

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and God.

This nation's parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall heed." (Ex. 24:7) But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation and all future generations will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, "God made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound." That is why Moses says:

Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath; with you who are standing here with us today before the Lord our God I make it, and with those, too, who are not with us today.
Deut. 29:13-14

"Those who are not with us today" cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means "generations not yet born." That is why the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai*, "foresworn from Sinai." (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a)

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat* or *bar mitzvah* is not a "confirmation". It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today," meaning all future generations.

But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you

can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents -- most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The Sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today's parsha. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born. (Shevuot 39a)

However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since God's covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to God? (Akeidat Yitzhak, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim) But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us can we give our consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses' covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: Why be Jewish? What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before? Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, "Why be Jewish?" did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

In fifteenth-century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its *Kristallnacht* in 1391, and from then on until the

expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*. But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life -- so that you and your children may live..." Deut. 30:19

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam. (Hilchot Teshuvah 5:2) We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients -- with their belief in fate, fortune, Moira, Ananke, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature -- did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says no. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct -- what Freud took to be the mark of civilisation? Can you practise self-control (which, according to the "marshmallow test", is the surest sign of future success in life)? (Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, Bantam Press, 2014) To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives. "We have to be free", said Isaac Bashevis Singer, "we have no choice!"

Choose life. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs, and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with God, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility, and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find God down here

on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

Judaism does not deny pleasure, for it is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine Presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find God not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study, and acts of kindness; we find God in community, hospitality, and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life-form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on whom God has set His image and likeness. We are the people God has chosen to be His partners in the work of creation. We are the nation God married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people God called on to be His witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth.

We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because God values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes, and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that "not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today." His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much greater than ourselves we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl*

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse: therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). What does it mean to choose life? Is life ours to choose? The Torah should have written to "choose good," which I would understand, because good seems within my control. But life and death? Go tell the children in a cancer ward to choose life! How many young people receive harsh decrees from heaven? So what does it mean to "choose life"?

A person can choose life! As Sigmund Freud taught, built into the human psyche is not only a passion for life, but also a passion for death; not only a will to create, but also a will to destroy – and sometimes even to self-destruct.

The first thing one must do is to avoid the lure of death. Despite the awareness of danger in certain lifestyles – indiscriminate sex, excessive alcohol, drugs etc. – many pursue thrills until the last chill, when it's too late.

Good and evil are abstractions; a genius in the art of rationalization only requires one hour to totally confuse himself and others about their moral foundations. But life and death are not abstractions. People who overdose on drugs or alcohol are real. And when the Torah says "choose life," it means avoid a lifestyle, or fanatical religion, which promotes death rather than life.

A second, less dramatic way, of choosing life is by not wasting time; hours spent in front of the TV, at best watching people running in pursuit of a ball and at worst inviting violence and pornography into our homes. We don't need an accountant to inform us that the hours soon become days, weeks, even months. The simple act of shutting off most programs on TV and opening a worthwhile book is an example of choosing life.

In modern Hebrew, the term for going out and having a good time is *levalot* – which is derived from *bilui*, a word which actually means to wear something out, to turn a usable garment into an outworn rag. In modern Hebrew slang, the expression *lisrof zman*, to burn time, is equivalent to the Americanism "to kill time," all pointing to the inherent destruction in improper time management.

You can commit suicide in one moment. Or you can commit suicide in a lifetime of wasted moments. The number of years a person is given is not under their control, but what we do with the moments God has given us, is. If we choose not to waste these precious moments, we have "chosen life."

And there is yet a third way to choose life, in the larger sense of the word – not just life as the avoidance of death, but life in its fullest meaning.

An older version of the Targum (Aramaic translation of the Bible) on the verse, "...Not by bread alone does the human being live, but by that which proceeds from God's mouth does the human being live" (Deut. 8:3), is revealing. It translates, "Not on bread alone does the human being exist (*mitkayem*) but on what proceeds from God's mouth does the human being live (*hayei*)."

Bread gives us *kiyum* – existence, the ability to stand on our feet, to work, to survive. But that which emanates from God's mouth provides life with meaning, purpose, participation in eternity.

Material subsistence is existence; spiritual and intellectual engagement in improving self and society is life. Bread is existence; Shabbat and compassion are life. Food, clothing and shelter are necessities, but they are necessities for existence.

Humans require an objective which goes beyond existence. As noted psychologist-philosopher and founder of logotherapy Victor Frankel discovered in the concentration camps, the most important drive within humans is not the will for pleasure or even the will for power, but the will for meaning. Those who had a higher meaning, who were involved in helping others survive, in calculating in their heads different mathematical or philosophical problems or in preserving and copying segments from the prayer books or the Bible from memory stood a better chance of surviving the horrendous living conditions of the concentration camps.

This search for purpose beyond one's own physical survival, this quest for self-transcendence and reaching out for the infinite, is what comes forth from God's mouth and it is what the Targum refers to as "life."

The search for pleasure is linked to the body, and since the body is finite, the fruits of the search are also finite. The Torah is immortal and infinite.

An individual home is destructible; the Land of Israel for the people of Israel is eternal. Materialistic goods are existence; Torah and Israel are life. The keeping of the commandments and the inheritance of the Land of Israel are in themselves involvement with eternity, participating in eternity. This is the real meaning of the Biblical command: Choose life! ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In emphasizing once again the eternal validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, Moshe addresses his words to the entire nation. All classes of society are included in the covenant – the heads of the people, the judges, the wealthy and powerful, the

poor, menial and manual laborers, and those that chop the wood and draw the water. No one is excluded from the terms of the covenant and no one is allowed the luxury of assuring one's self that Jewish destiny will not apply to him or her.

Judaism does not have two sets of rules, one for the elite and the other for the masses. It is an equal opportunity faith. Its leaders, be they temporal or spiritual, are bound to the same code of behavior. There may be exceptional people in every generation but there are no exceptions to the efficacy of the covenant on all of Israel.

Unlike other faiths that have different rules and mores for their clergy than they do for the lay population, Judaism does not even recognize the existence of a clergy class. There is no separate Shulchan Aruch for rabbis. The covenant binds and governs us all equally.

We see throughout Tanach that kings and prophets were held to the same standards and requirements of the covenant that apply to the ordinary citizen as well. The power of the covenant is all encompassing and embraces all generations – those that have gone before us, those that are currently present and those that will yet come after us. This is the key to understanding the Jewish story from the time of Moshe until today.

The Torah recognizes the nature of human beings. It knows that we all procrastinate and make rational excuses for our shortcomings. Therefore, the concept of the covenant is a necessary facet of all human existence and especially so for the Jewish people.

The covenant of the rainbow exists to remind us of the wonders of the natural world in which we are temporary guests. The covenant of history, of which the Jewish people is the primary example in the human story reminds us of the Creator's involvement in human affairs, unseen but omnipresent.

The covenant is the great net which encloses us all, even those who somehow have convinced themselves that they swim freely in the waters of life. The binding, and many times, tragic effects of the covenant are part of the Torah readings of this week's parsha and that of last week as well. The events that befell the Jewish people over the last century amply show that the dread engendered by the force of the covenant is justified and real. But the covenant has an optimistic and hopeful side to it, in its promise of redemption and restitution to greatness and tranquility.

We are a covenantal people. And though we each possess freedom of will, the terms of the covenant control our national destiny and our personal lives as well. ©2022 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

The first three words of Parashat Vayelech stand out. Va'yelech Moshe va'yedaber, "and Moses went and spoke" (Deuteronomy 31:1). Usually the Torah tells us simply that Moses spoke. What does the term va'yelech add?

Perhaps va'yelech, here near the end of the Torah, echoes the first words of God to Abraham near the beginning of the Torah when Abraham is told, "Lech lecha," (surely you shall go; Genesis 12:1).

Commenting on the term lech lecha, Sefat Emet writes, Adam tzarich lihiyot mehalech... mi'madregah l'madregah, "a person must keep walking, higher and higher" to help redeem the world (Lech Lecha 5664). This principle applies to Moses's life as well. As it draws to a close, the Torah declares that Moses lived a life overflowing with ultimate meaning – va'yelech Moshe.

The theme of lech finds expression in the Book of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur afternoon, which always falls soon after the portion of Vayelech is read.

Jonah, whose name literally means "dove," a bird of peace, represents the Jewish People. He is told by God to go (lech) to Ninveh, the capital of Assyria (the archenemy of Israel) to preach the message of Torah ethics (Jonah 1:2). The word lech is reminiscent of the lech in the Abraham story. Like Abraham, Jonah is told to change the world.

Note that Ninveh is a composite of nin veh. Although in modern Hebrew, nin is used to refer to a great-grandchild, in the Torah nin means children (Genesis 21:23), while veh (spelled vav-heh) is an abbreviated form of God's name. Even the wicked city of Ninveh is made up of children of God who deserve a chance.

Unlike Abraham, however, Jonah refuses. In this sense, Jonah was much like the many people in Abraham's generation who, according to Sefat Emet, heard the call lech but refused to comply. Jonah boards a ship for Tarshish – 180 degrees in the opposite direction from Ninveh.

Some have suggested that the ship can be viewed as a microcosm of the world, as the Midrash notes that its passengers speak seventy languages – the symbolic number of all the nations of the earth (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 10). The waters beneath the ship are turbulent, symbolizing a world in turmoil.

Jonah escapes to the bowels of the ship, reflective of the Jew who runs from challenges. He falls into a deep sleep (va'yeradam; Jonah 1:5). Radam is a term that often indicates that a major change is about to occur. God casts a deep sleep (tardemah) on Adam as Eve is created (Genesis 2:21). And Abraham falls into a deep sleep (tardemah) as the Jewish covenant of the pieces is given (Genesis 15:12). What great moment

does radam denote in Jonah's case?

The great moment is found as the narrative continues, telling us about lots cast to determine who was responsible for the choppy waters. Jonah's lot is chosen. Interestingly, the Hebrew term goral (lots) can also mean "fate." In other words, this lottery, as noted by others, underscores the fate of the Jewish People as chosen to do its share to bring peace and calm to a turbulent world – a universal message of enormous significance.

In the end, Jonah goes to Ninveh and preaches the message of God, and the people of Ninveh repent.

Jonah, like Abraham and Moses, fulfills his mission, walking and reaching higher and higher to enhance the lot of humankind. ©2022 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

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Hakhel

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather (*hakhel*) the people – the men, women, children, and the strangers in your midst, in order that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your G-d" (*Devarim* 31:12). This refers to the mitzva of *Hakhel*, which takes place on Sukkot at the conclusion of the *Shemita* year. The Torah specifies the categories of people who are obligated to attend. Nevertheless, the verse's inclusion of women may be limited, as we shall see.

Our initial assumption would be that women are not obligated in *Hakhel*. Since it takes place once every seven years, it seems to be a positive time-bound commandment (from which women are exempt). Yet the Mishnah tells us that *Hakhel* is an exception to the rule. There is another reason why women would not be exempt. According to many opinions, the obligation of attending *Hakhel* is connected to the obligation to travel to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals. Only property owners are obligated to do so. Someone who does not own land is exempt from both the pilgrimage and *Hakhel*. Thus, it is possible that the verse's inclusion of women in *Hakhel* is limited to the small minority of women who own land.

There is a disagreement about who is included in the category of children (*taf*) for this purpose. Some say that even the smallest children, namely nursing babies, must be brought to *Hakhel*. Others maintain that only children of educable age must be brought. According to this second opinion, who is watching over the little ones when all the parents are gathered in the *Beit HaMikdash*? If most women are exempt because they do not own land, this problem is solved. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the whole nation gathers to hear and study the word of G-d, while

leaving all the little children to run wild (or under the supervision of non-Jews, or impure Jews who are forbidden from entering the Temple. This is further support for the possibility that most women stayed at home for *Hakhel*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

In Your Mouth and Heart

As the Torah winds down to its concluding parshiot, it is appropriate that our physical, Jewish year is also near its end. There are many messages in our parasha that give us hope and strength in our efforts to renew our close relationship with Hashem through our observance of His Torah. One such message is the focus of our discussion at this time.

The Torah gives us a message from Moshe to the people; the Torah is accessible by everyone, according to his own ability. We should never think that we are incapable of knowing enough to observe the Torah properly. "For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in Heaven for you to say, 'Who can ascend to the Heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea for you to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it."

Several questions arise from the words of this paragraph. The word "nifleit" followed the translation of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, "hidden". The root word is "peleh, a wonder." Ibn Ezra explains that one could understand this to mean that one might not be certain how to perform a particular commandment. Since it is "not hidden," we can know how to perform the mitzvah or at least we can perform it with what knowledge we do have. The Or HaChaim explains that either translation might lead one to think that any understanding of the commandment might seem too distant for one to comprehend it. It is for that reason that the Torah proceeds to remark that the Torah is not in Heaven or across the sea.

The Kli Yakar states that "[the mitzvah] is not hidden from you" can be explained in two different ways, since the phrase is only used at the beginning of the paragraph and not later on in the parasha. This could mean that there is a difference when discussing all of the commandments being hidden or the concept of returning to Hashem, teshuva, being hidden. In terms of all commandments, there are two aspects to each commandment: (1) the performance of the mitzvah, and (2) the intention of the person performing the mitzvah, which requires some understanding of the purpose of the mitzvah. When Hashem gave the Torah to the B'nei Yisrael, He also imparted the knowledge and the understanding of the mitzvot. This was not

shared with the nations of the world who were not commanded in these mitzvot. One may perform a mitzvah without understanding the reason for it. The Kli Yakar explains that this may be hidden from the other nations of the world but not from the B'nei Yisrael.

The Kli Yakar explains the second way to understand the phrase. The performance of any mitzvah from the Torah is not hidden from any nation. He compares this general mitzvah with the bringing of a sacrifice. Hashem said, "I did not wish to burden you with bringing a korban from an animal that would not be in your possession, but from oxen and sheep which are in your possession." From this we can draw a connection to all of the commandments. Hashem presented the world with mitzvot that are not far from us and not distant from our understanding. Those commandments that were given to all the nations of the world are those which they could both understand and practice.

Sforno explains that the commandments are not distant from us that we would need to seek out a wise man who could elucidate them for us. Even in exile and spread around the world, we can perform the mitzvot that are passed down from generation to generation. We do not need to seek out a prophet who can speak to Hashem for us. Nor do we need to be concerned that the closest wise man is far from our "island" population. The Kli Yakar explains that even a person who has strayed far from the Torah, can return to study and observe its commandments.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin and the Ramban interpret this entire section as speaking only of the concept of teshuva, returning to the ways of Hashem, when speaking of "this mitzvah". Their understanding of this passage is based on the previous sentences which use the word "shuv, return" several times. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the entire concept of teshuva may seem illogical to the sinner. "It is too far from me; Hashem will not forgive me." The prosecuting angel says to Hashem, "the sinner, what is his punishment?" Hashem answers, "Let him do teshuva and it will atone for him." The sinner says, "but it is as far from me as across the sea." Hashem answers, "it is in your mouth and your heart."

HaRav Sorotzkin explains that teshuva requires a minimum of two actions. The first action is done with the mouth, confession. One who sins must speak out his confession, not to embarrass him, for he confesses his sins while others are saying the same words. The sinner knows which of the long list of sins within the oral confession are ones for which he needs forgiveness. Still, stating his sin out loud brings that sin before his eyes and helps him understand his need for teshuva. The second action requires the internalization of that sin and centers on one's understanding that this sin is intolerable for one to continue to perform. This is a commitment of the heart, the center of our knowledge

and logical thought.

The Kli Yakar explains "in your mouth and your heart" differently. The heart is the place of wisdom and the mouth is the place of action. Even when a commandment is one which one cannot perform (a commandment which could only be done in the Temple, yet the Temple does not exist), one can perform the mitzvah by studying it. Our Rabbis tell us in Gemara Menachot, (110a), "Whoever is involved in the study of the Olah sacrifice, it is as if he has brought the Olah." The Kli Yakar explains that this is true of all of the commandments of the Torah. Thus, when one uses his heart and his mouth in the study of the entire Torah, it is as if he has performed all of the commandments.

We are not all Kohanim, priests, and we cannot bring the sacrifices without a Temple. We are not all firstborn sons, nor are we all farmers with fields to tithe. Yet we are all capable of studying those laws either in the original Hebrew or in translation with guided texts. Those texts lead us to understand, which, in turn, leads us to returning to Hashem. Today it is certainly not distant or difficult, and we must not be afraid to attempt change. "Rather the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it." © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Name of the Holy Land

Hashem... will return and gather you in from all the peoples to which [He] has scattered you... and He will bring you to the land that your forefathers possessed and you shall possess it." (Devarim 30: 3-5).

"The land."

Eretz Yisrael isn't its name. It is our description of the fact that it was bequeathed to Klal Yisrael.

But it did have a name: Cna'an. We don't call it that anymore, but that was its name, and presumably has some meaning. And its meaning must be meaningful.

In his sefer Nachalas Tzvi, Rabbi Meshulam Fayish Tzvi Gross (who had a weekly chavrusa in Kabbalah with Rav Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn and whose sefarim had haskamos from some of the greatest Gedolim of his time; and who, as Herman Gross, patented several inventions) ventures an answer.

He sees the name rooted in the Hebrew noun hachna'ah, "deference" or "submission." While other lands, he explains, are overseen by malachim -- divine middlemen, not Hashem Himself -- Eretz Yisrael is different; hence the palace of the King demands a special degree of hachna'ah.

He cites the fact that the phrase "me'od me'od" is used both to refer to the goodness of the land (Bamidbar 14:7) and to the degree to which we are to feel shfal ruach, lowly (Ravi Levitas in Pirkei Avos, 4:4).

What occurs to me as well is the idea that, when in possession of Eretz Yisrael, we Jews are to be constantly cognizant that it is a yerushah, a bequeathal, to us from Hashem. And that, even when we rightly tell the world that the land is divinely meant for us, we must ourselves always fully and humbly remember that it isn't our political or military power that maintains our possession of the Holy Land, but Hashem's kindness in having allowed us to return to it. ©2022 Rabbi A. Shafran and Ami Magazine

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Sulfur and salt will scorch all the land... like the upheaval of Sodom and Amora..." (Devarim 29:22) If the Jews turn away from Hashem, Moshe describes in gory detail what will befall them and what the aftermath will look like to observers. Those of later generations will see great destruction and understand just how devastating the choice to serve other gods will be.

It will be so pervasive, we learn, that not only the people will be destroyed, but the very land they dwelled upon will be ruined to the point that it becomes uninhabitable. The imagery used here compares the retribution to that of Sodom and Amora, in which sulfur and salt rained down on the city. The earth was scorched and sullied to such a point that it would no longer allow anything to grow there.

More than that, as Chazal explain that the cities of Sodom and environs were situated on a large slab of rock, which Hashem turned over completely, so the cities were now buried beneath the stone. Not only was the soil ruined, but you wouldn't even be able to reach the soil because it was buried beneath the layers of rock.

Nevertheless, after this has all befallen us, and in fact, because it has, we will turn back to Hashem, Who will restore us as before and welcome us back with love. Even though we've ruined ourselves for holiness by seeking forces and experiences other than Hashem, and even though we've been literally buried in sin, our repentance can overturn it all.

The power of Teshuva lies in the fact that it reveals the greatness of Hashem. He can undo all that we've done simply because we realize we should not have done it and don't wish to repeat it. This recognition of Hashem becomes a mitzvah and merit on its own, and the abandoned sin becomes a springboard for a closer relationship with Him.

As we approach Rosh Hashana, and recognize the majesty of this trait of Hashem, let us rejoice in our good fortune for being His subjects, and break through all barriers that stand between us. It's never too late for a new beginning and a continuation of what was started by our forefathers.

Hashem taught Moshe the secret of reciting the

13 Middos of Hashem as an atonement for the Jewish People. These words, "Hashem, Hashem, Kail Rachum V'Chanun..." are recited frequently in the Selichos prayers, as well as before we take the Torah out of the Aron Kodesh during the Holidays, and represent various attributes of Hashem.

The first two words are identical. This indicates to us that Hashem remains constant before and after a sin. He has not changed; we have. We've moved away from Him, but He remains where He was, and if we come back, He will be waiting there.

Indeed, Hashem not only does not move away from us, but He stretches out His hands to the sinner to make it easier for them to come back. Perhaps part of the secret of this recitation is the recognition it forces us to have that the sins are not about Hashem at all, but about us and our choices. We can't blame Him for making us do what we did. We can only take ownership and return to where we stood before – in His presence.

ראש השנה - The word for year in Lashon Kodesh is שנה. Those letters can be punctuated in two ways. It can be pronounced show-neh, which means repeat, to do over again and again. It can also be pronounced shee-neh, which means to change or differ from the past.

At Rosh HaShana, we stand at the crossroads. Only we can decide whether this year will be different, and better, than previous years, or whether we will simply repeat the same mistakes.

On Rosh Hashana, we read of the feast Abraham made when Yitzchak was weaned. Rabbeinu Bachya says it was the day he began teaching Yitzchak Torah, so a festive meal was in order.

A nursing child depends on his mother. One who learns Torah comes to depend on no one but Hashem. This is a feast we reenact each Rosh Hashana, when we coronate our King and accept upon ourselves to look to Him for everything. ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

JEWISH WORLD REVIEW

The Shofar and the Echo of Sinai

By Rabbi Yonason Goldson

The Israeli army stands on alert, poised to attack. Opposing the Jewish force is an uncompromising enemy claiming sovereignty over the land that has been the cornerstone of Jewish tradition for centuries. Neither reason nor diplomacy has had the slightest impact upon the enemy's outlook, permitting no other recourse than a full-scale military offensive.

These were the headlines only a few years ago, and circumstances in Israel are not so different now. But the same conditions prevailed more than three thousand years old, when the Jewish people crossed the Jordan River to occupy the land that had been first

promised to their patriarchs five centuries earlier.

To establish and preserve an ethically and spiritually elevated society, the Jews could not live along side peoples steeped in immorality. And so Joshua, the leader of the Jews, sent forth his message to the inhabitants of the land: if they agreed to renounce murder, theft, idolatry, and adultery, then they could live together with the Jews as neighbors; if they were unwilling to accept these terms, then they were free to leave; but if they refused either option, then they should prepare for war.

With few exceptions, the Canaanite nations chose war over either conformance to an ethical code or repatriation elsewhere.

The first military encounter drew near with the encampment of the Jewish army opposite the fortified city of Jericho. Intimidated by the size of the Israelite camp, the residents of Jericho shut themselves inside the great walls that surrounded the city and prepared for the Jewish onslaught.

The Jews, however, employed an unorthodox strategy. For six consecutive days the Jewish army marched around the perimeter of the city; and on the seventh day, when the Jews sounded the shofar, the walls of the city sank into the ground, enabling the Jewish soldiers to swarm into the city and easily conquer the astonished inhabitants.

Since the Almighty does not perform miracles haphazardly, why did Jericho have to fall through divine intervention? Could the Jews not have defeated the city conventionally, as they had in the desert and would in their subsequent battles? And what is the special significance of their victory coming about through the blowing the shofar?

The battle of Jericho followed only a few days after the Jewish people's entry into the Land of Israel. Throughout the preceding forty years, the Jews had lived in the desert, fed by the manna from heaven, guided by the pillar of fire, and protected by the clouds of glory. But from the moment they crossed over the Jordan River, all the open manifestations of the divine presence departed instantaneously and left them to live according to the natural laws of the physical world.

From that time forward, the Almighty concealed His presence, requiring us to seek Him out by recognizing the intelligent design behind the intricate workings of nature. Instead of allowing ourselves to become numb to the wonders that surround us, it is our obligation to find inspiration in the multifaceted miracle that is Creation.

The great danger of physical existence, however, is that we easily forget that we are essentially spiritual beings. All the gratification offered by that the material world seduces us, while our own mastery over the world we live in makes us arrogant. And when we convince ourselves that success and prosperity reside in our own might and the strength of our own hands, we

lose our appreciation for our place in the community of Man and come to believe that there is no power or authority greater than ourselves.

And so, at the moment of their transition from supernatural to natural existence, the Jewish people received a dramatic reminder that even within the natural course of events, success or failure depends not upon military armaments or tactics, but upon our own sense of place in the natural order. As the Jews circled the walls of Jericho, the call of the shofar summoned them back to when they stood together at Sinai, as one man and with one heart, to accept upon themselves the mission that defines the Jewish people as a nation, to strive together toward spiritual and moral self-perfection.

Tragically, we often fail to take the call of the shofar to heart. Rather than fostering appreciation and unity, we respond to our successes with disregard for both our fellow Jews and our national destiny, so that lasting success slips repeatedly through our fingers.

Jewish history illuminates our failures in the harshest light. The glory of the first Temple gave way to civil war and national humiliation. The accomplishments of the Hasmoneans devolved into the murderous reign of Herod and the Roman occupation. The golden age of Spanish Jewry culminated in the Inquisition and the Edict of Expulsion. And the pillars of the Jewish communities of Europe splintered before the wanton violence of the Crusades and vanished amidst the ashes of the Holocaust.

Today, more than ever, when Israel continues to face military aggression from every side, and when militant secularism and religious extremism threaten people of faith throughout the world, Rosh HaShonah offers every one of us a priceless opportunity. When we hear the call of the shofar, let us hearken back to the time when Jewish national identity was forged at Sinai and remember that, ultimately, our success depends not upon the strength of our hands but upon our commitment to our identity and our commitment to one another. © 2008 Rabbi Y. Goldson & jewishworldreview.com

