 is kindly supported*

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Comfort you comfort you my nation, says the Lord your God." (Isaiah 40: 1) This Shabbat takes its name from our prophetic reading (Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of comfort.) Indeed, the entire month is known as Menachem Av, the comforting month of Av. And in the prophetic reading of Isaiah, the prophet adjures us to speak to the heart of Jerusalem, to do penance for our sins, to make a pathway for our Lord, to straighten out our crooked roads. In his magnificent lyric style, he is telling us to repent, for in repentance, we will find our comfort and our redemption.

The list of curses and punishments which came in the wake of the destruction of our Second Temple is catalogued in chapter 28 of the Book of Deuteronomy, and followed by the call to repentance in chapter 30. But repentance and return to what? First of all, to the Land of Israel. The nation has done that of its own volition since the rise of the modern Zionist movement in the 19th century, when we stopped waiting for the Messiah and beat our own path to our historic homeland.

But this certainly also includes return to God's Torah. Which commandments should we concentrate on? Should it be the ritual, should it be the ethical, and if both, then with which must we begin our repentance? Furthermore, since we are hopeful that this time our redemption will be not only national, but universal, what is to be our message to the world?

If we could only isolate the reason why we lost our Temples, we would then understand how to become worthy of the third and final Temple (remember that the Bible only speaks of two destructions and of two exiles, the first in Leviticus 26 and the second in Deuteronomy 28). And if we could discover why God elected Abraham in the first place, it would certainly be salutary to check our actions against God's design; then at least we could ascertain where we stand in God's eyes.

At the dawn of our history, the Almighty explains that "Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, that through him shall be blessed all the families of the earth, and that God has chosen, loved, and elected him because he has commanded his children and his household after him to guard the way of the Lord, to do compassionate righteousness and moral justice (tzedakah u'mishpat) (Gen. 18:18-19) What does tzedakah mean? The Bible itself explains this when it commands us not to oppress the stranger, not to afflict the widow or the orphan, because God hears their cries and will punish us by making our wives

widows and our children orphans. (Ex. 22:21-26) God in fact describes Himself as One who is gracious, who gives and loves even without cause and never expecting anything in return. (Ex. 34: 6-7)

Moreover, God repeats that when we make a loan to the poor and receive a pledge in return, we must return the pledge to the borrower if he needs it – even though the creditor actually owns the pledge until the borrower pays up his debt. The return of the pledge beyond the requirement of the law is called by the Bible an act of tzedakah: righteousness together with compassion. (Ex 22: 26)

In the first chapter of the Prophet Isaiah (the prophetic reading for the portion of Devarim, which always falls out towards the beginning of the Three Weeks of mourning), the prophet cries out that God is sated with our sacrificial animals, that He hates our monthly celebrations and festivals; it is God's will for us to rather judge the orphan and plead the cause of the widow. "Zion shall be redeemed through justice and we will return to her by means of our tzedakah, our acts of compassionate righteousness." (Isa. 1:27) Hence you see the straight line from Abraham's election to Isaiah's warning regarding the Temple: our worthiness depends not on our ritual piety, but rather upon our compassionate righteousness and moral justice.

After the destruction, the Prophet Jeremiah makes a ringing declaration which we read on Tisha B'Av itself: "So says God, let the wise not be praised for their wisdom, let the strong not be praised for their strength, let the wealthy not be praised for their wealth. Only for this is one to be praised: understand and know Me because I am the Lord who does loving kindness, moral justice and compassionate righteousness on earth. It is these things that I wish". (Jer. 9:23-24)

How do we match up to these ideals? Let me tell you a true incident which for me is a metaphor of our times. A young man attended a yeshiva in Tzfat. The first morning he arrived a bit late for breakfast and there was no milk left for his coffee. He went to the grocery, purchased a container of milk and placed the container in the Yeshiva refrigerator with a sign "private property". The next morning, the container was gone. He bought another container, on which he added to the previous sign "do not steal". The next morning, that container too was missing. He purchased a new container, adding to the sign "questionable gentile milk" (halav akum). This time no one took his container; he left the Yeshiva. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Although our teacher Moshe figuratively tears down the gates of Heaven with his prayers and supplications to be allowed to enter the land of Israel, his wish is not granted. Over the centuries, the

commentators have offered various explanations as to why Heaven, so to speak, remains so adamant in refusing his request and prayer.

Even though many great and noble insights have been advanced to rationalize and explain this refusal of the prayers by Moshe, the question itself remains a vexing one, even thousands of years later.

The simplest and, perhaps, least satisfying answer to the problem is simply that we can never understand or fathom the judgments and decisions of Heaven. The mortal mind can never cross the line of eternity and will always be left with questions and difficulties. All of this is encompassed in the words of God: "No human being while alive can fathom or see Me".

Naturally, we are greatly frustrated by our inability to deal with eternity on a rational basis. We are frustrated by the realization of our limitations, whether they be physical, mental, spiritual, or even mundane. The aptitude to live and function within the limitations of one's own shortcomings is a great talent, and, unfortunately, there are many who do not possess it, and are constantly unhappy, disappointed, frustrated, pessimistic and morose.

All the utopian ideas and legislation currently being promoted in much of the Western world is simply an outlet for the disappointment that is felt when one realizes that society is not perfect, and that life usually is messy.

Moshe is told by Heaven that he should no longer pursue this course of prayer. He is to give up on his lifelong dream and accept the will of Heaven, even though he may not understand or agree with the decision that is being rendered. This becomes part of the matrix of the greatness of Moshe, in that he does accept this judgment against him, and we do not find him pursuing the matter any longer.

In his closing words to the Jewish people, Moshe will refer again to the fact that he will not lead them into the land of Israel, and that he will die and be buried in the land of Moab. But these statements are not made in bitterness or in complaint, but simply in recognition of the truth of the situation that faces him and the Jewish people.

Judaism is a religion of optimism, opportunity, and multiple choices, but contains within it a certain degree of fatalism – an understanding that the will of Heaven will not be thwarted, no matter what, and no matter how mysterious it may appear to an ordinarily mortal.

In Yiddish, this streak of fatalism is expressed in the word 'bashert'. After all our attempts and actions have taken place, there still is this element that governs the outcome after all our efforts and seeming accomplishments. Such is the relationship of the created towards the Creator. ©2021 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

This week's portion presents a grim forecast of the Jews' fortune. God says that following their entry into the land of Israel, the Jews would sin, resulting in their exile. The Torah then states: "And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear, nor eat, nor smell" (Deuteronomy 4:28).

This sentence may be descriptive of further sins the Jewish People would commit once driven out of Israel. Yet one could also look at it another way, not as a description of sin, but as part of the initial punishment Am Yisrael would bear.

Abarbanel describes the punishment as follows: once exiled, the Jews would worship idols. Although they would be aware of the false nature of these idols, they would be forced to serve them in order to protect themselves and save their lives. To paraphrase Abarbanel, this is not mentioned as a sin but a punishment. Despite their recognition in their hearts of their true God, they would have no choice but to pray to idols and lie about their true belief, a torturous punishment indeed (Abarbanel, Deuteronomy 4:25).

Biur agrees that the sentence is descriptive of punishment, yet sees the punishment differently than Abarbanel. Biur suggests that in exile we would find ourselves in a foreign culture imbued with a value system contrary to Torah. To restate Biur, there is no greater punishment than the soul drowning in the abomination of sin from which one cannot escape. There is no worse soulful pain and punishment than recognizing the evil of one's actions but not being able to withdraw – having become so accustomed to committing this sin (Biur, Deuteronomy 4:28).

Nehama Leibowitz, who cites the Abarbanel and Biur, points out that these two commentators reflect the challenges of their respective generations. Abarbanel lived in Spain in the latter part of the fifteenth century during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. It was then that the Catholic Church demanded that Jews worship their man-god, otherwise they would be killed. Hence, he sees the punishment here as descriptive of what his generation was experiencing. At the risk of being killed, Jews had no choice but to outwardly leave their faith.

The Biur was penned by Moses Mendelssohn together with others in eighteenth-century Western Europe. The challenge of that generation was the enlightenment that ensnared the Jewish People and caused rampant assimilation. The threat was not physical but spiritual. For Biur, our Torah speaks of

Jews who leave the faith not because their lives are threatened, but because they have been swept up by the prevailing zeitgeist.

In truth, Abarbanel and Biur speak of the physical and spiritual tasks that we face throughout history. What both of these challenges have in common is the promise that immediately follows in the text that somehow against all odds, we will extricate ourselves from that exile and return to God – in fulfillment of God's covenant with the Jewish People. As the Torah states, "And from there you will seek the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Parashat Va'etchanan is always read on Shabbat Nachamu (the Shabbat of Comfort), the Shabbat after the Fast of the Ninth of Av. Appropriately, we read the portion that promises that no matter the darkness of exile, the light of redemption will prevail. ©2021 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"But take utmost care and watch yourselves greatly, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen...and make them known to your children and grandchildren." (Devarim 4:9) The Torah here exhorts us to remember standing at Mount Sinai, and the scene that transpired then. How when Hashem spoke to us, He made us see the thunder, and the words spoken, things that normally could only be heard. However, our senses were made keener and our abilities broadened so we could experience something beyond natural means.

The Ramban says this is an actual prohibition, that we may not forget that day when we stood at Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. Instead, we are to transmit the feelings of that day from generation to generation. This is because in future times, we might have someone perform some "miraculous" act, and cause us to question our faith. By imbuing these supernatural events in the consciousness of our children, they will be fortified and not swayed by the doubts of others.

Rashi, here, says something quizzical. He says that when you do not forget these things, and do them properly, only then shall you be considered wise amongst the nations of the world. However, if you do them improperly because you have forgotten, then you will be considered foolish.

While we understand that it is important to do the mitzvos properly, is that what the Torah is referring to here? To forgetting the commandments? It would seem that it is the event we are supposed to remember, as the Ramban says.

Further, if we perform them incorrectly because

we forgot whatever it was that we were to remember, why is that foolish? Ineffective, perhaps, and not fulfilling Hashem's will, but why is that foolish?

Perhaps we can suggest that Rashi is, indeed referring to the miraculous events of that day. When Hashem turned nature upside down, and showed that He, alone, is the sole power in Creation, it gave us a reason to perform the mitzvos. We do them out of obedience to Hashem, and acknowledge through them that Ain Od Milvado, there is nothing in existence but Him.

When a person forgets this, and believes that there are natural forces; when he fulfills the mitzvos on one hand but relies on his own intelligence or strength on the other, he is utterly foolish. Our principles and actions must be based on the simple truth that Hashem is the source of all and one who acts otherwise, though he may go through the motions of religious observance, is simply fooling himself, and no one else.

When the Chofetz Chaim visited Tchernigov, Russia, he heard about a Jew whose factory was open on Shabbos. He tried to convince the man to close it but the businessman said, "I make a profit of 4,000 rubles every day. Do you want me to lose that kind of money every Shabbos?"

The sage retorted, "Would you prefer to lose the entire factory because of your desecration of Shabbos? The Torah says, "On six days work may be done but the seventh shall be holy for you." Why tell us what we can do during the week? The answer is that only one who guards the sanctity of Shabbos is given the ability to work on the other six days."

The owner scornfully responded, "Does the Rabbi think a verse in the Torah keeps my factory going?!" The Chofetz Chaim left, disappointed that he had not convinced the man. When the Communist Revolution took place, the Bolsheviks seized the factory leaving the man destitute.

He sent a letter to the Chofetz Chaim. "Now I know," he wrote, "that you were right. Indeed, the verse in the Torah decided my factory's fate and I could do nothing about it." ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Blessing of Ga'al Yisrael

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

During the morning prayer service, one may not pause or interrupt between the blessing of redemption (*Ga'al Yisrael*), and the recitation of the *Amidah*. Even standing silently between them is prohibited. However, there is also a *halacha* that one must respond with an *Amen* after hearing a blessing. Thus, it would seem that someone who hears the *chazan* (cantor) complete the blessing of *Ga'al Yisrael* must answer *Amen*. But then he is creating an interruption between the blessing and the *Amidah*! What's a person to do?

Some answer that saying *Amen* to *Ga'al Yisrael* is like saying *Amen* after one's own blessing. In general, a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, if he is concluding a subject the *Amen* is considered part of the blessing and thus is not considered an interruption. (The classic example of this is in *Birkat HaMazon*, when we conclude our own blessing of "*Boneh Be-rachamav Yerushalayim*" by saying *Amen*.) Perhaps the *Amen* after *Ga'al Yisrael* is in the same category.

Others insist that the reciting of *Amen* at this point is an interruption and should be avoided. How can a person avoid taking sides in this disagreement?

The *poskim* offer three suggestions:

1. The person praying should try to reach *Ga'al Yisrael* a little before the *chazan*. He can then wait, recite *Amen* to the *chazan's* blessing, then recite the blessing himself, and immediately begin the *Amidah*. However, this solution is not without its problems. First, one is not supposed to pause in the middle of the blessings following *Keriat Shema*. Second, ideally one is meant to begin the *Amidah* at the same time as the *chazan*.

2. The person praying should recite the blessing together with the *chazan*. In such a case, he is not required to say *Amen*, as a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, as we have seen, there is an opinion that in the case of *Ga'al Yisrael* a person does say *Amen* to his own blessing.

3. The person praying should start the *Amidah* before the *chazan*. Once someone is in the middle of the *Amidah*, he does not respond *Amen* under any circumstances. However, once again, this means one is not beginning the *Amidah* with the *chazan*.

A fourth solution is very commonly followed nowadays. Namely, the *chazan* recites *Ga'al Yisrael* under his breath. Since no one hears the blessing, no one needs to answer *Amen*. Interestingly, this practice is not mentioned anywhere in the literature. Can it be that there truly is no source for it? ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopediá Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

What is Living?

Moshe was about to die and was reiterating the laws of the Torah to the B'nei Yisrael. Moshe told the people, "See that I have taught you statutes and ordinances as Hashem, my G-d, has commanded me, to do so in the midst of the land to which you come to take possession of it. And you will safeguard and perform them for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations who shall hear all these statutes and say surely a wise and understanding people is this great nation." These p'sukim follow a similar set of p'sukim that begin with almost the same words, "And now Israel, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to

perform so that you may live and you will come and possess the land that Hashem the G-d of your forefathers gives you. You shall not add to the word that I command you nor shall you subtract from it to observe the commandments of Hashem your G-d that I command you. Your eyes have seen what Hashem did with Ba'al P'or that every man who went after Ba'al P'or Hashem your G-d destroyed from your midst. But you who cling to Hashem your G-d you are all alive today."

These two sets of p'sukim approach the observance and performance of mitzvot from seemingly two different perspectives. In one set of p'sukim we are admonished to observe the mitzvot and perform them in order to live while in the other set the emphasis is on the impression that these mitzvot make on the rest of the nations of the world as well as the knowledge and understanding that we gain from studying about them. These approaches seem entirely different: one enables life while the other gives one comprehension which impresses others. Let us compare and contrast these two sections and perhaps we can understand their messages better.

The first statement of Moshe at the beginning of Chapter 4, is the quote which we discussed second. Moshe used the verb Sh'ma, listen. When this verb is used concerning the mitzvot, we understand it to mean much more than listen. The verb could be translated as understand, take to heart, observe, study, perform, and believe. Moshe's message then was to perform the mitzvot as Hashem commanded and Moshe reported, in order that Hashem could give the rewards that He had promised instead of any punishment. These rewards are then stated: "in order that you may live" and "you will possess the land." The punishments are also listed: "Your eyes have seen what Hashem did with Ba'al P'or that every man who went after Ba'al P'or Hashem your G-d destroyed from your midst." The B'nei Yisrael were cautioned to observe all of the mitzvot yet the punishment was connected with only one mitzvah, idol worship or following other gods. Once one has abandoned loyalty in Hashem, there is no validity to observing the mitzvot that Hashem has commanded. Failing to observe the mitzvot is also abandoning Hashem.

The second statement of Moshe speaks of two responsibilities of the people. Moshe used the verb "see" and also the verbs "safeguard and perform." "See" is understood by Rashi in other places to mean understand. This is appropriate here, especially since Rashi explains "and you will safeguard and perform them" to mean study in order to perform. Moshe also used the verb, "to do (the mitzvot)" in the land that you will come to possess. This parallels the promise in Moshe's first statement. The second promise here is unusual. "For it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations who shall hear all these statutes and say surely a wise and understanding people is this

great nation." Are the B'nei Yisrael to be influenced by whether the rest of the world looks upon them as wise? Moshe is not asking the B'nei Yisrael to He is not predicting the thousands of Koreans who now study Talmud in Aramaic because they think that it will make them smart like the Jews. The words that Moshe speaks, "who shall hear all these statutes and say surely a wise and understanding people is this great nation", talk about the nations hearing the mitzvot and understanding that we are a wise nation because of the mitzvot. It is true that the study of Gemara helps in the development of thinking and questioning. But that is not the purpose of our learning.

If we view Moshe's statements to the B'nei Yisrael as one entity, (after all, they are together in the Torah even though they are separated between Rishon and Shenii) we can get an even clearer understanding of Moshe's message to the people. The reward in both passages includes the land of Israel. In the first passage the reward is life itself whereas in the second passage the reward is the admiration of the nations of the world. But what is this "life" and "admiration"? Life without Torah and life without the Land of Israel is a life which is devoid of the essence of life. The Torah and mitzvot help us to realize that we can only "live" when we perform these mitzvot to bring holiness into our lives. The Land of Israel is the embodiment of holiness on the face of the Earth. The land can only tolerate the people when they are true to the mitzvot. When they are not, the land will spit them out.

Rav Kook, as quoted by Professor Nechama Leibovitz, emphasizes the importance of the Torah in our lives: "The uniqueness of the House of Israel lies in the fact that it views existence from the vantage point of holiness. It senses, with all the strength of its being, that life only possesses value to the extent that it is godly, and that life which is not godly is worth nothing. It perceives that...a life which is not godly is not to be termed life at all." Through Rav Kook, Moshe's words take on a special nuance. Moshe's warning to the people in the first passage is not in fear of death but in fear of not "living." The mitzvot are the means by which life becomes meaningful. Perhaps this is Moshe's message in the second passage also. When the nations of the world understand the mitzvot they will admire the fact that, as B'nei Torah, we understand that these mitzvot are what give us life itself.

May we continue to study Torah and perform its mitzvot and may we be zocheh to see that the spiritual level that we reach will enable us to receive our full reward of the Land of Israel in Peace. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Lelamed Weekly Dvar

Moshe urges the people to follow the rules of the Torah as they enter their new land and avoid

being tempted by outside influences. Moshe ends by famously proclaiming that "you who cleave to the Lord your G-d are alive, all of you, today" (4:4). Whoever is reading this is clearly alive, so why state the obvious, and what is the overall meaning of the exclamation? Also, why is there a double reference to G-d?

The Ohr Hachaim suggests a beautiful flow and significance to this passuk. If one starts by clinging "to the Lord" with mere actions (first reference to G-d), that person will find that G-d will become "your G-d" (second reference to G-d), a causality which will lead to feeling altogether more alive and in the present. Having our actions dictated by a higher and noble purpose will prompt more awareness, enabling us to appreciate and enjoy the gift of the present. ©2021 Rabbi S. Ressler and Lelamed, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The legal concept of the inviolability of one's home has been known in Western civilization since the age of the Roman Republic. In English common law this maxim is derived from the dictum that "an Englishman's home is his castle."

The term "castle" was defined in 1763 by Prime Minister William Pitt, first Earl of Chatham: "The poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the forces of the crown. It may be frail -- its roof may shake -- the wind may blow through it -- the storm may enter -- the rain may enter -- but the King of England cannot enter."

(Many years ago, one of my friends complained about Florida's high real estate taxes saying, "I finally understand the maxim 'a man's home is his castle.' It may look like a home but it gets taxed like a castle.")

Originally, the law in Florida was that, if possible, a person must retreat rather than use deadly force to incapacitate someone who is a serious threat to life or limb. The exception to that rule was the "Castle Doctrine," which is based on the concept that "a man's home is his castle." This means that when you are in your own home you are not required to retreat if you are threatened. Therefore, if someone breaks into your home you can use lethal force to dispatch the intruder. (Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law now extends that right to other places where one is lawfully present.)

The Castle Doctrine actually forms an essential part of the Fourth Amendment that protects people, their homes, and their property from unreasonable searches and seizures by the government. In other words, a person's home is hallowed grounds and he has a right to privacy; no authority can dictate to him how to behave behind closed doors. In one's home a man is king of his domain.

Judaism has a different view of this concept, and in this week's Torah reading we find a commandment that has something to say about how we should perceive our homes.

"And you should inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:9).

This week's Torah portion contains the obligation to place a mezuzah on the doorposts of one's home. A mezuzah is a small piece of parchment or "klaf" upon which a specially trained scribe carefully pens what is perhaps the most essential prayer in Judaism; the shema. The shema prayer is recited twice daily and is the affirmation of the monotheistic core of Judaism as well as one's acceptance of the absolute sovereignty of God. These verses begin with the phrase: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

The verses are written in black indelible ink with a special quill pen, usually hand made from a very large feather. The parchment is then rolled up and placed inside a protective case and affixed to the doorposts of one's home. In fact, the word "mezuzah" in Hebrew means "doorpost."

Interestingly enough, according to some estimates more than 95% of all Israeli homes have a mezuzah. In the 2020 study done by the Pew Research Center, most American Jews (almost two thirds) have a mezuzah on their home. It was fascinating to see that the more money a person earned the more likely it was that they had a mezuzah. Of those earning less than 50k a year only 51% had a mezuzah, while 69% of those earning between 100k-200k had one.

But the name mezuzah requires further explanation. Generally, a Torah mandated commandment is defined by the object used to perform the precept. For example, a shofar is a ram's horn that is blown on Rosh Hashanah, a lulav is a palm branch that is used on the holiday of sukkot, and tefillin are phylacteries that are placed on the arm during the morning prayer services. These are all names that relate to the object of the precept.

As mentioned above, the word "mezuzah" means "doorpost." Oddly enough, the object itself (the scroll and case) has no defining name other than the post upon which it is placed. Referring to this precept as mezuzah tells us nothing about the parchment or the very special prayer it contains. The only self-defining feature of its name seems to be where it is placed. This would be comparable to referring to tefillin as "arm." What is so critical about the placement of the mezuzah that it has come to define the very commandment?

In the Book of Ruth, we find a curious interaction between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. When leaving the land of Moav, Naomi attempts to dissuade her daughter-in-law Ruth from embracing Judaism and accompanying her on an arduous journey to the Land of Israel. In order to discourage her, Naomi mentions several commandments that Jews are required to fulfill.

Judaism is unique among world religions in that

a core belief is that even non-adherents can earn a share in the World to Come. In other words, Jews believe that one does not need to be Jewish to enter "heaven." A non-Jew must merely observe the Seven Noahide Laws and lead a moral and just life to earn a share in the World to Come. (This is a radical departure from Christianity and Islam; while both have their roots in Judaism, a basic tenet of those religions is that non-adherents are doomed.)

Conversion to Judaism is generally discouraged because it requires a rigorous commitment to following the Torah and all its commandments. In fact, one of the ways that potential converts are discouraged is by informing them of some of the more rigorous and challenging commandments that the Torah mandates.

One of the precepts that Naomi mentions to Ruth is the obligation of placing a mezuzah on one's home doorposts. Why is this such a critical commandment that Naomi felt it necessary to mention it to a person who was interested in converting?

A person's home is akin to having his own fiefdom. The manner in which a person makes it be known that his house is under his control is by placing his name on either the door or doorpost. In Europe, it was very common in medieval times to place a family's crest above the door to their home. This signage officially declared who were the masters of the home.

By placing a mezuzah on his doorpost, a person is affixing Hashem's name upon his home, thereby declaring that he is submitting to Hashem and that God is the actual authority of this abode. Even within our most cherished space -- the sacred private space that we own and reside in -- we are declaring that the ultimate master of our environment is the Almighty, not us. A mezuzah announces that this space is given over to God. Therefore, the name of this precept is all about the space it occupies.

Naomi understood that Ruth, coming from a society that entitles a person complete control over one's actions within one's own home, needed to be warned that as a Jew this will not be the case. This is a major paradigm shift; one that many would find stifling. A convert must accept that every aspect of a Jewish



life, even one's own home, is under the jurisdiction of the Almighty.

There is another very important symbolism to the mezuzah -- one that is an important life

lesson for anyone building a home life.

The mezuzah is affixed to the right doorpost at the entrance of a room. There is a well-known dispute as to what position the mezuzah is supposed to be affixed to that doorpost. The famous scholar known as Rashi ruled that a mezuzah should be affixed to the doorpost in an upright and vertical position. Along came his grandson, Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir -- also known as "Rabbeinu Tam" (a great scholar in his own right and the undisputed leader of his generation) -- who ruled that a mezuzah should be affixed horizontally on the doorpost.

Here we have the two great medieval luminaries (not to mention a grandfather and grandson) ruling in direct opposition to one another. What should be done?

This issue was cleverly solved a hundred years later by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, better known by his groundbreaking work on Jewish law and referred to as the "Tur." He ruled that we split the difference. Thus, a mezuzah is affixed at an angle -- midway between the vertical and horizontal position -- with the top facing into the room about to be entered. In this way, the Tur created a compromise of the two opinions.

How fitting: A compromise is one of the most important aspects of building a home and this compromise is the first thing a person sees upon entering his home -- and it's a constant reminder of how we should deal with all disagreements in our home.



Va'etchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

Moses pleads with God to enter the Holy Land, but is turned down. (Remember, God always answers your prayers -- sometimes with a "yes," sometimes with a "no"... and sometimes with a "not yet".) Moses commands the Children of Israel not to add or subtract from the words of the Torah and to keep all of the Commandments. He then reminds them that God has no shape or form and that we should not make or worship idols of any kind.

The cities of Bezer, Ramot, and Golan are designated as Cities of Refuge east of the Jordan river. Accidental murderers can escape there to avoid revengeful relatives. They then wait there until tried.

The Ten Commandments are repeated to the whole Jewish people. Moses expounds the Shema, affirming the unity of God, Whom all should love and transmit His commandments to the next generation. A man should wear tefillin upon the arm and head. All Jews should put a mezuzah (the scroll is the essential part) upon each doorpost of their home (except the bathroom).

Moses then relays the Almighty's command not to intermarry, "for they will lead your children away from Me" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). ©2021 Rabbi Y. Zweig & torah.org