

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularisation is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

These cannot be answered by the four great institutions of the modern West: science, technology, the market economy and the liberal democratic state. Science tells us how but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. The market gives us choices but does not tell us which choices to make. The liberal democratic state as a matter of principle holds back from endorsing any particular way of life. The result is that contemporary culture sets before us an almost infinite range of possibilities, but does not tell us who we are, why we are here, and how we should live.

Yet these are fundamental questions. Moses' first question to God in their first encounter at the burning bush was "Who am I?" The plain sense of the verse is that it was a rhetorical question: Who am I to undertake the extraordinary task of leading an entire people to freedom? But beneath the plain sense was a genuine question of identity. Moses had been brought up by an Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from the local Midianite shepherds, they went back and told their father, "An Egyptian man delivered us." Moses looked and spoke like an Egyptian.

He then married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters, and spent decades as a Midianite shepherd. The chronology is not entirely clear but since he was a relatively young man when he went to Midian and was eighty years old when he started leading the Israelites, he spent most of his adult life with his Midianite father-in-law, tending his sheep. So when he asked God, "Who am I?" beneath the surface there was a real question. Am I an Egyptian, a Midianite, or a Jew?

By upbringing he was an Egyptian, by experience he was a Midianite. Yet what proved decisive was his ancestry. He was a descendant of Abraham, the child of Amram and Yocheved. When he asked God his second question, "Who are you?" God first told him, "I will be what I will be." But then he gave him a second answer:

Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob--has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.

Here too there is a double sense. On the surface God was telling Moses what to tell the Israelites when they asked, "Who sent you to us?" But at a deeper level the Torah is telling us about the nature of identity. The answer to the question, "Who am I?" is not simply a matter of where I was born, where I spent my childhood or my adult life or of which country I am a citizen. Nor is it answered in terms of what I do for a living, or what are my interests and passions. These things are about where I am and what I am but not who I am.

God's answer - I am the God of your fathers - suggests some fundamental propositions. First, identity runs through genealogy. It is a matter of who my parents were, who their parents were and so on. This is not always true. There are adopted children. There are children who make a conscious break from their parents. But for most of us, identity lies in uncovering the story of our ancestors, which, in the case of Jews, given the unparalleled dislocations of Jewish life, is almost always a tale of journeys, courage, suffering or escapes from suffering, and sheer endurance.

Second, the genealogy itself tells a story. Immediately after telling Moses to tell the people he had been sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God continued: Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--a land flowing with milk and honey.' Ex. 3:16-17

It was not simply that God was the God of their ancestors. He was also the God who made certain promises: that He would bring them from slavery to freedom, from exile to the Promised Land. The Israelites were part of a narrative extended over time. They were part of an unfinished story, and God was about to write the next chapter.

What is more, when God told Moses that He was the God of the Israelites' ancestors, He added, "This is My eternal name, this is how I am to be recalled [zichri]

from generation to generation." God was here saying that He is beyond time - "This is My eternal name" - but when it comes to human understanding, He lives within time, "from generation to generation." The way He does this is through the handing on of memory: "This is how I am to be recalled." Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of what they remembered and handed on to me. Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory.

All of this is by way of prelude to a remarkable law in today's parsha. It tells us that first-fruits were to be taken to "the place God chooses," i.e. Jerusalem. They were to be handed to the priest, and each was to make the following declaration: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt

with a few people and lived there and became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our suffering, our harsh labour and our distress. The Lord then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearsomeness and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. I am now bringing the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me." Deut. 26:5-10

We know this passage because, at least since Second Temple times it has been a central part of the Haggadah, the story we tell at the Seder table. But note that it was originally to be said on bringing first-fruits, which was not on Pesach. Usually it was done on Shavuot.

What makes this law remarkable is this: We would expect, when celebrating the soil and its produce, to speak of the God of nature. But this text is not about nature. It is about history. It is about a distant ancestor, a "wandering Aramean", It is the story of our ancestors. It is a narrative explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi said in his classic book *Zachor*, Jews were the first people to see God in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and the first to make memory a religious duty.

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the land and state of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. We are what we remember, and the first-fruits declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget.

In the past few years, a spate of books has

appeared in the United States asking whether the American story is still being told, still being taught to children, still framing a story that speaks to all its citizens, reminding successive generations of the battles that had to be fought for there to be a "new birth of freedom", and the virtues needed for liberty to be sustained. The sense of crisis in each of these works is palpable, and though the authors come from very different positions in the political spectrum, their thesis is roughly the same: If you forget the story, you will lose your identity. There is such a thing as a national equivalent of Alzheimer's. Who we are depends on what we remember, and in the case of the contemporary West, a failure of collective memory poses a real and present danger to the future of liberty.

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole. You can't delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation. Winston Churchill said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward." Or to put it slightly differently: Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future. *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

“**F**or I have come to the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us.” (Deuteronomy 26:3) When the individual Jew brings the first fruits of the Land of Israel to the Holy Temple on the Festival of Shavuot, he addresses God as if He represents the entire historic People of Israel: “My father (Jacob) was a wandering Aramean... the Egyptians afflicted us, the Lord took us out of bondage”. And indeed, it is true that each Jew must see himself as the embodiment of his history, must completely identify with the generations which preceded him and feel responsible for the succeeding generations to come.

But what of the convert to Judaism who is not a descendant of generations of past Jews? The Mishna (*Bikkurim* 1,4) teaches: “These are the individuals who are responsible to bring [the first fruits], but do not declaim [the entire narrative]: the convert brings but does not declaim, since he cannot refer to “the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us.” If, however, his mother was an Israelite, he does bring and declaim [since the religious status of the child follows the religious status of the mother].

And then the Mishna continues to make a similar

point regarding the convert and the language of his prayers: And when [the convert] prays [the Amida] by himself, he says, "Blessed art thou O Lord, our God and the God of the forefathers of Israel" [rather than "and the God of our forefathers"]; when [the convert] is praying in the synagogue as the cantor [representative of the congregation], he says, "and the God of your forefathers." And if his mother was an Israelite, he says [with everyone else], "and the God of our fathers!" (Bikkurim 1:4)

Fascinatingly, however, and crucially importantly, normative Jewish law does not follow this Mishna; the convert has the same legal status as the biologically born Jew both with regard to the words of his speech accompanying his bringing of the first fruits, as well as with regards to his specific language in the Amida prayer.

The Jerusalem Talmud (ad loc.) disagrees with the Mishna in the Babylonian Talmud (which only cites the view of R. Meir), citing an alternate baraita which brings the view of R. Yehuda: "The convert himself must bring and declaim! What is the reason? Because God made Abraham the father of a multitude of nations, so that Abraham [metaphysically] becomes the father of everyone in the world who enters under the wings of the Divine Presence." Every convert is ensouled into the family of Abraham and Sarah!

In the Jerusalem Talmud, R. Yehoshua b. Levi declares that the normative law is to be in accordance with R. Yehuda, and R. Abahu actually ruled in the case of a convert that he bring and declaim in the manner of every biologically born Israelite. Maimonides decides similarly (Mishneh Torah, Laws of First Fruits), and even penned a most poignant responsum to Ovadia the Proselyte (MeKitzei Nirdamim, 293), which includes the ruling that a convert pray to "the God of our forefathers" as well! This is clearly why every convert becomes the son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah, with the ritual immersion at the time of the conversion, signaling their "rebirth" into the Jewish family-nation. (This does not take anything away from the biological parents, who nurtured them and so deserve heartfelt gratitude and sensitive consideration.) Hence, the convert too is considered to have entered Jewish history, and even to have Abrahamic –Sarahic "blood" pulsating through his/her veins. Judaism has nothing to do with race!

I would conclude this commentary with one additional point from an opposite direction: the Jew begins his declamation with the words, "My father was a wandering Aramean." Yes, we have seen from the Mishna in Bikkurim (as well as Kiddushin 3:12) that the religious status of the child is determined by the mother, most probably because the fetus is inextricably intertwined with the mother as long as it is in the mother's womb. Nevertheless, there is an important DNA contribution of the father which cannot be denied. This gives rise to a special halakhic category for a child who

is born to a gentile mother and a Jewish father, known as "zera Yisrael," Israelite seed.

Such a child is not considered to be a Jew and does require a process of conversion. However, most decisors throughout the generations have felt it to be incumbent upon the Jewish community to encourage conversion for such individuals and to be as lenient as possible in order to effectuate these conversions. An important and even monumental work called Zera Yisrael was published in 2012 by Rabbi Haim Amsalem (former M.K. Shas), in which he documents the relevant responsa, which suggest that "the religious court is duty-bound to convert" the individual with zera Yisrael status (Piskei Uziel, 64:4).

Indeed, in our daily prayer, after the Shema and before the Amida, we praise the Lord whose "words are alive and extant, devolving upon our fathers and upon us, upon our children and upon our future generations, and upon all the generations of the seed of Israel, Your servants..."

What is this reference to "seed of Israel"? Our children and our future generations have already been mentioned? Michael Freund, Director of Shavei Israel, pointed out to me (during an unforgettable trip to India for meetings with the Bnei Menashe) that this must be referring to those who have Jewish DNA from their paternal – but not maternal – side, Zera Yisrael! It is especially incumbent upon us to reclaim these exiled seeds of Abraham and Sarah and restore them to their land and their Jewish ancestry! ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The explicit descriptions of the disasters, personal and national, that make up a large portion of this week's parsha raise certain issues. Why do Moshe and the Torah paint such a harsh and unforgiving picture of the Jewish future before the people? And if we expect people to glory in their Jewishness, is this the way to sell the product, so to speak? We all support the concept of truth in advertising but isn't this over and above the necessary requirement?

The fact that the description of much of Jewish history and its calamitous events related in this parsha is completely accurate, prophecy fulfilled to the nth degree, only compounds the difficulties mentioned above. But in truth, there is clear reason for these descriptions of the difficulties inherent in being Jewish to be made apparent.

We read in this book of Devarim that God poses the stark choices before the Jewish people – life or death, uniqueness or conformity, holiness or mendacity. Life is made up of choices and most of them are difficult. Sugar coating the consequences of life's choices hardly makes for wisdom. Worse still, it erodes any true belief or sense of commitment in the choice that actually is made.

Without the necessary commitment, the choice itself over time becomes meaningless. The Torah tells us that being a Jew requires courage, commitment, a great sense of vision and eternity, and deep self-worth. So the Torah must spell out the down side, so to speak, of the choice in being Jewish. The folk saying always was: "It is difficult to be a Jew." But, in the long run it is even more difficult and painful, eventually, for a Jew not to be a Jew in practice, thought and commitment.

According to Jewish tradition and Halacha, a potential convert to Judaism is warned by the rabbinic court of the dangers of becoming Jewish. He or she is told that Jews are a small minority, persecuted by many and reviled by others. But the potential convert also sees the vision and grandeur of Judaism, the inheritance of our father Avraham and our mother Sarah and of the sheltering wings of the God of Israel that guarantee our survival. The potential convert is then asked to choose whether he or she is willing to truly commit to the project.

Without that commitment the entire conversion process is a sham and spiritually meaningless. And the commitment is not really valid if the downside, so to speak, of being Jewish is not explained and detailed. Judaism is not for fair weather friends or soldiers on parade. The new phrase in the sporting world is that the players have to "grind it out." Well, that is what being Jewish means – to grind it out, daily, for an entire lifetime. The positive can only outweigh the negative if the negative is known. Those who look for an easy faith, a religion that demands nothing, who commit to empty phrases but are never willing to pay the price of practice and discipline, will not pass the test of time and survival that being Jewish has always required. ©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 often describes Jerusalem as "hamakom asher yivchar Hashem" (the place God has chosen; Deuteronomy 26:2). One wonders why Jerusalem is not identified as "the place God made holy." Isn't being "holy" more sublime than being "chosen"?

It has been suggested that the status of Jerusalem as the chosen place does not necessarily mean that it is embraced by people as a holy place. God can declare a place chosen, and that designation remains forever. Whether it is holy in real life depends on human input.

What is true of a place is also true of a nation. Because we are the "chosen people" doesn't mean we are a "holy people." That status must be earned by the nation as a whole.

Hence, in our sentence, God is described as "choosing" Jerusalem, which is His prerogative. Making

the city live and breathe holiness, however, is not up to God but up to us.

A holy Jerusalem must reflect the meaning of its name – Yerushalayim. Yeru is Aramaic for city (similar to the word ir, city in Hebrew); shalayim has several meanings:

- It may be associated with Shalom, upper case (a name of God). Thus, Jerusalem has the capacity to be a godly city.

- Or it may reflect the word shalem ("whole" or "one"). Thus, Jerusalem has the potential to be a city of unity for all Jews, and for that matter, for all Jews and gentiles.

- Or it may refer to shalom, lower case (peace). Thus, Jerusalem represents a constant yearning and reaching for peace – outer peace, inner peace.

Natan Sharansky, the famed Soviet Prisoner of Zion, expressed this human responsibility for Yerushalayim beautifully. Standing aside his wife Avital in Jerusalem at the wedding of their children (Rachel and Micha), Natan suggested that the symbolism of breaking the glass was now more challenging than under his chuppah in the Soviet Union many years earlier – not long before he was sentenced to the Gulag.

Our aim was so simple and so clear. We had to win the [physical] battle [to return to Jerusalem] and nothing could deter us. Today, on the one hand you have to be builders and guardians of [the physical] Jerusalem, and at the same time guardians of the idea of Jerusalem.... The power of unity and connection to the generations of our people is in heavenly Jerusalem, in Yerushalayim shel ma'ala.

Whether the earthly Jerusalem reflects the values of the heavenly Jerusalem becoming the holy Jerusalem is up to us. ©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

Eating the First Fruits

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Parshat Ki Tavo touches on the *mitzvot* of *bikurim* (first fruits) and *ma'aser sheni* (a tithe consumed in Jerusalem). However, the details relevant to eating them are found elsewhere. The mitzva of eating *bikurim* appears in *Devarim* 12:5-6, and the mitzva of eating *ma'aser sheni* is in *Devarim* 14:23.

Not only are these two *mitzvot* mentioned in Ki Tavo in close proximity to each other, but they have many similarities (for example, they are both eaten in Jerusalem in a state of purity). Accordingly, our Sages apply the laws of one to the other. There are some differences, though. For example, *ma'aser sheni* is eaten in Jerusalem by its owners, while *bikurim* are presented to the *Kohanim* when the owners arrive in Jerusalem.

The declaration said when bringing *ma'aser sheni* to Jerusalem includes the phrase: "I have not eaten of it while in mourning" (*Devarim* 26:14). This means a person is required to eat *ma'aser sheni* joyfully. When he is mourning and shrouded in sorrow, he may not eat it. Because we apply the rules of *ma'aser sheni* to *bikurim*, a *Kohen* who is in mourning may not eat *bikurim*. Others derive the latter rule from the verse that states regarding *bikurim* that "You shall enjoy all the bounty" (*Devarim* 26:11). This requirement of joy applies not only to the field owners who bring their fruit to the *Kohen*, but also to the *Kohen* who is privileged to eat the fruit of the Holy Land.

The mitzva of eating *bikurim* is so important that the *Kohen* who eats *bikurim* makes a special blessing (just as he does before reciting the priestly blessing): "*Asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu le'echol bikurim*" ("Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to eat *bikurim*").
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RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"You shall place it before Hashem your G-d, and you shall bow low before Hashem, your G-d." (*Devarim* 26:10) We are now introduced to the mitzvah of Bikkurim. Having been taken from Egypt, where we had no land of our own, Hashem brought us to the Land of Israel, where we would have our own portions. However, this gift was contingent on our appreciating from whence it came, and acknowledging Hashem's kindness. To that end, when a farmer planted and began to harvest his first fruits, he would make a pilgrimage to the Bais HaMikdash in Jerusalem with an offering of the best of them. Beyond that, annually he had a tithing obligation to continually acknowledge Hashem's beneficence.

The ritual included placing the fruits in a basket, often made of gold or silver, and standing before a Kohain. There, the person would recite a special declaration thanking Hashem for His bounty and acknowledging how he brought us close to Him through the ages. The basket would be presented to the Kohain who would wave it, and then the person would take it back and place it down. Finally, before he left, the farmer would prostrate himself before Hashem, spreading out his arms and legs in the most intense form of bowing.

What was the reason for this bowing?

In truth, anyone who entered or left the Bais HaMikdash had to bow. Here, specifically, the commentaries say it was required as a respectful show of taking leave of one's master. If this was common practice anyway, why was it necessary to highlight it specifically here?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us how to be humble, especially when interacting with Hashem. It is common for large donors to receive great honor for their

gifts. Dinners and plaques abound, with people showering them with compliments. It is easy for someone to feel good about himself, and forget that all the good he had, came from Hashem.

Therefore, we tell him that when he brings his offering, not only must he recite the declarations, but he should not let himself become haughty with his gift. The bikkurim and maaser he brings are not because he is so great, but because Hashem is. When he makes his donation, he must acknowledge that all he has come from Hashem, and even the fact that Hashem accepts the donation is an act of kindness from Heaven.

The bowing at the end is meant to remind the person to be humble and not feel deserving of honor for doing what he did, because that's what Hashem gave him the prosperity for. Only when he takes leave in this fashion can he gain the benefits of the offerings, which are intended to increase his gratitude to Hashem and his appreciation for all he has received.

The story is told of a wealthy man who was known to give generously when approached by a certain Rabbi but, when another Rabbi called upon him, the donation he gave was much less. Confused, the Rabbi asked the man to explain.

"What can I tell you?" he replied. "When that Rav comes to me, he doesn't wait for me to invite him in. He barges into my home, pushes me down in my chair and starts berating me for my lack of Torah; for my lack of Mitzvos. He yells at me, 'How will you get into Heaven?? With your filthy money?!' I see that he's right and I'm so disgusted by the money that I throw it at him just to distance it from myself."

"But when you come in, speaking softly and ingratiating yourself to me, I know the only reason is because I have money. I figure it must be something worth holding onto, so I don't wish to part with so much of it." © 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Declarations

When the B'nei Yisrael were about to enter the Land, Moshe instructed them on a new commandment, this time involving bringing the first of their harvest and the message that they were to recite to the Kohain. "And it will be when you come into the land that Hashem your Elokim is giving you as an inheritance and you possess it and you dwell in it. And you will take from among the first fruits of your land that you will bring that Hashem your Elokim gives to you and you will place them into a basket and you will go to the place that Hashem your Elokim will choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you will come to the Kohain who will be at that time and you will say to him, 'I have told today to Hashem your Elokim that I have come to this land that Hashem promised to our forefathers to give to us,' and the Kohain will take the basket from your hand and raise it before the altar of Hashem your Elokim. And

you will raise your voice and you will say before Hashem your Elokim, 'An Aramite tried to destroy my father and he went down to Egypt and he sojourned there small in number and he became there a big nation mighty and numerous. And the Egyptians dealt badly with us and they made us suffer and they gave us hard work. And we cried out to Hashem the Elokim of our forefathers and Hashem heard our voices and he understood our suffering and our travail and our oppression. And Hashem took us out from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great awesomeness and with signs and with wonders. And He brought us to this place and He gave us this land a land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold I have brought the first fruits of the land that Hashem has given to me and have given it before Hashem your Elokim,' and you will bow down before Hashem your Elokim. And you will be happy in all the food that Hashem your Elokim has given you and your household, you and to the Levi and the stranger that is among you."

A second declaration would be made on the nineteenth of Nisan before the last day of Pesach following the end of the third and sixth years of the seven-year cycle. On the third and sixth year, the second tithe, which was normally brought to Jerusalem and eaten there, is replaced by the tithe for the poor man. "When you finish tithing all of the tithe of your produce in the third year the year of the tithe and you have given to the Levi to the stranger and to the orphan and to the widow as everything that was commanded of you, and they ate within your gates and they were satisfied. And you will say before Hashem your Elokim, 'I have cleared out the Holy from the house and also have given it to the Levi and to the stranger and the orphan and the widow as all Your commandments that You commanded me, I did not transgress from Your commandments and I did not forget. I did not eat from it in mourning and I did not dispose of it in impurity and I did not use from it for the dead I listened to the voice of Hashem, my Elokim, and I did like all that you commanded me. Look down from the lofty place of Your Holiness from the heavens and bless Your people Israel and the land that You gave to us as You swore to our forefathers a land flowing with milk and honey."

These two declarations are sometimes called vidui, confession. The vidui in the first declaration involves understanding that it is not through any greatness that we are now in possession of the land, but we may continue to possess it if we adhere to all of the mitzvot. The Sforno explains the second vidui: Had the Jews not worshipped the Golden Calf, each household would have had a firstborn who would serve as a "priest." Each house would be a sacred Temple and it would not have been necessary to remove the Holy tithe from each home. According to Nechama Leibovitz, the first vidui is more universal, speaking more in the second person (you). The second declaration is primarily individualistic,

with most of the terms using first person (I). The bikurim (first fruits) declaration includes the historical declaration which applies to all Jews, not just the ones who are bringing the bikurim.

It is important to note the order of the two declarations and the purpose of each. The declaration was in recognition of Hashem's generosity in giving us the land, not because of our worthiness, but the worthiness of our forefathers. One begins to understand from this declaration each year that the land is an eternal gift to him only if he uses it correctly. He must fulfill all of the laws of the land that are for Hashem and those laws which are for his fellowman.

The ma'aser declaration did not have to be made in Jerusalem since it was not a communal declaration. Each individual would declare that he had fulfilled the laws of the various tithes, which involved terumah, ma'aser rishon, ma'aser sheini which were to be eaten in Jerusalem, and peah (the corners of the field), leket (the gleanings), and shichicha (those stalks which were forgotten in the field). Each of these "donations" required an active role on the part of the individual. Each donation was the fulfillment of a law in the Torah, not merely a choice by the donor to support the poor or the widow, orphan, or stranger. Each individual makes this declaration alone, since this is the testimony to his own fulfillment of these mitzvot.

Why is the ma'aser declaration only given on the third and sixth years of the cycle? It is only on those years when the ma'aser sheini changes to become the ma'aser ani that the individual has been able to complete all of the different tithes that could possibly be brought. But there is a further reason. One only realizes after three years of declaring that the land truly is the possession of Hashem and is ours only if we are worthy, that one is now capable of understanding that his fulfillment of all of the mitzvot of the land is the only way in which he may maintain possession of the land. The declaration that he now makes is in recognition of that responsibility.

The lessons of the bikurim and the ma'aser are lessons which are most significant in this month of Elul. We must strive for personal growth and commitment to the mitzvot of Hashem if we are to become worthy of maintaining that which we currently have. This applies not only to our physical and material possessions but also our spiritual ones. May we be able to declare at our personal vidui that we are continually striving to accomplish that goal. It is the effort which Hashem rewards more than the actual accomplishment. May our efforts bring us the reward of health and peace in the coming year. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Seizing on the fact that the Hebrew word for a granary -- osem -- shares two letters with the word

for "obscured" -- samui -- Chazal make an intriguing assertion: Blessing [i.e. increase in volume] is common only in things that are "obscured from the eye" (Bava Metzia 42a). The pasuk on which that truth is based is in our parsha: "Hashem will order the blessing to be with you in your granaries [ba'asamecha]..." (Devarim, 28:8).

Rav Dessler (first chelek of Michtav M'Elياهو, pg. 178 in my ancient edition) explains that what we call cause and effect, the essence of physics, is really an illusion; only Hashem's will is operative, even in what we call physical nature. And so, when something is out of sight, where cause and effect cannot be perceived, His will can cause bracha in the hidden.

That idea of natural law's suspension in the case of something beneath perception is vaguely, but tantalizingly, reminiscent of quantum physics' "Schrödinger's cat" thought experiment, where direct cause and effect is seemingly suspended -- on the subatomic level, but with theoretical implications for the macroscopic world. The issue underlying Schrödinger's paradox remains an unsolved problem in physics.

Be that as it may, though, something important will in fact be "obscured from the eye" in a few weeks: the moon, on Rosh Hashana. The moon is Klal Yisrael's timekeeper, and time is the most fundamental element of nature. Klal Yisrael's clock will not be visible on the first of the days of teshuva.

And time itself, in a sense, will be suspended then. Because we can interfere with its natural, relentless march forward -- or, at least, with its unreachable past. Through the bracha of teshuva, which Chazal tell us can change the very nature of our pasts, traveling back, in a way, in time -- turning past wrong actions done intentionally into actions done inadvertently; even, with the deepest teshuva, repentance born of pure love of Hashem, into meritorious acts. © 2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

As I sit to write this column, I notice that it is exactly thirty-one years to the day from when Hurricane Andrew made landfall in South Florida. On August 24, 1992, the storm struck and destroyed more than 25,000 homes and damaged an additional 100,000. The hurricane caused 26 direct and 39 indirect deaths, the majority of which occurred in Dade County. The estimated financial losses exceeded \$26 billion and, at the time, it was by far the greatest natural disaster (in terms of monetary loss) to ever hit the United States.

During this time, I was married with a young family and living in Miami Beach. Before the storm hit, we evacuated to my in-laws' home, but we returned the following day. Trying to get home was an ordeal; the National Guard was helping the local police protect the empty homes in Miami Beach and you couldn't enter the area without proof that you lived there. A trip that should

have taken 20 minutes took hours.

The devastation with which we were confronted was just stunning; fallen trees strewn everywhere as if someone had dropped a box of toothpicks and dangerous downed power lines blocked passage on most of the streets. Though my neighbors and I had several huge trees fall, none of them had landed on our houses and the actual damage to our homes was thankfully minimal.

However, the one lasting memory I have is that of trying to manage the heat. Of course, with all the downed power lines we had no electricity, and this went on for five days. Trying to manage feeding a young family without refrigeration was challenging. But that wasn't the worst of it. If you have ever been to South Florida in the middle of August, you can probably imagine how hot it was. But this was even worse; aside from the sun beating down and generating temperatures in the high 90's (it cooled to a balmy 88 degrees at night), the area had just been deluged with water -- and the intensity of the sun during the day created a steam bath effect. It was absolutely brutal.

We became consumed with a desperate yearning for the electricity to come back on so that we could have our air conditioning back. It was all we could think about and all that we talked about with our neighbors. For my part, I couldn't even think about work or doing anything productive. Without exaggeration, it was so oppressive that we just didn't want to do anything; we were almost totally paralyzed by discomfort.

That's when it struck me; my house was actually built around 1920, many, many decades before air conditioning was widely available. I was dumbstruck by the fact that a mere 60-70 years prior this was the normal living conditions in Miami Beach! Somehow people managed to live and work and be productive during the summer months in South Florida! Why were we suffering so?

I had to face the fact that I had been so spoiled by modern conveniences that my baseline of what I considered acceptable living conditions had been terribly and sharply skewed. Somehow air conditioning had become a basic need, not a luxury, and without it I was rendered powerless and almost totally aimless. I realized that when we begin to conflate wants with needs our lives change dramatically, and almost always for the worse. Remarkably, his week's Torah portion has a similar message.

This week's Torah reading goes into great detail regarding both the rewards for following the Almighty's word and the calamitous repercussions for going against it. The Torah commits over fifty verses to foretelling the depths to which the Jewish nation will eventually fall, and the nearly unimaginable suffering we will endure as a consequence (e.g. personal financial and societal ruin, horrible diseases, starvation to the point of cannibalism

of one's own children etc.).

The Torah then makes an absolutely astonishing statement explaining why all these horrible things will befall the Jewish people: "Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, with happiness and a good heart, even though you had an abundance of everything" (28:45-47).

On the face of it this is actually quite astounding; if the Jewish people actually did have an "abundance of everything" then why were they not serving the Almighty with "happiness and a good heart"? This seems to be a devastating indictment of their future behavior, one that would lead to horrific suffering. It is therefore critical that we understand what the Torah is trying to teach us.

During the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE a terrible famine gripped the city and the inhabitants of Jerusalem suffered greatly. The Talmud (Gittin 56a) recounts the story of the last day in the life of a fabulously wealthy woman named Martha from the famously wealthy Baisus family. Martha sent her purchasing agent to the market to buy fine flour for the household. He returned home shortly thereafter empty-handed saying there was no more fine flour available. Instead, he suggested buying the white flour, which was still available. Martha agreed and he went back to the market. Once again, he returned empty-handed saying that there was no more white flour in the market, but that there was still dark flour available.

Martha sent him back to the market to buy the dark flour. By the time he got there all the dark flour was gone and, once again, he returned home empty-handed and explained that all the wheat flour in the market was sold out and the only thing left was a very coarse barely flour. Martha sent him back to the market to purchase the barley flour, but by the time he got there that too was sold out. He ended up with nothing.

The Talmud goes on to say that Martha was so despondent that she ran out of her palatial home without even putting on her shoes to see if she could scavenge some sort of food in the street. According to one opinion in the Talmud, in her anguish and despair she accidentally stepped barefooted into some dung that was in the street. She was gripped with extreme disgust and in her utter shock she perished on the spot.

The famous Talmudic sage of the time, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai thus applied to her the Biblical verse, also found in this week's portion, "The tender and delicate woman among you who would not venture to set the sole of her foot upon the ground" (Deuteronomy 28:56). This passage in the Talmud requires further interpretation. Following the theme of the verse, the whole point of the story seems to be that the Torah predicts that in the worst of times a highborn woman who ordinarily never ventured out of her home without shoes would do so, and that this would be a sign of how desperate the times had become. The story with Martha certainly fulfills that foreboding verse.

But why does the Talmud relate the whole background story about the servant who couldn't figure out how to buy flour for the family? Surely the Talmud isn't merely telling us that even two thousand years ago it was impossible to find competent domestic help?

Similar to my experience in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, when a person has something that he considers a basic need stripped away from him he feels so deprived that he becomes depressed and unable to move forward. Even worse, because his baseline for basic subsistence has been so warped, he fails to appreciate all the actual good in his life.

This is what the Torah means when it says, "Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, with happiness and a good heart, even though you had an abundance of everything." The Jewish people were destined to become so spoiled that even though they had "an abundance of everything" they continuously moved the needle of their baseline for basic subsistence so that they were no longer happy or joyful or even appreciative of what they had. They became so entrenched in their luxuries that they no longer really appreciated them as being special; it was just the basic baseline for existence.

This is exactly why the Talmud introduces the whole story of Martha of the Baisus family with the seeming incompetence of her servant. In actuality, he was far from incompetent, he probably knew her better than she knew herself.

Her servant was fully cognizant that when she sent him to the market for fine flour there was no way that she would accept any lower grade -- she would be literally sickened by it. He understood that until she restructured her thinking to come to terms with less and then expressly ask him to buy the next lower grade, there was no point in spending precious money purchasing it. Each lower grade of flour was a subsequent peeling of the layers of her psyche. That's why she never said to him "I don't care what you buy, just bring something home!" She needed to get there emotionally, step by step.

The Torah is telling us that in the future the Jewish people, too, will lose a sense of who they are. They will become totally entrenched and spoiled and warped by the new paradigm of their successes. It's for this reason that all these calamities will eventually befall them. The calamities will serve to clarify and refocus us as to what's real and what's not.

God doesn't punish people out of anger, he does so out of care and love for humanity. He brings punishments and terrible sufferings in the hope that eventually we will learn from our mistakes, wise up, and begin to live happier, more meaningful, and productive lives. Once we have our expectations moved back to the center, we begin to appreciate all the blessings in our lives and are able to serve God properly with happiness and a good heart. ©2023 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org