

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the most important words in Judaism, and also one of the least understood. Its two most famous occurrences are in last week's parsha and this week's: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," and "It shall come to pass if you surely listen to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul" -- the openings of the first and second paragraphs of the Shema. It also appears in the first line of the parsha: "It shall come to pass, if you listen to these laws."

The word, of course, is shema. I have argued elsewhere that it is fundamentally untranslatable into English since it means so many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise, to respond, to obey. It is one of the motif-words of the book of Devarim, where it appears no less than 92 times -- more than in any other book of the Torah. Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, Shema: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what he wants from us. If you would only listen... Judaism is a religion of listening. This is one of its most original contributions to civilisation.

The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture. Its greatest achievements had to do with the eye, with seeing. It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture and architecture the world has ever seen. Its most characteristic group events -- theatrical performances and the Olympic games -- were spectacles: performances that were watched. Plato thought of knowledge as a kind of depth vision, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things.

This idea -- that knowing is seeing -- remains the dominant metaphor in the West even today. We speak of insight, foresight and hindsight. We offer an observation. We adopt a perspective. We illustrate. We illuminate. We shed light on an issue. When we understand something, we say, "I see." (See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.)

Judaism offered a radical alternative. It is faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented

visually. The very act of making a graven image -- a visual symbol -- is a form of idolatry. As Moses reminded the people in last week's parsha, when the Israelites had a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no image; there was only a voice." (Deut. 4:12). God communicates in sounds, not sights. He speaks. He commands. He calls. That is why the supreme religious act is Shema. When God speaks, we listen. When He commands, we try to obey.

Rabbi David Cohen (1887-1972), known as the Nazirite, a disciple of Rav Kook and the father of R. Shear-Yashuv Cohen, chief rabbi of Haifa, pointed out that in the Babylonian Talmud all the metaphors of understanding are based not on seeing but on hearing. Ta shema, "come and hear." Ka mashma lan, "It teaches us this." Shema mina, "Infer from this." Lo shemiyah lei, "He did not agree." A traditional teaching is called shamaytta, "that which was heard." And so on. All of these are variations on the word shema. (This appears in the opening pages of his work, *Kol Nevuah*. To be sure, the Zohar uses a visual term, ta chazi, "Come and see." There is a broad kinship between Jewish mysticism and Platonic or neo-Platonic thought. For both, knowing is a form of depth-seeing.)

This may seem like a small difference, but it is in fact a huge one. For the Greeks, the ideal form of knowledge involved detachment. There is the one who sees, the subject, and there is that which is seen, the object, and they belong to two different realms. A person who looks at a painting or a sculpture or a play in a theatre or the Olympic games is not himself part of the art or the drama or the athletic competition. He or she is a spectator, not a participant.

Speaking and listening are not forms of detachment. They are forms of engagement. They create a relationship. The Hebrew word for knowledge, da'at, implies involvement, closeness, intimacy. "And Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and gave birth" (Gen. 4:1). That is knowing in the Hebrew sense, not the Greek. We can enter into a relationship with God, even though He is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.

The Greeks taught us the forms of knowledge

that come from observing and inferring, namely science and philosophy. The first scientists and the first philosophers came from Greece from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE.

But not everything can be understood by seeing and appearances alone. There is a powerful story about this told in the first book of Samuel. Saul, Israel's first king, looked the part. He was tall. "From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people," (1 Sam. 9:2, 10:23). He was the image of a king. But morally, temperamentally, he was not a leader at all; he was a follower.

God then told Samuel to anoint another king in his place, and told him it would be one of the children of Yishai. Samuel went to Yishai and was struck by the appearance of one of his sons, Eliav. He thought he must be the one God meant. But God said to him, "Do not be impressed by his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not see as people do. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jews and Judaism taught that we cannot see God, but we can hear Him and He hears us. It is through the word -- speaking and listening -- that we can have an intimate relationship with God as our parent, our partner, our sovereign, the One who loves us and whom we love. We cannot demonstrate God scientifically. We cannot prove God logically. These are Greek, not Jewish, modes of thought. I believe that from a Jewish perspective, trying to prove the existence of God logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise. God is not an object but a subject. The Jewish mode is to relate to God in intimacy and love, as well as awe and reverence.

(To be sure, many of the great medieval Jewish philosophers did just that. They did so under the influence of neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian thought, itself mediated by the great philosophers of Islam. The exception was Judah Halevi in *The Kuzari*.)

One fascinating modern example came from a Jew who, for much of his life, was estranged from Judaism, namely Sigmund Freud. He called psychoanalysis the "speaking cure", but it is better described as the "listening cure." (See Adam Philips, *Equals*, London, Faber and Faber, 2002, xii. See also Salman Akhtar, *Listening to Others: Developmental and Clinical Aspects of Empathy and Attunement*. Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2007.) It is based on the fact that active listening is in itself therapeutic. It was only after the spread of psychoanalysis, especially in America, that the phrase "I hear you" came into the English language as a way of communicating empathy.

(Note that there is a difference between empathy and sympathy. Saying "I hear you" is a way of indicating -- sincerely or otherwise -- that I take note of your feelings, not that I necessarily agree with them or you.)

There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been heard. They have not been listened to. We have not "heard their pain". There has been a failure of empathy. That is why the use of force -- or for that matter, boycotts -- to resolve conflict is so profoundly self-defeating. It may suppress it for a while, but it will return, often more intense than before. Job, who has suffered unjustly, is unmoved by the arguments of his comforters. It is not that he insists on being right: what he wants is to be heard. Not by accident does justice presuppose the rule of *audi alteram partem*, "Hear the other side."

Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

In Judaism we believe that our relationship with God is an ongoing tutorial in our relationships with other people. How can we expect God to listen to us if we fail to listen to our spouse, our children, or those affected by our work? And how can we expect to encounter God if we have not learned to listen. On Mount Horeb, God taught Elijah that He was not in the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire but in the *kol demamah dakah*, the "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19) that I define as a voice you can only hear if you are listening.

Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners. Whether between us and God or us and other people, listening is the prelude to love. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* © 2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd now Israel what does the Lord Your God ask of you, only to revere the Lord your God and to walk in all of His ways, and to love Him and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. To observe the commandments of the Lord and His statutes for your good...” (Deuteronomy 10:11-13) Is that all? Or, in the words of the Sages of the Talmud, “And is that such a small matter to accomplish?” (B.T. Berakhot 33b)

How can the Torah express such a difficult request in such an offhand manner?

A significant experience at the beginning of my teaching career intensifies the question. Decades ago, when teaching Talmud at the James Striar School of Yeshiva University for those without previous yeshiva background, the star of the class was a brilliant young man from Montreal who progressed from barely being able to read the words in Aramaic to real proficiency in analyzing a difficult Tosafot (super-commentary). At the end of the year, he decided to leave both Yeshiva University as well his newly found Torah observance!

His explanation has remained imprinted in my consciousness all these years: "As a non-religious Jew, I would get up each morning asking myself how I wished to spend the day; as a religious Jew, I must get up each morning asking myself how God wants me to spend the day. The pressure is simply too intense for me to take..."

I was sorely disappointed – but I did understand his tension. Indeed, he got it. He understood that true religious devotion is more than praying at certain times each day and subscribing to specific do's and don'ts; true religious devotion means dedicating every moment to a higher ideal, to answering a Divine call whose message you can never be certain that you correctly discern. Although it may very well be fulfilling, it is also difficult and even pressurizing to be a sincerely religious Jew.

So how can the Bible query "What does the Lord your God ask of you but only... to love Him and serve (Him)... with all your heart and with all your soul"? But only?!

And how can that be "Letov lakh" – "for your good"?

This question may be linked to a curious comparison made by the text of our Torah reading between the land of Egypt and the land of Israel – within the context of a lyrical exposition of the grandeur of the Holy Land and the luscious quality of its fruit:

"For the land which you are coming to inherit is not like the land of Egypt which you left, where you (merely) seeded your seed and watered with your feet a garden of vegetation (the water came naturally from the overflow of the Nile River); the land which you are crossing there to inherit is a land of mountains and valleys, (making you dependent upon) heavenly rains to drink water; it is a land which the Lord your God constantly investigates, the eyes of the Lord your God being upon it from the beginning of the year until end-year" (Deuteronomy 11:10,11).

Is, then, the fact that Israel does not have a ready and plentiful source of water as has Egypt, that the land of Israel is dependent upon the rains of Divine grace which come as a result of the Jewish people's moral and ethical standing, that agricultural activity is a much more arduous and precarious a task than it is in Egypt, a reason for praising Israel? It seems to me that Egypt is a far better option if we were to be given the choice!

It is fascinating to note that in both of the issues we have raised thus far, the Torah, which is the source

of our responsibilities towards God, and the land of Israel, which is the medium through which our nation will flourish and impart the message of ethical monotheism to the world, are both uniquely called *morasha*, or heritage, by the Bible (Exodus 6:8; Deuteronomy 33:4).

Yerusha is the usual term for inheritance; *morasha* is translated as heritage. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that an inheritance is often received through no expenditure of effort on the part of the recipient; a *morasha*, on the other hand, implies intense exertion, physical and/or emotional input, commitment and even sacrifice on the part of the recipient.

The verb form of *morasha*, *l'horish*, also means to conquer, and conquest implies struggle and even sacrifice. At the same time, the basic verb form around which *morasha* is built is *vav*, *resh shin*, almost the very same letters as *shin*, *yud*, *resh* (*yud* and *vav* are virtually interchangeable in Hebrew) – which spells *shir*, or song. And the Midrashic Sages already noted the linguistic comparison between *morasha* and *m'orasa*, fiancée, or beloved.

All of this leads us to one inescapable conclusion: those objects, ideals and people for which we have labored intensively and sacrificed unsparingly are the very ones we love the most and value above all others.

The Mishnah in Avot teaches, "In accordance with the pain is the reward;" my teacher and mentor Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik teaches, "In accordance with the pain is the sanctity." We learn from the word *morasha* that "in accordance with the pain is the love."

Note the experiences which in retrospect give the most satisfaction and which everyone loves to recount are rarely the days of lazy relaxation we spend on vacation, but more usually the sacrifices during periods of poverty or the battles in time of war. Ask any parent about the special love he/she has for the one child who needed the most care and commitment because of a serious illness or accident and you immediately understand the inextricable connection between conquest and song, commitment and love, intensive effort and emotional gratification. A life without ideals or people for whom one would gladly sacrifice is a life not worth living; a life devoid of emotional commitments is a life which has merely passed one by but which has never been truly lived.

Erich Siegel was wrong that "to love means never to having to say you're sorry"; but it is correct to say that one who is loved need not say thank you to the one who has sacrificed, expended effort, on his/her behalf. Jacobs's 14 years of hard work for Rachel were "as only a few days" because of his great love for her, attests the Bible. A husband who has the privilege of easing the pain of his beloved wife, if but for a few moments, is grateful for the privilege. And our commitment to God – with all our heart, soul and might – is a small thing to ask as long as it is an expression of

our mutual love.

In the final analysis, it is certainly for our good, because it gives ultimate meaning, purpose and eternity to our finite lives. ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The parsha this week ties together the observance of the Torah commandments, especially the warnings against paganism and idolatry, with the earthly blessings of longevity and prosperity. Over the ages this has caused great philosophic debate and discussion, for this cause and effect relationship is not always apparent in the national or personal lives of the Jewish people.

Many commentators hasten to add that these promises refer to biblical times when the Divine Spirit was palpably present amongst the Jewish community and the spirit of prophecy was also prevalent in the Land of Israel. This means that it was applicable to First Temple times only, for in Second Temple times the spirit of prophecy was absent in the Jewish commonwealth. Perhaps this is an insight as to why the rabbis attributed the destruction of the First Temple primarily to idolatry – a fulfillment of the cause-and-effect system of justice as outlined in this week's parsha – while the demise of the Second Temple was attributed to social dispute and baseless hatred, an issue never specifically mentioned in this week's Torah presentation.

It appears that different equations, moral gauges and causes affected the Jewish commonwealth's spiritual status during Second Temple times than were present in First Temple times when prophecy and Divine Spirit were current and abundantly visible. In any event, it is apparent that the direct cause and effect relationship between observance of God's commandments and blessings and prosperity and disobedience causing punishment and disaster has not always been evident in the annals of Jewish history, especially in our long years of exile and persecution. The very fact that the Torah this week makes this cause-and-effect relationship so patently clear, and repeats itself many times, raises the age-old problem of why the righteous suffer and the wicked are rewarded, in this world at least. This basic faith dilemma has its biblical origins in the book of Iyov where the problem is raised but basically left unanswered.

Over the long Jewish exile with its attendant difficulties and pogroms this gnawing problem of faith has always accompanied us in every generation and circumstance. The events of the Holocaust, almost unimaginable in its numbers and horror, has certainly been a test of faith for many Jews, even for those who themselves were spared that actual experience. Yet the faith of Israel is that somehow in the unfathomable system of God's justice, all will be set right.

This is the main message of this week. It informs

us that our actions have consequences and that there is a guiding hand to Jewish and world history and events that will eventually reveal itself. So our task remains, as it always was – to fulfill God's commandments and to behave morally and justly. The whole system of God's justice, opaque as it may seem to us to be, is simply to remind us of our potential and greatness, of the importance of our behavior in the grand scheme of things, and to reinforce our sense of destiny as individuals and as a people. ©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

Although we may live lives dedicated to following the commandments of the Torah, the core question of "What does God ask of us?" is posed by Moses. He offers the following answer: "Only to fear and love Him, and to observe the commandment of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 10:12).

The fact that the Torah uses the word "only" seems to imply that following the commandments is a minimal request. Yet keeping them is far from a small demand; it is a major commitment that requires devotion of the whole self.

Some suggest that these words, offered as they were by Moses, were stated from his perspective. For Moses, keeping the mitzvot was indeed a minimal request, because he, the prophet of prophets, was easily able to keep all of the mitzvot (Berachot 33b).

This explanation is a bit troubling, for it seems that by using the term "only," the master teacher Moses erred in not speaking on the level of the people. He was not speaking in language they could understand but in the lofty language of a profoundly religious leader.

The key to understanding the use of "only" may lie in resolving the larger question of why God gives the commandments at all. Are they primarily given for His sake, or for ours?

One could look at the mitzvot as God's way of expressing rulership over us. When we keep His laws, we profess allegiance and commitment to Him.

There is, however, an alternative approach. The mitzvot are not haphazard laws given by a God who wants to rule us just for the sake of ruling us. Instead, the commandments express what God feels is best for His people. They are for our sake. They are God's way of saying, I've created a beautiful world – follow these laws, and you will find inner happiness.

For me, a central theological idea is that God is a God of love. There cannot be love in a vacuum. In order to love, an "other" is needed. Thus, a God of love creates humankind as, without us, love, even for God, would not exist.

Similarly, in order to love, one must be prepared to give to one's beloved. Thus, a God of love sacrifices in the sense that He shares of His own Being with humans in the meta-form of tzelem Elohim, the image of God. From a mystical perspective, too, God, the Ein Sof who is Omnipresent, contracts (tzimtzum), making room for humankind.

Finally, in love, one sensitively offers guidance. Thus, a God of love commands. He gives the law not to exhibit mastery but because He cares endlessly about the welfare of humans.

This principle is not only true concerning interpersonal law, whose goal is to improve society, but ritual law as well. Martin Buber argues that a God of love would never have given such detailed ritual commandments as they are too restrictive – in their minutia they could disconnect the practitioner from God. But the word “only” is a minimalist request, teaching us the reverse.

A God of love creates, sacrifices, and finally commands as the ultimate act of love. ©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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Grace After Meals

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The verse instructs us to “Bless the Lord your G-d for the good land” (*Devarim* 8:10). Our Sages (*Berachot* 48b) extrapolate from here that the Torah requires three blessings to be included in *Birkat HaMazon*. The first blesses G-d for providing food (*Birkat HaZan*), the second blesses G-d for the Land of Israel (*Birkat HaAretz*), and the third blesses G-d for the rebuilding of Jerusalem (*Boneh Yerushalayim*). If they are based on the verse, how can the Talmud also tell us that Moshe instituted the first blessing, Yehoshua the second, and David and Shlomo the third? It must be that while the content was established at Sinai, the precise words that we recite were formulated by Yehoshua, David, and Shlomo.

Since *Birkat HaZan* was instituted by Moshe Rabbeinu, it is surprising that some versions of the blessing include the verse: “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (*Tehillim* 145:16). After all, *Tehillim* was written by King David, who lived much later than Moshe. The likely explanation is that some of the verses of *Tehillim* were formulated at an early stage, and King David wrote them down at a later stage. This is borne out by the language used in *Birkat HaZan* to introduce the verse: “As it is **said**, ‘You open your hand,’” and not “As it is **written**, ‘You open your hand.’”

As we mentioned, the specific formulation of the blessings was originally different from what we recite

today. A person could have fulfilled his obligation (for *Birkat HaZan*) by saying in Aramaic, “Blessed is the merciful One, King, the Creator of this bread.” Along the same lines, when someone sings *Tzur MiShelo* – the Shabbat song whose structure is parallel to that of *Birkat HaMazon* and incorporates the same themes – it is possible that he has fulfilled his obligation to recite *Birkat HaMazon*. Accordingly, perhaps a person should have in mind when he sings *Tzur MiShelo* that he does not intend to fulfill his obligation. This way, he ensures that his fulfillment of the mitzva takes place only when he recites the classic *Birkat HaMazon*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Observance Brings Blessings

Moshe began this week's parasha with a statement of the blessings that Hashem will bestow upon the Jewish people if they observe the commandments of the Torah. “This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your Elokim, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers. He will love you, bless you and multiply you, and He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your Land; your grain, your wine, and your oil; the offspring of your cattle and the flocks of your sheep and goats; on the Land that He swore to your forefathers to give you. You will be the most blessed of all peoples; there will be no infertile male or infertile female among you, nor among your animals. Hashem will remove from you every illness; and all the bad maladies of Egypt that you knew; He will not put them upon you, but will put them upon your foes. You will devour all the peoples that Hashem, your Elokim, will deliver to you; your eye shall not pity them; you shall not worship their gods, for it is a snare to you.”

HaRav Zalmon Sorotzkin points out that the beginning of this section starts with plural words, “tishm'un, ush'martem, and va'asitem, you (p) will listen, and you (p) will guard, and you (p) will do.” From that point on in the section, the verbs all switch to singular, “Va'acheiv'cha, uveirach'cha, v'hirb'cha, and He will love you (s), and He will bless you (s), and He will cause you (s) to increase.” HaRav Sorotzkin explains that when the B'nei Yisrael observe the commandments of Hashem, they become united and are treated as one. Each tribe had their own identity, as we see in the blessings associated with each tribe, and in that way they were separate entities. Yet, the Torah unites them into one people, and the blessing that they receive is a unified blessing, as one nation.

Moshe began the description of this reward with the promise that Hashem would uphold His covenant with the people and fulfill all the promises within that

covenant. The Ohr HaChaim explains that when the B'nei Yisrael perform the mitzvot, there is great joy and happiness in the world. But Moshe's message was much deeper. There is no joy and happiness without the observance of the mitzvot. The mitzvot give meaning to our lives, and meaning is what brings us true joy and happiness. Moshe continued with the words "and He will love you." The Ramban explains that when the B'nei Yisrael do the mitzvot out of love for Hashem, He reciprocates that love to them. The Ramban also suggests that the word is in the reflexive, namely, "cause to be loved," by those who have had judgment passed on them; the guilty and punished will respect those who punish them because those who pass judgment are following the Laws of Hashem.

All the blessings mentioned by Moshe flow from the observance of the commandments of Hashem. The Ramban explains that these blessings also require the firm establishment of the judicial system through which these laws will be enforced. "It is impossible that of a large nation, everyone will be heedful of all commandments so as not to transgress any of them, and it is only through the judgments [of the court] that they establish [the firm authority of] the Torah." Without the establishment of the Law and the punishments for breaking the Law, many will refrain from administering the punishments out of pity for the sinner. The Torah specifically refers to the case of the one who incites others to worship idols: "You shall not consent to him, nor hearken to him; neither shall your eye pity him; neither shall you spare him; neither shall you conceal him." Only when the courts adhere to the punishments of Torah Law, can the people and the sinners respect the truth of Hashem.

It is interesting that the blessings deal with the fertility of the people: "He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your Land," and "there will be no infertile male or infertile female among you, nor among your animals." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the greatest "blessing that is to distinguish the nation that lives under the regime of the Torah above all the other nations, is to be understood as the blessing of having children." Even the blessing of the produce of the Land is a function of the level of the people's observance of Torah. The illnesses of Egypt, a land of total corruption, will be spared the nation which immerses itself in the Torah. Enemies, who lack this connection to Hashem and His Torah, stand no chance against the nation of Israel.

In a previous discourse we examined the many meanings of the word "Eikev." One of the more familiar understandings is that this word, which is associated with the observance of commandments, comes from the name of Ya'akov, which was given to him because he clung to the heel of his brother when he was born. HaRav Sorotzkin tells us that these are commandments which are done with the heel; "sur meira, turn away from

evil, va'asei tov, and "turn' to do good." Some of the commentators explain that this word can also mean the reward for turning to the good. HaRav Hirsch explains that observance of the mitzvot is "the duty we owe to what is right, for which no thanks and no reward can be claimed." He continues, "But they all correspond so deeply to the nature and purpose of things and men, and they are all so much in harmony with each other, that, by their being faithfully carried out by the nation, a condition of the richest blessings of a national existence on earth emerges."

When the spies came into the Land nearly forty years before this speech from Moshe, they described the Land as "a land which devours its inhabitants." In truth, the spies were not wrong in their statement, only in their assessment. They were not considering the Holiness of this land, a Land which, by its own Holiness, was capable of reacting to the sins of its inhabitants. The Land that could punish could also reward. That is the message of Moshe's lecture to the B'nei Yisrael. Hashem created Israel as a Land that physically changes the lives of those who dwell there. But it is not enough to live on the Land, one must live a life of Torah Laws and values to receive its rewards. From the blessings to our grains, wine, olive oil, to the fertility of our people and our animals, these rewards become Nature's or Israel's reaction to our Torah lives.

We have been blessed to return after centuries to this Holy Land. What we must begin to realize is that the warnings of Moshe apply even today. We must guard this Land both with superior weapons and with superior adherence to the mitzvot. As the Ramban said, not everyone will accomplish this superior adherence; but our nation and our people need for us to try. ©2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**Y**our clothes did not wear out from upon you, nor did your feet swell, these forty years." (Devarim 8:4) Rashi and the Midrash explain that the clothing of the Jews remained intact for the duration of their sojourn in the Wilderness, even growing with the people as they grew (no word on whether they morphed to keep up with style trends.) The Clouds of Glory cleaned them, and the Mon and Well of Miriam prevented the Jews from producing sweat, reducing the wear on them. Even so, it was a miraculous occurrence that their clothes remained whole and wearable because time takes its toll on things.

The next part of the verse says that their feet didn't swell. Again, Rashi explains that it is the nature of those who walk barefoot that their feet swell up, but this didn't happen. The Sifsei Chachamim and others explain, however, that the reason this didn't happen was because, as we see elsewhere, their shoes ALSO remained intact, so the Jews did not walk barefoot.

The question is, if the reason their feet didn't swell was because their shoes remained whole, why not just say that their shoes didn't wear out? Especially since that was what was said about the clothing, the Torah could have saved words and simply said, "Your clothes and shoes didn't wear out..." Why the change?

Perhaps the posuk was bringing out an important lesson. We need to not only recognize the good Hashem does for us, but the underlying good beneath the surface which we may not notice. Not only did we have the miracle that our shoes didn't wear out, but because of that, our feet were protected from the rigors of walking barefoot, and we were saved from the pain of swollen feet. The good Hashem did for us also prevented bad from befalling us, and we ought to be appreciative and aware of all of it.

Therefore, the posuk mentions the fact that our clothing didn't wear out, and then goes a level deeper to focus on the results of a similar miracle, that our feet didn't swell, because, our shoes didn't wear out. This lesson is not just for appreciating the miracles of the Wilderness, because that time was intended to mold us and prepare us for living in the Promised Land, Eretz Yisrael.

There, we will have to depend on Hashem for rain and follow His Torah and mitzvos in order to remain there. Learning to appreciate every little thing, and the things that bring those little things about, will help us to see Hashem's hand in our lives on a constant basis, and that will help us to love Him and serve Him more and more every day, with joy and gratitude.

Two princes were traveling on the same train. Each of them was obsessed with himself and his honor. When they arrived at the station where they were to disembark, they were met by an orchestra of musicians playing songs of honor and welcome. Each prince was sure they had come for "his" honor, and bristled at the notion that they were there to greet the other.

Seeking to settle their disagreement, they located a poor Jew who lived near the station who was known to be honest and wise. Shocked when they asked him to arbitrate their disagreement, he agreed to do it for fifty rubles, since he had no money for Pesach.

Upon receiving the money and hearing their stories, the man stroked his beard sagely and ruled, "The musicians did not come in honor of either of you. Rather, they came for me, so I might have money for the upcoming Jewish holiday!" ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

A few weeks ago I was studying with a young man who was struggling with some of the more esoteric observances in Judaism. He mentioned one of the more inscrutable mitzvot (commandments) with which he was conflicted, and then said, "Rabbi, c'mon. Does

God really care if I do that?"

My initial reaction to his question was, "If it appears in the Torah then I guarantee you that God really cares." My young friend accepted that approach, because the observance with which he was struggling was in fact an explicit verse in the Torah. But upon further reflection I realized that my answer – at least in part – was erroneous.

I have heard this very question asked in many different ways since I was a child. When my family first moved to Miami Beach in the mid-1970's there wasn't a whole lot for kid who didn't want to go to camp to do during the summer. My grandfather, of blessed memory, used to walk on the golf course every day right after sunrise. He would find all sorts of golf balls that had been hit into bushes or trees and he'd collect them.

One day he asked me if I wanted them. He suggested that perhaps I could make a business out of it by going to the golf course during the day and sitting next to "water" holes (where mediocre golfers tended to lose their balls), and see if anyone was interested in buying an extra ball. Sure enough, I went to the golf course and started talking and engaging the golfers and a new business was born.

To my surprise, a very large percentage of the golfers were Jewish and they were both a little surprised and impressed to see an industrious ten-year-old boy with a yarmulka (skullcap) selling golf balls. I received loads of unsolicited advice like, "If you wash the balls first, then you'll sell more" (which ended up being true) and "If you stand with your shoulders back and your spine straight you'll grow tall." I ended up growing to six feet, but I cannot honestly tell you that it had anything to do with how I stood. I also received some good natured ribbing: "You really need to wait till the balls stop rolling before collecting them" (though I wasn't the one collecting them).

They even told relevant jokes: The rabbi was a neophyte golfer. As he approached a hazardous hole with a green surrounded by water he debated if he should use his new golf ball. Deciding that the hole was too treacherous, he pulled out an old ball and placed it on the tee. Just then he heard a booming voice from above, "Use the new ball!" Thus heartened, he replaced the old ball with the new and approached the tee. Now the voice from above commanded, "Take a practice swing!" The rabbi stepped back and took a swing.

Feeling more confident, he approached the tee when the voice again rang out, "Use the old ball!"

Anyway, for whatever reason, many of them made mention of my yarmulka (in the Miami of the 1970's it was still uncommon to see a young boy wearing a yarmulka outside of the synagogue. In those days, Miami was still the "Deep South"). It quickly became clear to me that many of these golfers had attended Hebrew school in their youth. Whether it was plain guilt or some other reason, they often felt compelled to explain to me why

they weren't religious; "Because all God really cares about is being a good person – and that's what I focus on." That summer I must have heard ten different versions of the sentiment.

This all-too-common refrain of "What God really cares about..." to explain behavior that runs counter to God's actual words in the Bible is, at the very least, somewhat hypocritical. In general, trying to divine what the Almighty "really cares about" is a losing proposition. In fact, we have a teaching in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers, a compilation of the wisdom of our sages distilled into principles of life and ethical behavior) that directly addresses this issue. "Be as careful with a 'minor' mitzvah as with a 'major' one for you do not know the reward given for the mitzvot" (Pirkei Avot 2:1).

In other words, we might imagine that we can determine what is important to the Almighty by focusing on the presumptive reward for each commandment. This teaching tells us that even though we may perceive some of the commandments as "minor" and others as "major," we cannot infer from that assessment the innate value of God's commandments or what God "really cares" about.

We find a very similar idea in this week's Torah portion. "If you listen to these laws, safeguarding them and fulfilling them, then Hashem your Lord will guard the covenant that and the love with which He made an oath to your ancestors" (Deuteronomy 7:12).

Rashi, the great medieval Biblical commentator, interprets this verse in a rather surprising way. Rashi says that the laws referred to in this verse are those that we generally "trample underfoot." In other words, this refers to those commandments – mitzvot – that we feel are insignificant.

Many have struggled to understand why Rashi is limiting the fulfillment discussed in the verse to those types of mitzvot. In fact, it seems contrary to the simple reading of the verse, which seems to imply all types of commandments. What compelled Rashi to explain the verse in this manner?

Consider for a moment that you received a call from your neighbor at 2 a.m. begging you to come right over because his wife had a medical emergency and has to be rushed to the hospital. They have young children sleeping and need someone to come over right away to stay with them. This actually happened to me. Even though I wasn't particularly close with this family, I did what anyone in that situation would undoubtedly do; I responded in the affirmative and immediately rushed over there.

Now, imagine receiving a call at 2 a.m. from this very same neighbor, but instead he tells you that his pregnant wife has a sudden, intense craving for pickles and ice cream. He then asks you to go to the store to pick them up for her. In this scenario, you would hardly be as accommodating. In fact, you might just begin to wonder whether or not your neighbor has lost his mind,

and you'd definitely question the long-term viability of the friendship.

Yet, a wife has no qualms about asking her husband to get out of bed at 2 a.m. and pick up items that would satisfy her cravings. Why? The answer, of course, lies in the nature of the relationship. When you are closely connected to someone you can ask things of them that seem insignificant, but that show the strength of the bond. Of course, this is reciprocal and, if the situation were reversed, you would do the same for them.

Here is another way to understand this concept. Obviously, forgetting one's wedding anniversary is one of the cardinal sins of marriage. A husband (and wife) must treat the day as a special occasion, perhaps buying a nice gift before spending the evening at a nice restaurant. This is a standard expectation.

Now consider a spouse who regularly leaves notes of appreciation or buys flowers for no specific occasion, just to express how much they cherish and appreciate their beloved. Writing short notes or giving flowers aren't considered grand gestures. Yet, which would be considered a stronger indicator of the strength of the relationship; a very nice dinner once a year on an anniversary or notes and small gifts throughout the year for no specific reason other than to express one's love?

Grand gestures aren't necessarily a true barometer of the strength of the relationship, nor is responding to an expectation. We often go out of our way to help those in need, including complete strangers. But does contributing to a random stricken family's "GoFundMe" page because of a heart wrenching newspaper story, or calling 911 after witnessing a car accident indicate any sort of close relationship? Hardly. That is the humanity within us, and it compels us to respond. It's not about them; it's about us.

While it is true that responding to a great need of someone that we care about is of extreme importance, the true measure of the depth of the relationship cannot be determined by that. A true relationship isn't about responding to a great need, it's about being tuned in to who they are and what they might appreciate receiving as an expression of our love. In a relationship the value of the gift isn't determined by the price of what is given; it's based on how the recipient feels about it.

This is also true in our relationship with the Almighty. Because, for the most part, He is unknowable, we cannot pretend to know "what he really cares about." God alone decides the true value of our deeds. Therefore, when we follow His commandments, we don't get to set the true worth of the individual mitzvah – we simply do them because that is His desire, and it's the little things that count. In this way, our acts are out of love, not out of obligation.

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