

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Near the end of Bemidbar, we encounter the law of the cities of refuge: three cities to the east of the Jordan and, later, three more within the land of Israel itself. There, people who had committed homicide could flee and find protection until their case was heard by a court of law. If they were found guilty of murder, in biblical times they were sentenced to death. If found innocent -- if the death happened by accident or inadvertently, with neither deliberation nor malice -- then they were to stay in the city of refuge "until the death of the High priest." There, they were protected against revenge on the part of the goel ha-dam, the blood-redeemer, usually the closest relative of the person who had been killed.

Homicide is never less than serious in Jewish law. But there is a fundamental difference between murder -- deliberate killing -- and manslaughter, accidental death. To kill someone not guilty of murder as an act of revenge for an accidental death is not justice but further bloodshed, and must be prevented. Hence the need for safe havens where people at risk could be protected.

The prevention of unjust violence is fundamental to the Torah. G-d's covenant with Noah and humankind after the Flood identifies murder as the ultimate crime: "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d, G-d created man" (Gen. 9:6). Blood wrongly shed cries to Heaven itself. G-d said to Cain after he had murdered Abel, "Your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10).

Here in Bemidbar we hear a similar sentiment: "You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it" (Num. 35:13). The verb ch-nph, which appears twice in this verse and nowhere else in the Mosaic books, means to pollute, to soil, to dirty, to defile. There is something fundamentally blemished about a world in which murder goes unpunished.

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Human life is sacred. Even justified acts of bloodshed, as in the case of war, still communicate impurity. A Cohen who has shed blood does not bless the people. (Berakhot 32b; Rambam, Hilkhos Tefillah 15:3) David is told that he may not build the Temple "because you shed much blood." (I Chronicles 22:8) Death defiles.

That is what lies behind the idea of revenge. And though the Torah rejects revenge except when commanded by G-d. (Only G-d, the giver of life, can command us to take life, and then often only on the basis of facts known to G-d but not to us.) Something of the idea survives in the concept of the goel ha-dam, wrongly translated as 'blood-avenger.' It means, in fact, 'blood-redeemer.' A redeemer is someone who rights an imbalance in the world, who rescues someone or something and restores it to its rightful place. Thus Boaz redeems land belonging to Naomi. (See Ruth, chs. 3-4.) A redeemer is one who restores a relative to freedom after they have been forced to sell themselves into slavery. (See Lev. 25, where the verb appears 19 times.) G-d redeems His people from bondage in Egypt. A blood-redeemer is one who ensures that murder does not go unpunished.

However not all acts of killing are murder. Some are bi-shgagah, that is, unintentional, accidental or inadvertent. These are the acts that lead to exile in the cities of refuge. However, there is an ambiguity about this law. Was exile to the cities of refuge considered as a way of protecting the accidental killer, or was it itself a form of punishment, not the death sentence that would have applied to one guilty of murder, but punishment none the less. Recall that exile is a biblical form of punishment. Adam and Eve, after their sin, were exiled from Eden. Cain, after killing Abel, was told he would be "a restless wanderer on the face of the earth." We say in our prayers, "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land."

In truth both elements are present. On the one hand the Torah says, "The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the redeemer of blood and send the accused back to the city of refuge to which they fled" (Num. 35:25). Here the emphasis is on protection. But on the other, we read that if the exiled person "ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which they fled and the redeemer of blood finds them outside the city, the redeemer of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder" (Num. 35:26-27). Here an element of guilt is presumed, otherwise

why would the blood redeemer be innocent of murder? (See Amnon Bazak, 'Cities of refuge and cities of flight,' in Torah Mi-Etzion, Devarim, Maggid, Jerusalem, 2012, 229-236.)

We can see the difference by looking at how the Talmud and Maimonides explain the provision that the exile must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest. What had the High Priest to do with accidental killing? According to the Talmud, the High Priest "should have asked for mercy [i.e. should have prayed that there be no accidental deaths among the people] and he did not do so." (Makkot 11a) The assumption is that had the High Priest prayed more fervently, G-d would not have allowed this accident to happen. Whether or not there is moral guilt, something wrong has occurred and there is a need for atonement, achieved partly through exile and partly through the death of the High Priest. For the High Priest atoned for the people as a whole, and when he died, his death atoned for the death of those who were accidentally killed.

Maimonides, however, gives a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed (III:40). For him the issue at stake is not atonement but protection. The reason the man goes into exile in a city of refuge is to allow the passions of the relative of the victim, the blood-redeemer, to cool. The exile stays there until the death of the High Priest, because his death creates a mood of national mourning, which dissolves the longing for revenge -- "for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one befalls another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest."

The desire for revenge is basic. It exists in all societies. It led to cycles of retaliation -- the Montagues against the Capulets in Romeo and Juliet, the Corleones and Tattaglias in The Godfather -- that have no natural end. Wars of the clans were capable of destroying whole societies. (See Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.)

The Torah, understanding that the desire for revenge as natural, tames it by translating it into something else altogether. It recognizes the pain, the loss and moral indignation of the family of the victim. That is the meaning of the phrase goel ha-dam, the blood-redeemer, the figure who represents that instinct for revenge. The Torah legislates for people with all their passions, not for saints. It is a realistic code, not a utopian one.

Yet the Torah inserts one vital element between the killer and the victim's family: the principle of justice. There must be no direct act of revenge. The killer must be protected until his case has been heard in a court of law. If found guilty, he must pay the price. If found innocent, he must be given refuge. This single

act turns revenge into retribution. This makes all the difference.

People often find it difficult to distinguish retribution and revenge, yet they are completely different concepts. Revenge is an I-Thou relationship. You killed a member of my family so I will kill you. It is intrinsically personal. Retribution, by contrast, is impersonal. It is no longer the Montagues against the Capulets but both under the impartial rule of law. Indeed the best definition of the society the Torah seeks to create is nomocracy: the rule of laws, not men.

Retribution is the principled rejection of revenge. It says that we are not free to take the law into our own hands. Passion may not override the due process of the law, for that is a sure route to anarchy and bloodshed. Wrong must be punished, but only after it has been established by a fair trial, and only on behalf, not just of the victim but of society as a whole. It was this principle that drove the work of the late Simon Wiesenthal in bringing Nazi war criminals to trial. He called his biography Justice, not Vengeance. The cities of refuge were part of this process by which vengeance was subordinated to, and replaced by, retributive justice.

This is not just ancient history. Almost as soon as the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War came to an end in 1989, brutal ethnic war came to the former Yugoslavia, first in Bosnia then Kosovo. It has now spread to Iraq, Syria and many other parts of the world. In his book The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), Michael Ignatieff wondered how these regions descended so rapidly into chaos. This was his conclusion (p.188): "The chief moral obstacle in the path of reconciliation is the desire for revenge. Now, revenge is commonly regarded as a low and unworthy emotion, and because it is regarded as such, its deep moral hold on people is rarely understood. But revenge -- morally considered -- is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honor their memory by taking up their cause where they left off. Revenge keeps faith between the generations; the violence it engenders is a ritual form of respect for the community's dead -- therein lies its legitimacy. Reconciliation is difficult precisely because it must compete with the powerful alternative morality of violence. Political terror is tenacious because it is an ethical practice. It is a cult of the dead, a dire and absolute expression of respect."

It is foolhardy to act as if the desire for revenge does not exist. It does. But given free reign, it will reduce societies to violence and bloodshed without end. The only alternative is to channel it through the operation of law, fair trial, and then either punishment or protection. That is what was introduced into civilization by the law of the cities of refuge, allowing retribution to take the place of revenge, and justice the place of retaliation. *Covenant and Conversation* is

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"This is the matter that the LORD has commanded concerning the daughters of Tzelofhad, saying: Let them be married to whom they think best... Just as the LORD commanded Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad" (Numbers 36:6,10). What can we do to transmit a love of the Land of Israel to the next generation? The Book of Numbers, by concluding with the case involving the five daughters of Tzelofhad, touches on this very issue. These women – Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milca and Tirza – moved all the way up the judicial and political ladder until they stood before Moses himself.

By insisting on their rights of inheritance so that Tzelofhad would also have a portion in the future eternity of Israel through his descendants' working and living in the Land of Israel, they won the case for female rights to inheritance, causing an entire addendum to be added to the previous inheritance laws of the Torah!

Who was this man, Tzelofhad, father of such special women, and how did he instill in them such a strong love of the Land of Israel? The Talmud (Shabbat 96b-97a) records a fascinating dispute that offers insights that have far-reaching implications as it relates to transmitting a love for the Land of Israel.

According to Rabbi Akiva, "the one who gathered wood [on the Sabbath and was stoned to death as a punishment] (Numbers 15:32-36) was Tzelofhad, as it is written, 'and the People of Israel were in the desert and they found a man gathering wood,' and later it is written, 'our father [regarding Tzelofhad] died in the desert' (ibid., 27:3). Just as the second case refers to Tzelofhad, so, too, does the first."

The Talmud provides a different interpretation in the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteyra, who even takes Rabbi Akiva to task for his commentary: "Akiva, whether or not you are correct in your identification [of Tzelofhad], you will eventually be punished. If it is as you say, then if the Torah saw fit to hide [the identification], why did you reveal it? And if you are mistaken, how dare you cast aspersions on such a righteous person? Rather, from where did Tzelofhad come? From the group of brazen climbers [ma'apilim] atop the mountain [who defiantly attempted to conquer Israel without God in their midst and without the Holy Ark (ibid., 14:40-45)]".

From the perspective of this Talmudic discussion, we can glean much about Tzelofhad. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteyra sees Tzelofhad as one of the ma'apilim, the brazen would-be conquerors of Israel, the non-religious Zionists who storm the ramparts of the Land of Canaan with neither God nor the Holy Ark of

the Torah in their midst, but nevertheless with a strong love for the land and the peoplehood of Israel.

They may have failed at their attempt in the desert, but it was apparently their passionate love for the land of Zion that produced these very special five daughters, who learned their love for the land from their father, and added to it an indomitable faith in God and in the equitability of His Torah.

In contrast, why did Rabbi Akiva identify Tzelofhad with the culpable gatherer of wood, a Sabbath desecrator who was condemned to death?

I believe that Rabbi Akiva is emphasizing a crucial foundational principle of Judaism: we are both a nationality as well as a religion, with each of these critical compartments of our faith having been worthy of a Divine covenant. The Torah (Genesis 15) records the national covenant with Abraham "between the pieces" in which He guaranteed the first patriarch progeny and a homeland, and the religious revelation at Sinai, a Divine covenant with the entire nation of Israel (Exodus 19 and 24).

And even though Tzelofhad, in desecrating the Sabbath, may have "lapsed" in terms of his religious obligations, this does not detract from his status as a member of Klal Yisrael, the historic Jewish nation. "A Jew, even though he sins, remains a Jew," teach our Talmudic sages (Sanhedrin 44a).

And remember that the daughters' claim was that "the name of their father not be diminished" (Numbers 27:4) by his inability to bequeath a portion of land in Israel because he lacked male heirs. Certainly, there were some "sages" at the time who may well have claimed to the five sisters that they were not entitled to any land, to any parcel of the Israel patrimony, if their father had been a transgressor of the law.

Perhaps Rabbi Akiva specifically identifies Tzelofhad as the culpable wood-gatherer in order to stress that even though a Jew may tragically cut himself off from the religious covenant, he still remains an inextricable member of the national covenant, the historic nation of Israel. And although his five brilliant and righteous daughters re-established a profound relationship with the Hebraic laws and traditions, they undoubtedly received much of their Zionist fervor for the land from their father! Therefore, his share in the land was indisputable, and deserved to be bequeathed to his daughters. ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah reading of this week, in essence, completes for us the narrative portion of the Torah.

The 40-year sojourn, with its triumphs, defeats, accomplishments, and failures, is now ending. The Jewish people are poised to establish their own

homeland, that the Lord promised their ancestors centuries earlier. But it is not only those who were present who influenced those actions and the events of the time.

The Torah teaches us that not only those who are physically alive at the time of an event, but indirectly, Jews always feel the presence of those no longer alive at these special times. It is not only the generation that succeeded the Jewish people that actually left Egypt and accepted the Torah at Sinai, which is present at the moment when the Jewish people are about to enter the land of Israel. It is obvious that the Torah continues to remind the Jewish people of the covenant that the Lord made with their ancestors, centuries earlier.

The agreements made regarding behaviors and attitudes that mark their lives are no longer to be considered history, but, rather, are current events that influence and color all the present circumstances and challenges that the Jewish people face. Thus, it is not only Joshua who is leading the Jewish people into the land of Israel, but it is also Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and our mothers that are in the forefront of this effort and part of this most memorable occurrence.

The history of a people, or even of a family, is oftentimes felt to be a burden, and not necessarily a privilege. Children of great people oftentimes simply resent being reminded of their ancestry. Furthermore, they resent being held to the standards of behavior, attitudes, and the visions of their predecessors. People would like to start life with a completely clean slate, with no background information that imposes potential feelings of guilt and inadequacy upon them.

There have been many studies about children who were abandoned or given up for adoption, and they later search for any scrap of information that can be provided for them while they were only infants. Invariably, when, somehow, they discover that the family that raised them, loved them, and provided for them was not their biological ancestry, those individuals invariably begin to search for their biological parents, and try to determine their historical ancestry. It is an amazing, almost instinctive, drive within us to know more about our parentage. We wish to discover our blood relatives.

This week's Torah reading describes the journey of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Rashi points out that this is the story of a father telling a son about what led to his reaching adulthood. The adult youngster is incomplete without the knowledge of his or her true past. The great disconnect in much of the Jewish world today, which leads to so much frustration and even self-denial and often, in the extreme, self-hate, is simply due to that individual not knowing anything about his or her heritage. It is hard to begin a journey with an unknown destination if one is not even aware of where that journey began. ©2022 Rabbi Berel

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Why does the Torah spend an entire chapter outlining all of the Israelites encampments in the desert (Numbers 33)? Rashi, quoting the Midrash, suggests it illustrates God's love for His people. "It can be compared to a king whose son was ill and whom he took to a distant place to cure. As...they returned, the king would recount to the lad all the experiences they went through... 'here we slept, here we had a cool resting place, here you had a headache'" (Midrash Tanchuma). Just as a parent cares endlessly for a child, so did God lovingly carry His children through the most difficult moments in our travels through the desert.

Sforno sees the mentioning of these places as revealing the Jewish People's love for God. In his words: "He [Moses, as per God's instructions] wrote down...the details of their journeys, because it involved leaving for a new destination without any previous notice, which was very trying." Similarly, Jeremiah recalls God's expression of love for Israel, who, despite all odds, followed Him into the wilderness. In Jeremiah's words: "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed Me into the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2).

Considering that the Israelites were just days before entering Israel brings another approach to mind. When taking any major step in life, it is a good idea to carefully reevaluate one's past. The listing of each resting place reminded the nation of these moments. It allowed for serious individual and national reflection and accountability. No doubt some of these places evoked memories of rebellion and even betrayal of God. Rather than avoid such memories, we should remember them with the goal of learning from those mistakes.

Also, bearing in mind that Am Yisrael was assuredly overwhelmed with enthusiasm, believing that the liberation of the Land of Israel would come in an instant, we needed to be reminded that accomplishments come in small steps, much like the Jews' incremental travel through the desert.

Thus, the Torah elaborates for an entire chapter on our journey. It teaches invaluable lessons for life: the importance of self-reckoning, the importance of changing misfortune into fortune, and the importance of realizing that lasting improvement occurs gradually rather than instantaneously. ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox

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Annulment of Vows

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

If a person has taken a vow (*neder*) but later regrets having done so, he may approach a rabbi to have it annulled. The Hebrew word for annulment is *hatarah*. Some *Rishonim* explain that this is related to the word *le-hatir*, to untie. Undoing a vow is like untying a knot. Others explain that it is related to *heter* (permissible) as opposed to *issur* (forbidden). According to them, *Hatarat Nedarim* means permitting the behavior that had been forbidden by the vow.

There is a disagreement among the *Tannaim* as to the source for *Hatarat Nedarim*. Some say the source is the verse (*Bamidbar* 30:3), "He shall not break his pledge" (*Lo yachel devaro*). They expound: The one who undertook the vow cannot forgive (*mocheil*) it, but someone else can forgive it for him. The other opinion is that *Hatarat Nedarim* has no basis in the written Torah at all. Rather, Moshe taught the people orally that when the verse says, "He shall not break his pledge," it means one should not flippantly disregard his vow. Instead, if he truly regrets it and wishes to undo it, a rabbi can do it for him. The idea that there is no clear biblical source for *Hatarat Nedarim* is expressed in the Mishnah with the phrase "it is floating in the air" (*Chagigah* 1:8).

When a rabbi annuls a vow, the annulment takes effect retroactively. It is as if the person never made the vow at all. In contrast, when a husband cancels his wife's vow (*Hafarat Nedarim*), it takes effect only from the time he becomes aware of the vow and cancels it.

How is a vow annulment actually done? The person who made the vow stands in front of one rabbi or three laymen. He explains that he regrets having made the vow, and would not have made it if he had realized all the consequences. They then say to him, "The vow is annulled," "The vow is forgiven," or anything similar. Some require that the phrase be recited three times, but this is just to make it feel more serious. According to the letter of the law, though, saying it once is sufficient. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA SICHAN OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ZT"l

Summarized by Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon

Translated by Kaeren Fish

These are the journeys of Bnei Yisrael, who went out of the land of Egypt... And Moshe wrote down their departures for their journeys

by God's command... And they departed from Ra'amses... and they departed... and they camped..." (*Bamidbar* 33) This parasha is extremely puzzling. Why does the Torah enumerate all the journeys of Bnei Yisrael -- what possible significance can this have? Why does the Torah not simply tell us where the original starting point and the eventual destination were? In any case we don't know what happened at each place that is enumerated, so why name each and every one?

Rashi explains: "Why were these journeys recorded? In order to show us God's mercy. Although it was decreed that Bnei Yisrael would wander in the desert, one shouldn't think that they spent forty years on the move, one journey after the next, without rest. For... it works out that during the entire thirty-eight year period they journeyed only twenty times."

In other words, the journeys were recorded in order to show us God's mercy in that He moved them only twenty times during forty years.

Ramban cites a different reason, offered by Rambam in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (Guide for the Perplexed): "And our teacher has explained, in *Moreh Nevukhim*, that there is a great and important reason for mentioning the journeys. Because the miracles and wonders which were performed were clear to all who saw them, but in the future they would be conveyed by word of mouth, and the hearer might disbelieve the wonders described in the Torah... The hearers would not believe it, and would think that their location in the desert was somewhere near an inhabited area, a place where other people were to be found, like the deserts inhabited by the Arab peoples today... Therefore God removed the possibility of such thoughts, and specified all the wonders in the enumeration of the journeys, in order that future generations should appreciate them...."

In other words, if some heretic should claim that the places where Bnei Yisrael journeyed in the desert were places where there was food, and that therefore there were no such miracles as the manna etc. since the food arrived in a perfectly natural manner, we can show him the places where Bnei Yisrael journeyed and prove that they were barren areas devoid of any vegetation, and that without God's perpetual help there would have been absolutely no possibility of their surviving.

Rashi brings another explanation, which hints at another possible significance in the recording of all the journeys: "Rabbi Tanchuma gave a different explanation for it -- he compared God to a king who had a son who was ill. He took his son to a distant place in order to have him healed. When they returned, the father began recounting all the steps of the journey. He said to his son, 'Here we slept, here we gave thanks, here you laid down your head...' etc."

Why did the father point out to his son all the

stations that they had passed up until his recovery? Because he wanted to show his son that not only is the result important -- i.e. the fact that the son had in fact recovered -- but the process, too, has significance: "Here we slept, here we gave thanks...."

This is what the Torah is teaching us in its enumeration of all the journeys. There is a philosophy which holds that the whole purpose and significance of today is that it leads us to tomorrow. This approach attaches no independent significance to the actual day itself; only to what it will bring in its wake, what it will lead to. This opposes and contradicts our belief. Such a philosophy leads to the idea that "the end justifies the means" -- everything is permissible, everyone and everything may be trampled, so long as the aim is attained. This is the approach adopted by the Socialist movements and by the various messianic movements.

We await and hope for the ge'ula (redemption); we await the coming of messiah. But despite the importance of today as the harbinger of tomorrow, as bringing redemption nearer, the primary importance of today is its importance in its own right.

In Pirkei Avot (chapter 4) we learn, "Better one hour of teshuva (repentance) and good deeds in this world than all of eternal life in the world-to-come." The world-to-come is of tremendous importance, but one hour of Torah and good deeds in this world are better than all of eternal life in the world-to-come. And if one hour of Torah and good deeds in this world is better than all of eternal life in the world-to-come, then it is certainly better than all the future hours in this world.

Massekhet Shabbat (30a) records a conversation between King David and God: "David said to God, 'Master of the Universe -- Tell me, O God, my end... and I shall know how I shall perish.' God replied, 'You will die on Shabbat.' [David said,] 'Let it be on the first day [Sunday]'. He replied, 'The time for the rule of Shlomo, your son, will already have come, and one rulership does not overlap another by even the shortest time.' [David said,] 'Let it be on Erev Shabbat [Friday]'. God replied, "'One day in your courtyards is better to me than a thousand...' -- I prefer your sitting for one day involved in Torah study to the thousand sacrifices which your son Shlomo will bring to the altar."

Imagine the ceremony of a thousand sacrifices -- imagine how long it takes to sacrifice a thousand offerings! A powerful spiritual experience indeed. In contrast, what is one day of study, regarding which God says, "One day in your courtyards is better to me..."? Will he be more of a talmid chakham (Torah scholar) after one day? What is the value of that learning? He cannot even pass it on to others, for either way he is going to die the very next day!

Nevertheless, God prefers this learning to a thousand sacrifices, because one hour of Torah and good deeds in this world is better than all of eternal life in the world-to-come. The value of the present in this

world is very great, and the study of Torah has significance not only for the future, in order that one become a talmid chakham, but also for the present -- for the sake of the learning itself, even if by tomorrow all will be forgotten.

A stranger who happened to enter a synagogue between Mincha and Ma'ariv would be amazed at the sight that met his eyes: a group of people sitting and studying a gemara or mishnayot on a topic far removed from any practical application -- pertaining, say, to the sacrifices or to categories of ritual impurity -- the details of which are unlikely to be remembered for long. Can we even imagine a group of people conscientiously studying pages of a medical or legal textbook, knowing full well that they will have no use for this information and that the information will be forgotten within a few days?

"It is not your obligation to finish the task", but at the same time "you are not free to desist from it". A Jew is obligated to study Torah because of the importance of that learning in the present, and not just in order to further his future status as a talmid chakham -- and even if it is clear to him that he will in fact never become a talmid chakham. "You are not free to desist from it."

It is important for a person to plan his future, but not to the extent that he perceives the present as purely a means to that end. He must appreciate the special significance of the present itself, of each and every moment.

This is what the Torah is teaching us by enumerating all the journeys of Benei Yisrael. Even if a person died during the last journey, just before reaching Jericho, and did not enter the Land of Israel -- there is still considerable significance in the journeys which he completed. Each journey has its own importance, there is significance in each step of the process and not only in the final outcome. It is true that each day does bring the end closer, it takes us a step nearer to tomorrow, but each day has significance first and foremost in its own right. "One hour of teshuva and good deeds in this world is better than all of eternal life in the world-to-come." (*This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Masei 5750.*)

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Conquering the Land

This week marks the end of Sefer BaMidbar with the last parasha Masei. The parasha contains some of the final laws given to Moshe before he was to pass on the leadership of the B'nei Yisrael to his assistant, Yehoshua. Hashem and Moshe were concerned that the B'nei Yisrael were too easily influenced by idol-worshippers, the daughters of Midian; and the laws which Hashem gives the people at this time through Moshe reflect this concern.

The Torah tells us, "And Hashem spoke to

Moshe in the plains of Moav, by the Jordan, at Jericho, saying. Speak to the children of Yisrael and you will say to them, 'when you cross the Jordan to the Land of Canaan. You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the Land before you, and you shall destroy all their temples, all their molten images you shall destroy, and all of their high places shall you demolish. You shall rid the land and you shall settle in it, for to you have I given the land to possess it. You shall give the land as an inheritance by lot to your families: to the many you shall increase its inheritance and to the few you shall decrease its inheritance, wherever the lot shall fall for him, his shall it be, according to the tribes of your fathers shall you inherit. And if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those of them whom you leave shall be as pins in your eyes and as thorn-hedges at your sides, and they will harass you upon the land in which you dwell. And it shall be that what I had meant to do to them, I shall do to you.'

We have seen these same commands to the people earlier. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that this time Moshe was telling the people that they were commanded to cross the Jordan River into Canaan, yet the one who commands them (Moshe) will not be able to cross. We can imagine that the people would be reluctant to cross the river without their leader. We see that Moshe insisted that Hashem appoint a new leader whom the people could see and rally behind even before Moshe left them. Moshe understood that the people needed direction and leadership. But even with the new leader, Yehoshua, the people had become so attached to Moshe that they might feel that they could not leave the area where he was buried. Moshe gave them these commandments now to show them that their journey was not yet complete and that the best way for them to honor him was by entering the land and conquering it.

Rashi presents a different reason for retelling these commands. He concentrates on the idea of crossing the Jordan River. We know from the opening chapters of the Book of Yehoshua that the B'nei Yisrael crossed the Jordan River in much the same way that they had crossed the Red Sea, on dry land. Yehoshua told the waters descending from the North to cease flowing, and they created a wall of water which allowed the river bed to dry. Moshe told the people to drive out the inhabitants of the land and warned them at the same time. If they were to cross the river with the understanding that they would drive out the inhabitants, then the river bed would remain dry. But if they did not have faith that Hashem would enable them to succeed, then the waters would wash them all away.

The term "v'horashtem, and you shall drive out" is directly related to the root "yarash" which means "possess". HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term is used when it discusses becoming the new possessor of an object or land. It is also used to

mean inherit as one who inherits as the new possessor of the land. The Or HaChaim combines this command with the previous command. He explains that the previous command involved driving out the seven nations that lived in the land. Here the command was to drive out any other people who did not belong to the seven nations but were also living in the land. He also reminds us that Yehoshua sent out a warning to each of the nations first, asking them to leave the land and avoid any bloodshed. The B'nei Yisrael would have been satisfied to possess the land without having to slaughter the inhabitants. What was not acceptable, was allowing those nations to remain where their devotion to idol-worship might influence the B'nei Yisrael.

The B'nei Yisrael were given several responsibilities upon entering the land. "You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the Land before you, and you shall destroy all their temples, all their molten images you shall destroy, and all of their high places shall you demolish." Rashi explains that the term used for temples, maskiyotam, refers to an area in which they would bow down to their idols. They would place stones on the ground to designate such an area. The molten images, maseichotam, were made of metal, giving them a degree of permanence and strength. The bamotam, their high places, refers to altars where they sacrificed to their idols. Even were none of the inhabitants remaining in the land, their idols and their areas of worship could still have an influence on the people.

The final p'sukim in our section involve an unusual warning, "And if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those of them whom you leave shall be as pins in your eyes and as thorn-hedges at your sides, and they will harass you upon the land in which you dwell. And it shall be that what I had meant to do to them, I shall do to you." The Ramban understands the words, "the pins in your eyes" as a metaphor for leading one astray like the stumbling block before a blind person. The progression would begin with being led astray by the inhabitants to worship their idols in addition to worshipping Hashem. Once the people began to stray, the thorns would encircle them like a hedge, giving them no alternative actions to pursue. Finally, the B'nei Yisrael would suffer the same fate as was planned for the other nations, namely they would be forced out of the land and taken into exile.

There are two ideas that come across from this section of the Torah: (1) the B'nei Yisrael will possess the land and leave it to their children as an inheritance, and (2) the holiness of the land can only be insured if the idolatrous nations who live there are driven out of the land. If this could only be accomplished by wiping out those who inhabited the land, the course for the B'nei Yisrael was set. Today, we still must protect our

land by observing the Torah and not permitting any form of "idol-worship" in the land. Idol-worship was primarily an attack on the sexual morals found in Hashem's laws. If we are tempted to pervert Hashem's teachings, we run the risk that Hashem might decide to place us in exile again, since we are not worthy of the land. May we each do our part to preserve our connection to the land. ©2022 Rabbi D. Levin

DONIEL TRENK

Teshuva Through Broken Promises

While basking in the fun and sun of summer, it's easy to forget that the Yomim Noraim are just two months away. Interestingly, we happen to find a reminder at the beginning of Parshas Mattos with its discussion about Nedarim. On Erev Rosh Hashana, we recite the unique declaration of Hataras Nedarim, and at the start of Yom Kippur, although we sing a hauntingly inspiring Kol Nidrei, its words are not about teshuva, but the nullification of vows.

What is it about Nedarim that's so important to the Yomim Noraim? One would think such a technical sugya is unrelated to the kedusha of the Yom HaDin and the day of Slichah and Kapara?

The Tiferes Tvi writes, if there's one thing that diminishes our belief in the power of teshuva, it's the feeling that we've been here before, have made promises to be better, yet repeatedly failed to improve. The inspiration of the Yomim Noraim, and the "New Year's resolutions" we've made, wear off all-too-quickly. How then can we honestly stand before our Creator yet again, making the same promises and commitments that have been broken year after year? How can we believe in ourselves?

The Ish Chamudos offers a fascinating insight. Teshuva is not about promises, but something else entirely. The central point of the Yomim Noraim is anivus, recognizing how small we are when standing before the Melech. Humility comes when we acknowledge, in the words of the Yom Kippur machzor: עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי ועכשו שנוצרתי כאלו לא נוצרתי, עפר אני בחי, קל וחומר במיתתי.

Humility is acknowledging that as humans of but flesh and blood, of אפר ועפר, we are fickle creatures with minds that change from one day to the next. At one moment, we may feel inspired, making all kinds of promises, while the next day, it all vanishes.

It's precisely in the declaration of Hataras Nedarim, and during the melancholy tune of Kol Nidrei, where we begin to recognize how little we have to offer the בורא עולם. We can't manage to keep the promises made even to ourselves. Is there any better way to humble ourselves before the Melech, to open a מחט, a small step towards attaining selicha? In other words, it's in our very broken promises, where we begin to find a

path to teshuva.

In the words of Kol Nidrei, we shudder at how broken we are, and are mevatel the belief that we possess our own koach to achieve selicha - rather it's all a gift from Hashem. This is the essence of teshuva: it's not about the promises we make, not about bargaining with the Melech to give us a good life in exchange for good behavior, but acknowledging that we have no hope other than receiving a gift of rachamim given to us by מלכנו. ©2022 D. Trenk

RABBI YOCHANAN ZWEIG

Respecting Human Life

"Then Moshe designated three cities" (Devarim, 4:41) The Talmud (Makkos, 10a) teaches that the three cities of refuge on the east bank of the Jordan River only became functional after the three on the west bank were established. Although Moshe knew that the latter three would only be established fourteen years after his passing, he insisted on establishing the three on the east bank. The Talmud uses this as an example of Moshe's alacrity in the performance of mitzvos.

Generally, alacrity in the performance of a mitzva leads to the mitzva being accomplished sooner. However, in Moshe's case, since the cities offered no refuge until after they all were completed, what was there to be gained by his promptness?

The cities of refuge served a dual purpose. One function was as a safe haven for the perpetrator of an accidental murder, while the second was to create a higher degree of awareness amongst Bnei Yisroel concerning the sanctity of human life. The mere presence of the city sent a message to everyone to be more cautious with their actions. Although the first function did not take effect until after the conquest of Eretz Yisroel, Moshe was able to immediately set the second function into motion. ©2021 Rabbi Y. Zweig & torah.org

