

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.

When words take wing, they modulate into song. That is what they do here in Ha'azinu as Moses, with the Angel of Death already in sight, prepares to take leave of this life. Never before had he spoken with such passion. His language is vivid, even violent. He wants his final words never to be forgotten. In a sense he has been articulating this truth for forty years, but never before with such emotion. This is what he says: "Give ear, O heavens, that I may speak, / Earth, hear the sayings of my mouth... / The Rock, His acts are perfect, / For all His ways are just. / A faithful God without wrong, / Right and straight is He. / He is not corrupt; the defect is in His children, / A warped and twisted generation. / Is this the way you repay God, / Ungrateful, unwise people? / Is He not your Father, your Master? / He made you and established you." (Deut. 32:1-6)

Do not blame God when things go wrong. That is what Moses feels so passionately. Don't believe, he says, that God is there to serve us. We are here to serve Him and through Him be a blessing to the world. God is straight; it is we who are complex and self-deceiving. God is not there to relieve us of responsibility. It is God who is calling us to responsibility.

With these words Moses brings to closure the drama that began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When they sinned, Adam blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent. So it was when God began creating, and so it still is in the twenty-first century secular time.

The story of humanity has been, for the most part, a flight from responsibility. The culprits change. Only the sense of victimhood remains. It wasn't us. It was the politicians. Or the media. Or the bankers. Or our genes. Or our parents. Or the system, be it capitalism, communism or anything between. Most of all, it is the fault of the others, the ones not like us, infidels, sons of Satan, children of darkness, the

unredeemed. The perpetrators of the greatest crime against humanity in all of history were convinced it wasn't them. They were "only obeying orders." When all else fails, blame God. And if you don't believe in God, blame the people who do. To be human is to seek to escape from responsibility.

That is what makes Judaism different. It is what made some people admire Jews and others hate them. For Judaism is God's call to human responsibility. From this call you can't hide, as Adam and Eve discovered when they tried, and you can't escape, as Jonah learnt in the belly of a fish.

What Moses was saying in his great farewell song can be paraphrased thus: "Beloved people, I have led you for forty years, and my time is coming to an end. For the last month, since I began these speeches, these devarim, I have tried to tell you the most important things about your past and future. I beg you not to forget them.

"Your parents were slaves. God brought them and you to freedom. But that was negative freedom, chofesh. It meant that there was no-one to order you about. That kind of freedom is not inconsequential, for its absence tastes like unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Eat them once a year so you never forget where you came from and who brought you out.

"But don't think that chofesh alone can sustain a free society. When everyone is free to do what they like, the result is anarchy, not freedom. A free society requires cherut, the positive freedom that only comes when people internalise the habits of self-restraint so that my freedom is not bought at the expense of yours, or yours at the cost of mine.

"That is why I have taught you all these laws, judgments and statutes. They are not arbitrary rules. None of them exists because God likes giving laws. God gave laws to the very structures of matter -- laws that generated a vast, wondrous, almost unfathomable universe. If God were only interested in giving laws, He would have confined Himself to the things that obey those laws, namely matter without mind and life-forms that know not liberty.

"The laws God gave me and I gave you exist not for God's sake but for ours. God gave us freedom -- the most rare, precious, unfathomable thing of all other than life itself. But with freedom comes responsibility. That means that we must take the risk of action. God gave us the land but we must conquer it. God gave us

the fields but we must plough, sow and reap them. God gave us bodies but we must tend and heal them. God is our Father; He made us and established us. But parents cannot live their children's lives. They can only show them, by instruction and love, how to live.

"So when things go wrong, don't blame God. He is not corrupt; we are. He is straight; it is we who are sometimes warped and twisted."

That is the Torah's ethic of responsibility. No higher estimate has ever been given of the human condition. No higher vocation was ever entrusted to mortal creatures of flesh and blood.

Judaism does not see human beings, as some religions do, as irretrievably corrupt, stained by original sin, incapable of good without God's grace. That is a form of faith but it is not ours. Nor do we see religion as a matter of blind submission to God's will. That too is a form of faith but not ours.

We do not see human beings, as the pagans did, as the playthings of capricious gods. Nor do we see them, as some scientists do, as mere matter, a gene's way of producing another gene, a collection of chemicals driven by electrical impulses in the brain, without any special dignity or sanctity, temporary residents in a universe devoid of meaning that came into existence for no reason and will one day, equally for no reason, cease to be.

We believe that we are God's image, free as He is free, creative as He is creative, We exist on an infinitely smaller and more limited scale to be sure, but still we are the one point in all the echoing expanse of space where the universe becomes conscious of itself, the one life form capable of shaping its own destiny: choosing, therefore free, therefore responsible. Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Which means: thou shalt not see thyself as a victim. Do not believe as the Greeks did that fate is blind and inexorable, that our fate once disclosed by the Delphic oracle, has already been sealed before we were born, that like Laius and Oedipus we are fated, however hard we try to escape the bonds of fate. That is a tragic view of the human condition. To some extent it was shared in different ways by Spinoza, Marx and Freud, the great triumvirate of Jews-by-descent who rejected Judaism and all its works.

Instead like Viktor Frankl, survivor of Auschwitz, and Aaron T. Beck, co-founder of cognitive behavioural therapy, we believe we are not defined by what happens to us but rather by how we respond to what happens to us. That itself is determined by how we interpret what happens to us. If we change the way we think -- which we can, because of the plasticity of the brain -- then we can change the way we feel and the way we act. Fate is never final. There may be such a thing as an evil decree, but penitence, prayer and charity can avert it. And what we cannot do alone we can do together, for we believe "it is not good for man

to be alone." (Gen. 2:18)

So Jews developed a morality of guilt in place of what the Greeks had, a morality of shame. A morality of guilt makes a sharp distinction between the person and the act, between the sinner and the sin. Because we are not wholly defined by what we do, there is a core within us that remains intact -- "My God, the soul You gave me is pure" -- so that whatever wrong we may have done, we can repent and be forgiven. That creates a language of hope, the only force strong enough to defeat a culture of despair.

It is that power of hope, born whenever God's love and forgiveness gives rise to human freedom and responsibility, that has made Judaism the moral force it has always been to those whose minds and hearts are open. But that hope, says Moses with a passion that still sears us whenever we tread it afresh, does not just happen. It has to be worked for and won. The only way it is achieved is by not blaming God. He is not corrupt. The defect is in us, His children. If we seek a better world, we must make it. God teaches us, inspires us, forgives us when we fail and lifts us when we fall, but we must make it. It is not what God does for us that transforms us; it is what we do for God.

The first humans lost paradise when they sought to hide from responsibility. We will only ever regain it if we accept responsibility and become a nation of leaders, each respecting and making space for those not like us. People do not like people who remind them of their responsibility. That is one of the reasons (not the only one, to be sure) for Judeophobia through the ages. But we are not defined by those who do not like us. To be a Jew is to be defined by the One who loves us.

The deepest mystery of all is not our faith in God but God's faith in us. May that faith sustain us as we heed the call to responsibility and take the risk of healing some of the needless wounds of an injured but still wondrous world. *Covenant and Conversation 5782 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2021 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The very joyous and ritually rich festival of Sukkot comes at the heels of Yom Kippur, the Day of Forgiveness and Purity. Now that, hopefully, we have been forgiven for our transgressions, we begin afresh with a clean slate. It is certainly a wonderful feeling to start off the new year with joyous days of familial and communal togetherness. We celebrate by eating our meals in colorfully decorated booths (sukkot) which remind us of God's protection in the desert. And our prayers in the synagogue are punctuated by the waving of the Four Species through which we thank God for His agricultural bounty.

From this description, it would seem that the emphasis is on religious ritual connecting God and Israel. However, the great legalist-philosopher Maimonides makes the following comment in his Laws of Festivals (6: 18): When a person eats and drinks in celebration of a holiday, he is obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard (or sukka) and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is not indulging in rejoicing associated with a mitzvah, but rather the rejoicing of his gut.

And with regard to such a person the verse, (Hoshea 9:4) is applied: "Their sacrifices will be like the bread of mourners, all that partake thereof shall become impure, for they kept their bread for themselves alone." This happiness is a disgrace for them, as implied by the verse (Malachi 2:3): "I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your festival celebrations."

The Four Species are symbolically described by the Sages of the Midrash as representing four types of Jews: the "Etrog Jew" is both learned and filled with good deeds; the "Lulav Jew" has learning but no good deeds; the "Myrtle Jew" has good deeds but no learning and the "Willow-branch Jew" has neither learning nor good deeds. We are commanded to bind these four together, in order to remind us that a Jewish community consists of many types of Jews all of whom must be accepted and lovingly included within our Jewish community. Hence, a festival which superficially seems to be oriented solely in the direction of religious ritual actually expresses important lessons in human relationships.

To this end, I would like to relate a story. Reb Aryeh Levin, of sacred memory, was renowned as a righteous person of Jerusalem. He was known for his punctilious observance of each of the ritual commandments and his overwhelming compassion for every human being. Two days before the advent of the Festival of Sukkot, he went to the Geula district of Jerusalem to choose his Four Species. Immediately, word spread that the great tzaddik Reb Aryeh was standing in front of a long table in the street selecting his species. A large crowd gathered around him, after all, the etrog (citron) is referred to in the Bible as a beautiful fruit (eitz hadar), and since we are enjoined to "beautify the commandments", observant Jews are especially careful in purchasing a most beautiful and outstanding etrog. Everyone was interested in observing which criteria the great tzaddik would use in choosing his etrog. To the amazement of the crowd, however, Reb Aryeh looked at one etrog and put it down, picked up a second, examined it, and then went back to the first and purchased it together with his three other species. The entire transaction took less than 5

minutes. The crowd, rather disappointed, rapidly dispersed imagining that the great rabbi had a very pressing appointment.

One person decided to follow Reb Aryeh to see exactly where he was going. What could be more important than choosing an etrog the day before Sukkot? this Jerusalemite thought to himself. Rav Levin walked into an old age home. The individual following him, waited outside and 90 minutes later the great Sage exited. The Jerusalemite approached him "Revered Rabbi", he said. "Please don't think me impudent, but I am anxious to learn a point of Torah, and therefore, I am asking the question." The great commandment of Sukkot include the waving of a beautiful etrog. I am certain that visiting the elderly individual or individuals in the Old Age home is also an important mitzvah, but they will be in the Old Age Home during the Festival of Sukkot as well as after it. The purchase of the etrog is a once a year opportunity. I would have expected the revered rabbi to have spent a little more time in choosing the etrog."

Rav Levin took the questioner's hand in his and smiled lovingly "My dear friend", he said. "There are two mitzvot which the Torah employs the term hidur, (beautification), one is: the mitzvah of a beautiful etrog (pri etz hadar), (Leviticus 23: 40) and the second is beautifully honoring the face of the aged – (vehadarta pnei zaken) (Leviticus 19:32). However, the etrog is an object and the aged individual is a subject, a human being and not a fruit. Hence, I believe one must spend much more time in beautifying the commandment relating to the human being than beautifying the commandment relating to a fruit. ©2021 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

These last chapters of the Torah, culminating in this week's reading, are all a very serious and have an almost fearsome quality and tone. Heaven and earth are called upon to be the ultimate witnesses regarding the covenant that the Lord has made with Israel for all time. Rashi points out to us that human witnesses and even historical tradition within families, tribes and other groups are insufficient to uphold the veracity of the covenant between God and Israel. Human beings, by their very natures, can only see things superficially, and remember things selectively and often with a bias and/or agenda.

This is not the case with nature that always does the will of the creator and has no independent opinion or understanding of events on its own. We will see later in Jewish history that the prophet Isaiah will also invoke Heaven and earth in repeating the outlines of the covenant, justifying the rewards and punishment that observance or disregarding the covenant always brings with it.

The concept that nature itself, with all its wonders, unpredictability, and beauty, is itself the greatest source of testimony regarding the covenant between God and Israel. It is one of the truly unique ideas and interpretations that Moshe teaches us in this final part of his valedictory oration to the Jewish people.

Heaven and earth are eternal in this world and have fixed laws and patterns that are to never be altered. So too, is the covenant between God and Israel. It also is unchangeable, reliable, consistent, and predictable, and serves as an example and witness to the covenant that has bound us for millennia and remains in force in our current world as well.

The rabbis of the Talmud have often used nature and its attendant animal world as a source of instruction as to how human life should be conducted. The Talmud tells us that we could learn cleanliness from the feline species, monogamy from the ant, and other such values that are present in the great natural world that we inhabit. Nature in the world that surrounds us is one of wonder and inspiration, but at the very same time, one of possible danger and trepidation.

Volcanoes and earthquakes are also present when we view the beauty and inspiration that snow peak mountain ranges present before us. If one stands in the shadow of a great, tall mountain, every human being experiences the trepidation that the gigantic rock formation provokes.

So, too, is the nature of the covenant between God and Israel. It is a thing of wonder and beauty, of soaring visions, rich in mystery and inspiration. It invokes within us a sense of wonderment. But it also awakens within us the fear and anxiety that make our lives uncertain and bestows upon us feelings of danger. Our only choice is to observe the covenant and to realize that, in so doing, we guarantee our eternity in partnership with the natural world in which we live. ©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

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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Moses advises the people of Israel that, in times of difficulty, shirah (song) will bear witness that the covenant with Israel "shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring" (Deuteronomy 31:21, 22). Some suggest that the song referenced here is limited to Ha'azinu while others insist it is more encompassing, as the whole of Torah is a song. Either way, the characteristic of being a song insures that it "shall not be forgotten." What is the power of song that is so unique?

Song is a uniting force that brings together people of disparate backgrounds. Even those who do not know each other join in, arm in arm. As different as we are, we become sisters and brothers.

Song not only moves outward but inward, touching the inner core, our inner goodness and godliness. And although sometimes we are unaware of that potential purity within us, song can stir and awaken our inner souls.

Song also moves upward. The distance

between the lower world and upper world is great. How can we bridge the chasm? With the connecting ladder of song, which brings heaven down to earth and earth up to heaven.

This is the secret of song. Song is transcendent, moving out, in, and up. It crosses all barriers. The sound of song is expansive, it is everywhere – encompassing the sounds that surround us in our daily lives. The ripple of waves, the swaying of branches, the movement of clouds, the blowing of the wind, the turning of the page, the clicking of a keyboard, the chirping of birds, the laughter and cry of a child, the sound of lovers – it's all song. In the words of King David, the sweet singer of Israel: "Let the sea and all within it thunder, the world and its inhabitants; let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains sing joyously together" (Psalms 98:7, 8).

The singing that we engage in not only lifts us high but comforts us during low times. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is purported to have said that when we're sad, we cry; when the sadness is more intense, we are silent; when the sadness is piercing, painful, beyond description...we sing.

Theodor Adorno, a twentieth-century philosopher and composer, touches on the stirring spirituality of song when defining the power of music in this way: "Interpretation is essential in both music and language, but in different ways. To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music."

In language, one seeks to decipher, to comprehend precisely what has been said. Music takes us to a higher level. In the act of singing, we expand upon the music, revealing new dimensions, triggering an endless continuum. It hovers in our subconscious, percolating, reverberating – today, tomorrow, the next day, week, month, year, decade, and beyond.

Much like the theme of the song my parents, who were my first teachers of music, taught me: The days pass, the years go by, but the song remains forever. ©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

"**F**or the L-rd's portion is His nation; Jacob, the rope of His allotment." (Devarim 32:8) According to some, the requirement to "write this song" found in Parshas Vayelech refers to the song of Haazinu. The powerful imagery of Hashem's mastery over us and the foolishness of denying it is intended to be memorable.

Though other nations are ruled by ministering angels, Hashem, Himself guides the Jewish People, and this verse tells us why. It is because Hashem has

chosen the Jewish People as His portion, His special piece of this world. How did we merit being chosen? It was through our three patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who created a triple strand much as a strong rope is made of multiple smaller threads.

This striking lesson teaches us that when Hashem protects us, blesses us and does good to us, it is because He has become completely invested in us. We are His, and one protects that which is his. When we say, "Hashem, save us for your sake" it is a very accurate request. And we should recognize that since the time of Yaakov, every one of us has become a strand in the rope which ties us to Hashem. Even if we feel our connection may have snapped, we still have all the others to hold us fast. Then we can hang on to that rope for dear life, because it will not give out on us, and Hashem will not give up on us.

There is a famous story of the Baal Shem Tov who once had no money for Shabbos. He went to the home of a rich man, tapped on the door and whispered, "I need money for Shabbos."

The rich man heard and came running after him but the Baal Shem Tov had already turned and left. When asked why he hadn't stayed at the door, the Besht responded that he had done the basic effort Hashem required of him for his physical needs.

On Yom Kippur, we are knocking and asking for forgiveness. But it's not enough to say a few words to be 'yotze.' Rather we must return "all the way to Hashem," and He will then provide for us lavishly. ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Insights from Krakow

"**M**ay my teaching drop like the rain...like storm winds upon vegetation, and like raindrops upon blades of grass. (Devarim 32:2) Vegetation and grass? Would it not be more significant (and poetic) to speak of the rain falling upon amber waves of grain?

The answer, I believe, is rooted in a truth about communication. Chazal (Berachos 6b) tell us that words that come from the heart enter the hearts of others. It is more than apparent, however, that the listener's heart has to be open and engaged. Otherwise, the words lodge elsewhere, but are never fully felt. The listener has to prepare and direct his heart to the speaker for the message to be effective.

This is not unlike the effects of rainfall. The moisture that descends is crucial to what grows. In some cases, it is insufficient. Bountiful harvests of grain and fruit require much prior care and toil. They require preparing and readying the field. They then must be followed by more care: weeding, fertilizing, pruning, dealing with pests and frost. This is not so in regard to grass and random vegetation, which show themselves in all kinds of places. Add rainwater, and they appear.

They may not be attractive or useful, but they do quite well without human input. No preparation necessary.

This, then, was Moshe's heartfelt prayer. He wanted his words to penetrate everyone -- even those whose hearts were not prepared. He asked that his parting message should be as effective as rain on a field, which will grow grass and vegetation even with no prior preparation. *(Based on Chiddushei R. Yosef Nechemiah (Kornitzer) (1880-1933), Rav of Krakow) © 2021 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

An Oath from Hashem

Our parasha begins with a song which describes Jewish history from the redemption of the B'nei Yisrael from Egypt, Hashem's protection in the wilderness for forty years, and to the future when the people will turn away from Hashem and worship the gods of their new land. After describing how Hashem will eventually turn His back on His people and allow their destruction, the song ends with a promise that Hashem will redeem His people and will never truly abandon them.

The Torah states, "Mine is vengeance, and it will repay at the time their foot will falter, for the day of their catastrophe is near, and swiftly future events shall come towards them. When Hashem will have carried out judgment upon His people, and regarding His servants, He shall reconsider, when He will see that the hand has gone, and there is none saved or emboldened. He will say, 'Where are their gods, the rock in whom they sought refuge, who would eat the fat of their offerings, who would drink the wine of their libations? Let them stand and help you! Let him be a shelter for you! See now that I, I am He -- and no god is with Me, I put to death and I bring life. I struck down and I will heal, and there is no one who rescues from My hand. For I shall raise My hand to Heaven and I shall say, 'As I live forever, that I shall sharpen the shine of My sword and My hand shall grasp judgment, I shall return vengeance upon My enemies and upon those that hate Me shall I bring retribution. I shall make My arrows drunk with blood and My sword shall devour flesh, because of the blood of corpse and captivity, because of the earliest incursions of the enemy.'"

The poetry of Ha'azinu is difficult to interpret. The "vengeance" spoken of here could be seen as vengeance against the Jewish People who had abandoned Hashem, but the following pasuk speaks of having already carried out judgment against His people. The first pasuk must then be understood to be speaking of those who hated His People and sought to destroy them. Rashi, however, sees "at the time their foot will falter" to mean "when the merit of their (the B'nei Yisrael's) forefathers, on which they rely, will be depleted." Rashi understands this to mean that Hashem will hold off punishing the People completely

until the merit which was theirs from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov could no longer protect them. The Ramban, like Rashi, interprets "at the time their foot will falter" as the time that the B'nei Yisrael are dependent only on Hashem, and no longer expect that the merit of their forefathers will save them. At that time, Hashem will repay evil with evil to those who have sought Israel's destruction.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that, even though many strayed from Hashem and abandoned His Torah, the B'nei Yisrael "had never come to a complete break with Hashem and His Torah and to completely deny Him and it." When Hashem withdrew His protection, the B'nei Yisrael "were surrendered helpless to the excesses of the nations, (yet) that did not justify their having to endure all and every mishandling." The evil nations of the world deserved to be judged because "it is the amount of sympathy and respect for the rights which the weak find among the strong which is the measure of the moral worth of the strong." These nations abused their power against the powerless B'nei Yisrael.

Hashem cautioned the B'nei Yisrael: you sought out the gods of these nations and abandoned Hashem. The nations of the world sought refuge in those gods, they offered sacrifices and libations to them, and you joined them willingly. Now that you have reached the bottom, "let them stand and help you! Let him be a shelter for you! See now that I, I am He -- and no god is with Me, I put to death and I bring life. I struck down and I will heal, and there is no one who rescues from My hand." The people must come to realize that these other gods are fake and that there is only One Who has the power of life and death. The Ohr HaChaim explains that there were many who believed that there were two different forces in the world. They could not justify a god who could "both harm and heal, kill and give life."

The concluding section of our passage contains an unusual oath both in its form and its application. Hashem says, "For I shall raise My hand to Heaven and I shall say, 'As I live forever, that I shall sharpen the shine of My sword and My hand shall grasp judgment, I shall return vengeance upon My enemies and upon those that hate Me shall I bring retribution.'" The term used here for "I shall raise My hand" is esah. Most of the commentaries understand this as an oath, as one is required to raise one's hand when making such an oath. This is an unusual use of esah, as the more common word to use raising a hand is "arim". Hirsch explains that arim is a sign of greater strength, whereas esah indicates more likely a plea as in "esah einay el heharim, I lift up my eyes to the mountains". Hirsch understands our phrase to be closer to, "I raise my hand in supplication to the Heavens to carry out my vengeance on those that persecute My People." One reason for Hirsch's reluctance to call this an oath is that

it speaks of Hashem raising His hands to the Heavens, "and it would seem quite unsuitable if used referring to Hashem." Hirsch also indicates that the term "Chai Anochi, as I live" is similar to Man's statement of "Chai Hashem, as Hashem lives". Yet here we find the phrase "Chai Anochi l'olam, as I live forever", which Hirsch sees, not as an oath, but as a separate statement of fact.

Parashat Ha'azinu always occurs near to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One can easily comprehend why this is so. From our passage in the parasha we can glean several important messages that are applicable especially at this time of the year. Even though the B'nei Yisrael would reach such a low level that Hashem would withdraw His protection from them, there would always be a number of righteous souls who would not abandon Hashem. It is through these righteous souls, though they may be few in number, that Hashem is able to forgive those who stray and maintain His special relationship with the Jewish People.

The Torah here speaks of this relationship in terms of the Nation, but the same is true for each individual. Even if an individual has strayed far from the Torah, each Jew has that spark of righteousness within that can enable him to return to the Torah and Hashem's moral code. Though other gods may tempt one to worship them (money, fame, power), and place them above the demands of the Torah, that spark can always help one to realize that true fame and power exists only in Hashem. This realization within each of us can lead us to serve Hashem as we seek to improve our community and our world. May we each seek that spark within ourselves. ©2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**T**hree books are opened on Rosh Hashana, one for those who are completely wicked, one for those who are completely righteous, and one is for those in between. The completely righteous are written down and sealed right away for life; the completely wicked are written down and sealed right away for death; those in between remain suspended from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are written down for life; if they don't merit it, they are written down for death.” (Rosh Hashana 16b, and echoed, in different words, by Rambam, Hilchos T'shuvah 3:3)

While the Talmud tells us the consequences of being righteous or wicked, it doesn't define for us who are considered such. Rambam (3:1-2) tells us that whoever has good deeds that outweigh their bad deeds is "righteous," those whose bad deeds outweigh their good deeds are "wicked," and those whose "good" and "bad" deeds are exactly even are considered "in between" (or "middling"). However, if those whose fate

is not determined on Rosh Hashana is limited to only those whose good deeds weigh exactly the same as their bad deeds, it would seem that only a small number of people have until Yom Kippur to mend their ways in order to improve their upcoming year. Yet the wording of our prayers indicate that the heavenly decrees that will affect us for the next year aren't sealed until Yom Kippur. Are these prayers meant only for the few whose deeds are exactly "half and half?" Why is there so much focus on improving ourselves before Yom Kippur, rather than on or before Rosh Hashana, if the decrees issued on Yom Kippur apply to only a few people?

Lechem Mishneh (3:2), answering a different question, says that Rambam's definition of who is righteous and who is wicked is only meant for the judgment made upon death, not the yearly judgments made on Rosh Hashana. He says that for Rosh Hashana, the Rambam would define "righteous" and "wicked" the same way Ramban does (at the beginning of Sha'ar HaG'mul), with the terms referring to the outcome of this particular judgment; even a wicked person who is given a year of life is considered "righteous" vis-à-vis that decision. Aside from the semantic gymnastics, Rambam gives no indication that the terms are different for this judgment than they were for the previously discussed judgment). Additionally, if these terms refer to the outcome of the judgment, and are not a description of the person being judged (and the reason for the judgment), the Talmud's statement doesn't read well; saying the "righteous are given a good judgment" is superfluous, since the reason they are considered "righteous" is precisely because there was a positive outcome to their judgment! Also, this explanation does not apply to the person referred to as "in between," unless the term is a euphemism for "to be determined." How can there be a separate book opened on Rosh Hashana for each category, if the categories don't really apply until after the judgment?

"The essence of a human being is his desires." These are the opening words of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler's essays on the High Holy Days (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu volume II, page 62). He explains how these desires remain with the person even after death, and are the source of most of the reward and punishment in the next world. After all, how can one satisfy a physical desire in a world that exists only on a spiritual plane? Rav Dessler applies this concept to the above Talmudic quote; the completely righteous are those whose "wants" are completely spiritual, the completely wicked those who have only physical cravings, and those in between have both physical and spiritual longings. Therefore, as almost everybody fits into the latter category, it is not until Yom Kippur that the King of kings seals our decrees. (The goal is to improve ourselves so that our primary cravings are for the spiritual, which would move us from the category of

being "in between" to being among the "righteous.") Nevertheless, since Rambam discusses deeds, not desires, it would be difficult to suggest that this was what he meant.

Rav Yitzchok Hutner (Pachad Yitzchok, Rosh Hashana 18) discusses this Rambam as well, including the differences between his wording and that of the Talmud. When describing those who are "in between," the Talmud says that if they merit it, on Yom Kippur they are written in for life, while if they don't, they are written down the other way. Rambam, on the other hand, specifies that in order for those "in between" to be sealed "for life," they must repent (and if they don't, they will be sealed "for death"). Aside from needing to explain why Rambam changed the verbiage at all (including why those "in between" are "sealed" rather than "written"), stating that the "in between" have to repent has larger implications. If the reason they are "in between" is because their good deeds are exactly equal to their sins, shouldn't all they need to do be to "unbalance" the scales by adding more good deeds? [This becomes more difficult based on Rambam's own words in the very next law (3:4), where he explains why we make an extra effort between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to give more charity, do more good deeds and fulfill more mitzvos.] Why is the only way for those "in between" to merit "life" to repent past misdeeds, thereby making their "positive side" heavier than their "negative side," rather than being able to make their "positive side" heavier by adding to it?

Rav Hutner has a similar approach to Rav Dessler's, but rather than changing the definition of "righteous" and "wicked," Rav Hutner changes the definition of "having a majority of merits or sins" to be a description of the person rather than of the number of his good deeds or bad deeds. (Bear in mind that Rav Dessler is explaining the Talmud, while Rav Hutner is explaining how Rambam understands the Talmud; the Talmud never discusses the actions, only how the person is categorized.) Still, Rambam's wording (3:1), "if he has more merits than sins," sounds like a description of his actions, not a categorization of the person.

When discussing the decrees made regarding the "righteous" and "wicked," the Talmud says they are "sealed" on Rosh Hashana. This indicates that the reckoning based on their previous actions is complete; good deeds and bad deeds done between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur will be counted next Rosh Hashana, when the next year's reckoning is done, but are not part of the calculation of the previous year. There is no reason to think that this isn't true for those who are "in between" as well. [Although the Talmud does use the word "written" for them, it is rather obvious that by Yom Kippur it is sealed. The word "written" is most likely used because until Yom Kippur their fate is not "sealed"; not repenting before Yom Kippur doesn't

mean they won't do so sometime before Yom Kippur is over, and repenting doesn't "seal the deal" if they can still "un-repent" before Yom Kippur ends. In order to avoid confusion, Rambam uses the term "sealed" for those "in between" as well, referring to the end of the process, i.e. their status after Yom Kippur is over.] Since good deeds done after Rosh Hashana do not count for the judgment made about the previous year, the only way to "tip the scales" after Rosh Hashana is to repent, thereby retroactively removing sins that had prevented the "merit" side from being heavier. (Not removing them, leaving the "scales" as they were, means not being given "life.")

[As far as Rambam promoting increasing good deeds between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the context indicates that this was not meant to affect the judgment, but the way we live our lives. As he says explicitly, we should try to do every good deed we can all year long. However, many are "asleep" spiritually, and need to be woken up (which is why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana). As part of our "reawakening," we increase our amount of good deeds, something we are always supposed to do.]

Although Rambam only mentions those "in between" needing to repent, he is referring to what it takes for those "in between" to be granted "life." But just as repenting helps those in between by removing sins from their scale, repenting removes sins from the scales of the righteous as well. True, they were granted "life" even beforehand (when their original decree was sealed on Rosh Hashana), but there are many more aspects to decrees than just "life," and their situation will be much improved after some of their (fewer) bad deeds are removed retroactively. As Rambam wrote earlier (2:6), even decrees that were sealed can be changed during the Ten Days of Repentance (especially if it is part of a public repentance). Yom Kippur providing us the opportunity to cleanse ourselves of our sins is enough of a reason to take advantage of it, but even if a decree of "life" was given on Rosh Hashana, the more affective our repentance is, the better our final decree will be.

Despite the Talmud saying that the decrees regarding the righteous and wicked are sealed on Rosh Hashana, the liturgy refers to the decrees made on Rosh Hashana as being "written" because it is literally true for those "in between," and true from a practical standpoint for everyone else, since we can improve on the decrees made by improving ourselves through repentance. Therefore, even though it is only those "in between" who first have their decrees "sealed" on Yom Kippur, its benefits apply to all of us. ©2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

