

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

I argued in *Covenant and Conversation* Kedoshim that Judaism is more than an ethnicity. It is a call to holiness. In one sense, however, there is an important ethnic dimension to Judaism.

It is best captured in the 1980s joke about an advertising campaign in New York. Throughout the city there were giant posters with the slogan, "You have a friend in the Chase Manhattan Bank." Underneath one, an Israeli had scribbled the words, "But in Bank Leumi you have mishpochah." Jews are, and are conscious of being, a single extended family.

This is particularly evident in this week's parsha. Repeatedly we read of social legislation couched in the language of family: "When you buy or sell to your neighbour, let no one wrong his brother." (Lev. 25:14)

"If your brother becomes impoverished and sells some of his property, his near redeemer is to come to you and redeem what his brother sold." (25:25)

"If your brother is impoverished and indebted to you, you must support him; he must live with you like a foreign resident. Do not take interest or profit from him, but fear your God and let your brother live with you." (25:35-36)

"If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him like a slave." (25:39)

"Your brother" in these verses is not meant literally. At times it means "your relative", but mostly it means "your fellow Jew". This is a distinctive way of thinking about society and our obligations to others. Jews are not just citizens of the same nation or adherents of the same faith. We are members of the same extended family. We are -- biologically or electively -- children of Abraham and Sarah. For the most part, we share the same history. On the festivals we relive the same memories. We were forged in the same crucible of suffering. We are more than friends. We are mishpochah, family.

The concept of family is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. Consider the book of Genesis, the Torah's starting-point. It is not primarily about theology, doctrine, dogma. It is not a polemic against idolatry. It is about families: husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters.

At key moments in the Torah, God himself defines his relationship with the Israelites in terms of

family. He tells Moses to say to Pharaoh in his name: "My child, my firstborn, Israel" (Ex. 4:22). When Moses wants to explain to the Israelites why they have a duty to be holy he says, "You are children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1). If God is our parent, then we are all brothers and sisters. We are related by bonds that go to the very heart of who we are.

The prophets continued the metaphor. There is a lovely passage in Hosea in which the prophet describes God as a parent teaching a young child how to take its first faltering steps: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms... To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them." (Hosea 11:1-4).

The same image is continued in rabbinic Judaism. In one of the most famous phrases of prayer, Rabbi Akiva used the words *Avinu Malkenu*, "Our Father, our King". That is a precise and deliberate expression. God is indeed our sovereign, our lawgiver and our judge, but before He is any of these things He is our parent and we are His children. That is why we believe divine compassion will always override strict justice.

This concept of Jews as an extended family is powerfully expressed in Maimonides' *Laws of Charity*: "The entire Jewish people and all those who attach themselves to them are like brothers, as [Deuteronomy 14:1] states: 'You are children of the Lord your God.' And if a brother will not show mercy to a brother, who will show mercy to them? To whom do the poor of Israel lift up their eyes? To the gentiles who hate them and pursue them? Their eyes are turned to their brethren alone." (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:2*)

This sense of kinship, fraternity and the family bond, is at the heart of the idea of *Kol Yisrael arevin zeh bazeh*, "All Jews are responsible for one another." Or as Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai put it, "When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain." (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai to Ex. 19:6*)

Why is Judaism built on this model of the family? Partly to tell us that God did not choose an elite of the righteous or a sect of the likeminded. He chose a family -- Abraham and Sarah's descendants -- extended through time. The family is the most powerful vehicle of continuity, and the kinds of changes Jews were expected to make to the world could not be achieved in a single generation. Hence the importance of the family as a place of education ("You shall teach these things

repeatedly to your children...") and of handing the story on, especially on Pesach through the Seder service.

Another reason is that family feeling is the most primal and powerful moral bond. The scientist J. B. S. Haldane famously said, when asked whether he would jump into a river and risk his life to save his drowning brother, "No, but I would do so to save two brothers or eight cousins." The point he was making was that we share 50 per cent of our genes with our siblings, and an eighth with our cousins. Taking a risk to save them is a way of ensuring that our genes are passed on to the next generation. This principle, known as "kin selection", is the most basic form of human altruism. It is where the moral sense is born.

That is a key insight, not only of biology but also of political theory. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) famously said that "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind." (Reflections on the French Revolution. The Harvard Classics. 1909 -- 14) Likewise Alexis de Tocqueville said, "As long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone." (Democracy in America, Chapter XVII: Principal causes which tend to maintain the democratic republic in the United States)

Strong families are essential to free societies. Where families are strong, a sense of altruism exists that can be extended outward, from family to friends to neighbours to community and from there to the nation as a whole.

It was the sense of family that kept Jews linked in a web of mutual obligation despite the fact that they were scattered across the world. Does it still exist? Sometimes the divisions in the Jewish world go so deep, and the insults hurled by one group against another are so brutal that one could almost be persuaded that it does not. In the 1950s Martin Buber expressed the belief that the Jewish people in the traditional sense no longer existed. Knesset Yisrael, the covenantal people as a single entity before God, was no more. The divisions between Jews, religious and secular, orthodox and non-orthodox, Zionist and non-Zionist, had, he thought, fragmented the people beyond hope of repair.

Yet that conclusion is premature for precisely the reason that makes family so elemental a bond. Argue with your friend and tomorrow he may no longer be your friend, but argue with your brother and tomorrow he is still your brother. The book of Genesis is full of sibling rivalries but they do not all end the same way. The story of Cain and Abel ends with Abel dead. The story of Isaac and Ishmael ends with their standing together at Abraham's grave. The story of Esau and Jacob reaches a climax when, after a long separation, they meet, embrace and go their separate ways. The story of Joseph and his brothers begins with animosity but ends

with forgiveness and reconciliation. Even the most dysfunctional families can eventually come together.

The Jewish people remains a family, often divided, always argumentative, but bound in a common bond of fate nonetheless. As our parsha reminds us, that person who has fallen is our brother or sister, and ours must be the hand that helps them rise again. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

The problem surely occurs to every reader of the first Rashi in parshas Behar. The Rabban shel Yisrael, quoting a Midrash, recounts the famous question, "What does shemita have to do with Har Sinai?"

The reference, of course, is to the Torah's introducing the mitzvah of letting fields lie fallow every seventh year as what "Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai."

The Midrash's answer is that the Torah means to teach us that "just as with shemita, its general principles and its finer details were all stated at Sinai, likewise, all [mitzvos were similarly stated and elaborated upon]."

The problem: The answer seems to not address the question. Why, though, of all mitzvos, is the point made specifically with shmita?

It is brought in the name of the Chasam Sofer that shmita is chosen because it establishes, to the frustration of the scoffer who contends that the Torah isn't in fact from Hashem, that it is.

Because, logically, shmita is a self-defeating law. Enjoining the Jews in the Holy Land to let all their fields lie fallow every seventh year (and at the end of 49 years, two years in a row) is an assured recipe for economic disaster. No human lawmaker would be cruel or dim enough to lay down such a law -- only a Legislator Who could in fact ensure, as Hashem does, that the sixth year crops will be sufficiently abundant to carry the populace through could decree such a law.

Thus, says the Chasam Sofer, shmita's having been divinely commanded at Sinai isn't merely part of our tradition (a powerful enough status in its own right) but, in its very essence, an indication of its source in the divine.

And so, "just as with shemita" -- which law telegraphs its source in Hashem -- likewise all mitzvos are sourced in Him. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafraan and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.” (Leviticus 25:23)

“You must not defile the Land upon which you live and in the midst of which I (God) dwell, since I (God), dwell in the midst of the children of Israel.” (Numbers 35:34)

The sacred Zohar teaches that the nation Israel, the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed be He are one. This suggests that the eternal God may be experienced and apprehended through those phenomena which are also perceived to be eternal. Since the covenantal nation Israel is eternal (by Divine oath, Genesis 15) and since the Torah is eternal, Israel, the Torah and God are inextricably linked by virtue of their common eternity.

The land of Israel shares in this feature of eternity. The earth’s perennial cycles of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth, express a movement of regeneration and renaissance which informs the very nature of the most primitive form of life. There are intimations of immortality in the earth’s movement from life to life: a fruit falls from the tree when it no longer requires the physical sustenance provided by attachment to the branch, and the tree re-births (regenerates) its fruit in the spring. The trees shed their leaves and fruits onto the earth, and when they decompose and merge with the earth, that very earth provides the necessary nutrients for the tree to continue to grow and bear fruit in the future. Plants leave their seeds in the ground, these continue to sprout plant life from the earth after the mother herb has been taken and eaten. And so the cycle of life, decay, death and rebirth is grounded in the eternal, infinite and natural dimension of the earth. In the words of the wisest of men, “one generation passes away and another generation arrives, but the earth abides forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:3).

In a more national sense, it is the Biblical tradition to bury our dead in the earth, and specifically in the land of Israel. The Biblical idiom for death is, “And he was gathered to his nation, or his family,” for if one is buried in one’s homeland, one’s physical remains merge with the physical remains of one’s family members, of those who came and died before as well as of those who will follow in the future.

Furthermore, the land of Israel is invested with a special metaphysical quality which is inextricably linked to Knesset Yisrael, historic Israel. The first Hebrew, Abraham, entered into the Covenant between the Pieces – the Divine mission of a nation founded on the principles of humans created in the image of God and the right of freedom for every individual – in the City of Hebron, and God’s promise of world peace and messianic redemption will be realized in the City of Jerusalem. The Cave of the Couples – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah – was the very first acquisition by a Jew of land in Israel as the earthly resting place for the founders of our faith. At the very same time, it is also the womb of our future, a future informed by the ideas and ideals of our revered ancestors. “Grandchildren are the crowning glory of the aged; parents are the pride of their children”. (Proverbs 17: 6)

It is for this reason that the Talmud maintains that only in Israel is there a true and authentic “community” (B.T. Horayot 3) – for only in Israel do we see the footprints of historic Israel, the sweep of the generations, the “common unity” of tradition, from Abraham to the Messiah; Israel formed, prophesied and taught its eternal traditions and continues to live out its destiny within the land of Israel.

Moreover, the eternal Torah is rooted and invested in the very earth, stones and vegetation of the land of Israel. This is true not only in terms of the Biblical covenantal promise which guarantees our constant relationship and eventual return to Israel; it is also true because of the myriad of mitzvot (commandments) embedded in its bedrock, its soil, and its agricultural produce. The seventh Sabbatical year provides free fruits and vegetables for anyone who wishes to take them; the “corners” of the field actually “belong” to the poor every day of the year, and they may come and reap their harvests; tithes from the land’s produce immediately go to the Kohen – Priest-teachers, the Levite Cantors, and the poor who share in the land of the rest of the nation. The land of Israel itself cries out to its inhabitants in the name of God: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers” (Leviticus 25:23).

Hence God Himself, as it were, becomes inextricably linked – even “incorporated” or “in-corporealized”, if you will – within the peoplehood, the land and the Torah of Israel, the very objects and subjects which express God’s will and out of which our essence and destiny is formed. Indeed, historic Israel, the land of Israel, the Torah of Israel and the Holy One Blessed be He, God of Israel and the universe are truly united in an eternal bond. © 2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

These two parshiyot together form the final bookend of the book of Vayikra. This conclusion of Vayikra is a rather somber one, with the dominant theme being the prediction of Jewish dereliction from Torah values and practices and the resultant exile from their land and sovereignty. Yet in these parshiyot there are also promises of prosperity and well-being and successful Jewish life.

The Torah generally conforms to such a pattern of great blessings and stern warnings. It really allows the Jews very little middle ground in which to maneuver the private and national lives of Israel. Our entire history is one of great vacillation between exalted and miraculous moments and dire events.

This certainly is true regarding the story of the Jewish people and the Jewish State over the past century. Our tears are always mixed with joy and our joy is always laden with a heavy dose of accompanying

tears. The Torah's message to us is that life constantly presents different emotions and scenarios that are rarely if ever completely positive or completely negative.

Perhaps this is one of the meanings of the words of the rabbis of the Talmud that everything that Heaven does has good within it. Even if the general event may be deemed to be a negative one, there always is a kernel of good buried within it. So, our parshiyot reflect this duality of blessing and accomplishment as well as of defeat and hardship. This duality also applies to our daily dealings with others. Always try to see the good lurking within another person whenever possible – though I admit that there are situations that make it look impossible to do so. This has always been a premier Jewish trait. The rabbis in Avot taught us that every person has his moment so to speak. Seizing and exploiting that moment is the main accomplishment.

But that requires a sense of realism. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that everything is always correct and well with ourselves and our society, nor can we be so pessimistic and down on the situation that it precludes honest attempts at improvement. The balance of hope and warning that these concluding parshiyot of Vayikra exude is an important lesson and guidepost.

This lesson lies embedded in another teaching of the rabbis in Avot: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the entire task at hand, but neither are you free to discard it entirely." Reality dictates to us that we face our world and its dangers squarely and honestly. But we should not abandon hope and the effort to improve our lot.

We believe that positive effort and wise decisions, coupled with faith and tradition allow us to survive and prosper. Therefore at the conclusion of the public reading of these mixed messages at the end of the book of Vayikra we rise and strengthen ourselves "Chazak chazak v'nitchzeik." ©2023 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 Torah proclaims that a house in a walled city may be sold in perpetuity, but the owner has the right of repurchase during the first year of the sale (Leviticus 25:29, 30). Interestingly, the word lo in the phrase "asher lo chomah" (in a walled city [lo with a vav, meaning "that has"]) is written in the Torah with an aleph (meaning "not"), changing the meaning to "in an unwalled city." Rashi explains that this phrasing indicates that the law can apply to a city that has no walls today so long as it had walls when Joshua conquered Israel (Rashi, quoting Torat Kohanim).

Rabbi Duschensky in his B'lkvei Parshiot takes this point a step further, relating the matter specifically to

Jerusalem – a walled city from the time of Joshua. He suggests that while the fortification of Jerusalem symbolized by walls is necessary for its defense, God's help is at least as important to protect the city. To paraphrase Rabbi Duschensky, only if we realize that Jerusalem has no walls – in the sense that we cannot only rely on ourselves – will the city have true walls, forever protected.

And perhaps it can be added that only when the inhabitants of Jerusalem remove the walls surrounding themselves – when the observant and less observant come to love each other, when Jews and Palestinians learn to coexist – will the city be secure, at peace, and whole.

Note also that the seven times a bride circles her groom at the wedding ceremony represent walls wherein the bride expresses her intent to protect her husband. But the circles are metaphysical; the walls are not true walls, as the greatest protection in marriage is the dismantling of barriers between husband and wife, assuring they live forever in peace, harmony, and love.

Not coincidentally, the only city mentioned under the chuppah is Jerusalem, which, like the couple's love, will be at peace when it becomes a city of unwalled walls. Then and only then will Jerusalem be what its name can mean: Yeru (they will see); shalom (peace; Bereishit Rabbah 56:10). ©2023 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 DAVID LEVIN

Shemittah & Mt. Sinai

Our joint parshiot of Behar and Bechukotai begin with the words, "And Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai saying." The mitzvot that was then discussed were the laws of Shemittah, the seventh year of a cycle which would begin when the Jews entered the Land of Israel. The laws of Shemittah and Yovel involved two areas of concern: (1) the use of and sale of ancestral land, and (2) the lending of money. The laws of the land are discussed in our parshiot, and the laws of lending money and forgiving of loans are primarily discussed in Sefer Devarim (Deutoronomy). Our primary concern here is the first pasuk which has been quoted and not the laws of Shemittah except as how the purpose of those laws is essential to our understanding of this first pasuk.

Rashi quotes the Gemara in asking the basic question about this pasuk, "What does Shemittah have to do with being by Har Sinai?" As Rashi explains, all of the mitzvot were given at Har Sinai, but this is the only mitzvah in the Torah where the specific location is given for where this mitzvah was commanded. Rashi takes this explanation further. The laws of Shemittah are listed here in detail, and Rashi explains that just as these laws were given in detail at Har Sinai, so too were the other laws of the Torah given in detail at Har Sinai. In most

cases, however, the details of each law are found in the Oral Law (Talmud) rather than in the Torah itself.

Many commentators offer a variety of reasons for the reference to Har Sinai that we find here. The Ramban disagrees with Rashi's understanding that the Torah, here, is out of order, and this section belongs to the commandments that were given to Moshe when he ascended the Mountain and remained there for forty days and nights. The Ramban demonstrates that the Torah is properly in order here, and that the mention of Har Sinai refers to the second time that Moshe ascended the Mountain after Hashem had forgiven the people for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Ramban also indicates that he disagrees with Rashi's statement that this reference to Har Sinai indicates that all of the details of each Law were given at Har Sinai. He uses the incident immediately preceding this parasha, a person who blasphemed Hashem, to prove his point. Moshe did not have the details for the punishment of the blasphemer and had to consult with Hashem for the method and the kind of death he was to receive for this sin. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch agrees with this explanation, and adds that one must accept that if Moshe had not received the details of the laws for a blasphemer at Har Sinai, so too there may have been other laws whose details were not given at Har Sinai.

The Kli Yakar presents a numerical connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai. When the B'nei Yisrael left Egypt, they counted seven complete weeks, forty-nine days, until the fiftieth day on which they received the Torah on Har Sinai. Today this is counted as the time of Sefirah, the seven-week count of the Omer. Since that fiftieth day was Holy, the day on which we received the Torah, planting and harvesting was forbidden. Hashem explained to Moshe that, just as He counted by sevens and ended on forty-nine, and the B'nei Yisrael received their Freedom and Holiness by receiving the Torah, so too would the Land of Israel receive its Freedom and Holiness through the repetition of those numbers in relation to the land. The description of not planting or harvesting in the fiftieth year, Yovel, as a time of declaring Freedom throughout the land, parallels the Freedom of the B'nei Yisrael once they received the Torah and parallels not planting or harvesting on the holiday following Sefirah.

The Or HaChaim explains that the connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai is related to the connection between the Torah and Creation. When Hashem created the world, He was not finished after the six days of Creation. While the physical world was completed, the world could not continue to exist without the spiritual part of the world. This was accomplished with the giving of the Torah, for without the Torah, the physical part of the world would have ceased to exist. The Torah was Hashem's gift to Man, and the Land of Israel was Hashem's gift to the B'nei Yisrael. The gift of Israel, however, was predicated on the acceptance of

the responsibilities of the Torah and its mitzvot. Without accepting the Torah, the B'nei Yisrael would have been subject to the law which forbids giving a gift to a heathen for no reason.

HaRav Hirsch explains that the connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai lies in the concept of Hashem's owning and ruling the world. Just as Hashem's rule over Man enabled Him to command Man at Sinai, so too His rule over the entire World established Him as the owner of the Land even after giving it as a gift to the B'nei Yisrael. "The Land of Israel and every man of Israel and his property are owned by Hashem alone; and on the basis of this legal principle, it develops a code of agrarian, personal, and property law, Shemittah and Yovel (Jubilee), the redemption of the land, houses, and servants; the laws of interest – these are all logical outgrowths of one legal principle: Israel and its land belong to Hashem, Who has the sole legitimate claim to them.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the reason why the Laws of Shemittah are tied to Har Sinai is that the very concept of giving honor to the land is foreign to Man. The other laws of the Torah all deal with our responsibilities to "Hashem, parents, teachers, rulers, our children, ourselves, our friends, our slaves, strangers, animals, and all living creatures." The idea of treating the land upon which one lives with respect and honor does not seem to be of the same level of concern. We understand Man's need for rest on the Shabbat, but this does not translate to the land. We can understand the concept of leaving a portion of our land fallow for this year and a different portion of land fallow the next, but the idea of taking one year and leaving all our fields fallow goes beyond our sense of reason. Were this the need for the land to recuperate, we would stagger which land would rest and when. It becomes clear that by connecting this land to Har Sinai, we are recognizing that this seventh year's rest is not for the land's sake but for Hashem.

While the Gemara gives the opinion that is quoted by Rashi, it is clear that the other commentators have presented ideas that are both valid and useful to our discussion. We must always be open to different ideas and different explanations as this is the source of much of our Torah and Truth. There is, however, one caveat to this idea; we must measure each idea by the words of the Torah. As we weigh each idea by the Truth of the Torah, we expand our understanding of Hashem and what He desires from us. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"If you will not listen to Me and won't do all of these commandments. And if you are disgusted by My statutes and repulsed by My judgments..." (Vayikra 26:14-15) After first promising blessing and goodness for following His commandments, Hashem

now tells the Jewish People what will happen if they don't follow the commandments. Not only will they miss out on the reward they could attain, but they will be visited by numerous difficulties. This is not a punishment, but a means of directing us back to our Source, Hashem. It is for our own good.

However, the order of the verses here seems to be incorrect. It would make sense that if a person found some of the statutes to be questionable in his mind, or if he was offended by some of the Torah's judgments, then he would be loathe to do them. Although we should listen to Hashem's commandments regardless of whether we agree with them or not (and who are we to disagree?) we can understand that if one finds a particular mitzvah anathema to him, he will not fulfill it.

But that's not what the Torah says here. It says, "If you will not listen and do these commandments," and only afterwards does it say, "And if you are disgusted by My statutes." Why is the order reversed?

The answer is that the pesukim make perfect sense, and are very telling indeed. Hashem is warning us that if we don't do the mitzvos, we will come to hate them and be reviled by them. Why would this be the case?

Because when one is derelict in the mitzvos, for whatever reason it might be: laziness, desire, or he feels it's difficult, the guilt he feels will cause him discomfort. He knows what is right, but because he wants something else, he must defend himself. Therefore, he finds fault with the commandments of Hashem. He finds excuses to say they are unfair or hurtful or make no sense. Doing so assuages his conscience and makes him feel less wrong for abandoning his life's mission. But Hashem is not fooled.

He says, "If you don't listen to Me, and you don't do the commandments, you will come to be repulsed by My laws, and you will pull even farther away from Me than if you simply admitted that you were wrong." Rationalizing one's behavior will create an ever-growing chasm between him and His Creator.

To stop this, Hashem will send all sorts of terrors and tribulations. They will hopefully force the person to acknowledge that the fault lies with him and not with Hashem, and then he can begin to renew his Divine relationship. As he begins to listen to Hashem once again, he will come to appreciate the mitzvos and be worthy of the blessings Hashem promises to those who walk in His way.

An irreligious fellow was speaking to the Brisker Rav. He explained that though he had originally been raised observant, he had a number of "kashios," questions. Not finding satisfactory answers, he felt he could only remain intellectually honest by abandoning his Jewish practices.

The Rav looked at him piercingly and said, "You don't have questions. You have "ta'avos," desires and lusts. However, your intellectual honesty doesn't allow

you to give in to your urges while calling yourself an observant Jew, so you've developed some doubts in order to give yourself the rationale to satisfy those urges.

Your kashios are not kashios (questions) - they are "teirutzim," answers and excuses." ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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The Mitzva of Confession

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The obligation to verbally confess applies in a number of situations. Perhaps the best-known type of *vidui* is the one that is part of the process of *teshuvah* (repentance), when people confess and express their regret for a particular sin they have committed. Another *vidui* is recited by an individual offering a Torah-mandated sacrifice for a particular sin, or by an individual who is being subjected to punishment by a rabbinic court for a particular sin. *Vidui* is also relevant to sins in general. This includes the *Kohen Gadol* reciting a confession for the nation on Yom Kippur, an individual reciting the traditional confession on Yom Kippur, or a person on the brink of death reciting a final confession.

As part of *teshuvah*, a person must recite *vidui* for any transgression he or she has committed. This applies whether the transgression was of a positive or negative commandment, and whether the sin was performed willingly or unwillingly.

Essentially, the *mitzvot* of *vidui* and *teshuvah* are interconnected; for there is no *vidui* if there is no *teshuvah*. For if someone confesses his sins but does not resolve to avoid repeating them, he is like someone who immerses for purity while holding a dead (and thus impure) animal in his hand (*tovel ve-sheretz be-yado*). *Vidui* is necessary for the completion of *teshuvah*. Though a person who regrets his sins in his heart is deemed completely righteous, he still needs to confess verbally in order to finish doing the mitzva of *teshuvah*. First, he stops sinning, resolves not to sin again and stops thinking about it, and regrets having sinned. Then he says *vidui*, giving voice to what he has already thought. Nevertheless, if he is unable to verbalize the *vidui*, he should at least think it.

In Tanach, we find two types of *vidui*. One type is personal. Examples of this are the confessions of Kayin, King David, and Achan. The second type is collective. This can either be recited by an individual on behalf of the entire community (as did Moshe and Ezra the Scribe), or by the entire Jewish people collectively.

As we said above, our Sages stress that if someone has sinned and recites the *vidui* but continues to sin, he is like someone who immerses in a mikvah while holding an impure animal. It makes no difference how many bodies of water he immerses in – he is still impure. However, once he throws away the dead animal

and immerses in a kosher mikvah, he is instantly purified.
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RABBI YONASON SACKS

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In linking Chag haPesach to Chag haShavuos, the days of sefiras ha'omer underscore the fundamental relationship that exists between yetzias Mitzrayim and kabbalas haTorah. Indeed, a plethora of Midrashic and Rabbinic writings seem to place particular emphasis on this critical connection. The Ran (Pesachim 28a in Rif), for example, quotes the Midrash, which traces the current practice of sefiras ha'Omer back to the original counting done by Bnei Yisroel in anticipation of kabbalas haTorah as they left Mitzrayim. Similarly, the Sefer haChinuch (306) posits that the counting of the omer reflects our insatiable yearning for kabbalas haTorah, like a slave counting the days until he is freed. By counting in ascending order from day one to forty nine, we reflect that our "every longing and yearning is to arrive at this day." The Ramban (23:36) also stresses this relationship, explaining that the Torah's reference to Chag haShavuos as "Atzeres" analogizes the days of sefiras ha'omer to chol hamoed, thereby connecting yetzias mitzrayim to kabbalas haTorah. The Ramban adds (Introduction to sefer Shemos) that the redemption from Mitzrayim of Pesach was incomplete until Bnei Yisroel received the Torah on Shavuos, as only kabbalas haTorah could return Bnei Yisroel to the exalted status of their forefathers.

Furthermore, perhaps one could suggest that the connection between Pesach and Shavuos may account for the Torah's omission of any explicit mitzvah of "simcha" on Pesach itself. While the mitzvah of simcha certainly applies to Pesach halachically, the Torah does not particularly specify so. The conspicuous absence of the mitzvah of simcha may suggest that true simcha can only be experienced in the context of complete freedom, which comes from the kabbalas haTorah of Shavuos. As the mishnah (Avos 6:2) states, "There is no free man except one who involves himself in the study of Torah." Thus, the role of sefiras ha'omer in connecting the Yetzias Mitzrayim of Pesach to the kabbalas haTorah of Shavuos cannot be overstated.

This hashkafic role of sefiras ha'omer may bear halachic ramifications as well. Rav Ovadya Yosef (Yechaveh Da'as 1:24) adduces support for his opinion that one may recite a birchas shehechyanu on new items purchased during sefirah from the Ramban's analogy of sefiras ha'omer to chol hamoed. Rav Ovadya explains that although the three weeks between the seventeenth of Tamuz and the ninth of Av mark a time of collective national tragedy accompanied by practices of mourning, the period of sefiras ha'omer is quite different. These days are not considered days of collective misfortune for the entire nation (although isolated practices of mourning are maintained in order to

commemorate the tragic deaths of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva).

Rather, the days of sefirah resemble a festive chol hamoed Pesach and Shavuos, and thus birchas shehechyanu may certainly be recited. The role of sefiras ha'omer as a connection between Pesach and Shavuos may also be halachically significant in explaining the status of sefirah bizman hazeh. Many rishonim assume that in the absence of the Beis HaMikdash, sefiras ha'omer is mandated only mid'rabanan (see Tosafos Menachos 66a s.v. "Zecher," Rosh and Ran at end of maseches Pesachim). Their rationale may be based on the Torah's apparent linkage of the korban omer to the counting of the omer within the same pasuk (Vayikra 23:15): "And you shall count for yourselves, from the morrow after the Sabbath, from the day you bring the waved omer offering, seven complete weeks." This juxtaposition suggests a relationship between the korban and the counting, implying that if the korban omer can no longer be offered, counting the omer must also be inapplicable Mid'oraisa. The Rambam, however, maintains that sefiras ha'omer always remains a Biblical obligation, unequivocally stating that the mitzvah applies "to every man of Israel, in every place and every time" (Hilchos Temidin UMusafin 7:22-24). The Aruch HaShulchan (489:3) explains that the Rambam's opinion is rooted in his understanding of the hashkafic Pesach and Shavuos. Even if the korban omer is no longer brought in our times, sefiras ha'omer must still be performed Mid'oraisa in order to symbolize our ardent anticipation of kabbalas haTorah- a sentiment which is as relevant after the churban as it was before. The Aruch HaShulchan adds that the korban omer itself further reflects this relationship. Brought from barley, the fodder of animals, the korban omer symbolizes man's animal-like status when he is without Torah. Only upon receiving the Torah on Shavuos may the wheat flour shtei halechem be brought, thereby symbolizing man's elevated status above the animal world.

The hashkafic significance of sefiras ha'omer may also account for the lack of a birchas shehechyanu on the mitzvah of sefirah. The Ba'al HaMaor (Pesachim 28a in Rif) attributes the absence of shehechyanu to the fact that shehechyanu is recited only on mitzvos which produce some type of benefit or joy. Sefiras ha'omer, however, is a source of distress, calling to mind doleful memories of the destruction of the holy Mikdash. The Meiri (Pesachim 7b) adopts a different approach, explaining that the birchas shehechyanu recited on the first night of Pesach actually covers the mitzvah of sefiras ha'omer. Rabbeinu Yerucham (Nesiv 4, Chelek 5), however, suggests almost the opposite possibility: the birchas shehechyanu of Shavuos retroactively covers the mitzvah of sefiras ha'omer. Perhaps Rabbeinu Yerucham's explanation may relate to the aforementioned relationship between Pesach and Shavuos. While most mitzvos require a birchas

shehechyanu prior to the performance of the mitzvah, sefiras ha'omer is quite different. Since the purpose of sefiras ha'omer is to bring Bnei Yisroel from the incomplete redemption of Pesach to the kabbalas haTorah of Shavuos, sefirah does not constitute an end unto itself. Rather, it is a means towards the desired end of Shavuos. Thus the birchas shehechyanu of Shavuos, which marks the culmination and goal of the mitzvah of sefirah, may retroactively apply to the sefirah as well, despite the general preference for reciting a shehechyanu before the performance of a mitzvah.

One other explanation for the lack of a birchas shehechyanu on the mitzvah of sefirah is suggested by the Levush. Like the aforementioned rishonim, the Levush (Hilchos Pesach 489) emphasizes sefirah's role as a connector between Pesach and Shavuos. The Levush explains that sefirah is counted "like a man expecting and waiting for a particular day upon which he will receive a great gift or other item which will bring joy to his heart." In expressing one's unbridled anticipation for kabbalas haTorah, one demonstrates that receiving the Torah is of greater value than the physical redemption from Egypt. Hence, argues the Levush, if the entire purpose of sefirah is to direct one's gaze away from the present towards the anticipated ends of kabbalas haTorah, how could one possibly make a blessing on the present zman? Because Bnei Yisroel hope to pass through the period of sefirah as rapidly as possible in order to reach the period of Shavuos, no birchas shehechyanu is recited.

The physical freedom from Mitzrayim is thus incomplete without the spiritual freedom engendered by kabbalas haTorah. While physical redemption bears the simulacrum of freedom, true redemption can only be attained through Talmud Torah and yiras Shamayim. Yehi ratzon that we should merit to continue to learn and exert ourselves constantly in talmud Torah, so that we will greet Mashiach tzidkeinu bimheira b'yameinu. ©2008 Rabbi Y. Sacks & TorahWeb.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Toil Trouble

The portion of Bechukosai begins quite simply. Hashem tells us: "If you will walk in My ordinances and observe My commandments and perform them. Then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit" (Leviticus 26:3-4) Rashi the premier commentary on the Torah, has a mission to define the simple explanation of the verse. He rarely deviates from the simple pshat (explanation), unless he prefaces his remarks by stating his intention to do so. In this instance Rashi explains the concept of "walking in My ordinances" not as mitzvah observance or following in the Ways of the Almighty. Rather, Rashi explains walking in G-d's ways as toiling in Torah study. Rashi explains his commentary: One might think that this [verse] denotes

the fulfillment of the commandments; but when Scripture follows by stating and you shall keep My commandments and do them, it is plain that in this passage there is mentioned the fulfillment of the commands. How then must I explain 'Im Bechukosai Teleichu?'" As an admonition that you should study the Torah laboriously.

Clearly when Rashi translates the words, he seems to deviate from the simple meaning. Instead of explaining, "If you go in my path, he states, If you will toil in Torah." Walking in Hashem's path may mean many things. Surely many of them can be simply understood from those words. But toiling in Torah does not seem to be one of them.

In a very popular day school, the Morah was reviewing the meaning of the prayers with her young charges. "Children," she asked in her melodious voice, "Who knows what Shema Yisrael means?"

The hands shot up and waved frantically. "I know! I know!" came muffled shouts from the youngsters who each had their siddurim opened to the proper pages. "It means 'Hear O Israel!'"

"Wonderful!" responded the young teacher. "And who knows what Baruch Atah Hashem means?"

Again the students raised their hands in excitement. "It means 'blessed are You Hashem!'"

"Good," she exclaimed. "Good. Now for a hard one. Who knows the meaning of Amen?"

There was a moment of silence and then little Joey raised his hand! "That's simple every time it says Amen in the Siddur the translation appears right next to it!"

"It is," asked the Morah.

"Sure," said Joey. "Everyone knows that Amen means Cong." (In many siddurim, you will see the following at the end of a blessing: "Cong. -- (Heb) Amen.")

I learned the Rashi and learned a lesson. Sometimes we read words and we translate from Hebrew to English. We nod our heads as if it makes sense, and we don't give pause to think about the true meaning of what we have just said. Often, however, even in the simplest form the mere translation of words does not constitute the actual meaning of a verse. Indeed the Hebrew Im Bchukosai Talaichu translates word by word as "If you will walk in My ordinances" but when learning Torah we must do more than merely look at the words and then translate. We must delve deeper. We must



analyze seemingly redundant phrases. We must get to the depth of the true meaning of the words. Indeed, we must toil in Torah! ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org