

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

On 14 October 1663, the famous diarist Samuel Pepys paid a visit to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Creechurch Lane in the city of London. Jews had been exiled from England in 1290 but in 1656, following an intercession by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam, Oliver Cromwell concluded that there was in fact no legal barrier to Jews living there. So for the first time since the thirteenth century Jews were able to worship openly.

The first synagogue, the one Pepys visited, was simply a private house belonging to a successful Portuguese Jewish merchant, Antonio Fernandez Carvajal, that had been extended to house the congregation. Pepys had been in the synagogue once before, at the memorial service for Carvajal who died in 1659. That occasion had been sombre and decorous. What he saw on his second visit was something else altogether, a scene of celebration that left him scandalised. This is what he wrote in his diary:

"... after dinner my wife and I, by Mr. Rawlinson's conduct, to the Jewish Synagogue: where the men and boys in their vayles (i.e. tallitot), and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up, which I believe is their Law, in a press (i.e. the Torah in the Aron) to which all coming in do bow; and at the putting on their vayles do say something, to which others that hear him do cry Amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that everyone desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this."

Poor Pepys. No one told him that the day he chose to come to the synagogue was Simchat Torah, nor had he ever seen in a house of worship anything like the exuberant joy of the day when we dance with the Torah scroll as if the world was a wedding and the book a bride,

with the same abandon as King David when he brought the holy ark into Jerusalem.

Joy is not the first word that naturally comes to mind when we think of the severity of Judaism as a moral code or the tear-stained pages of Jewish history. As Jews we have degrees in misery, postgraduate qualifications in guilt, and gold-medal performances in wailing and lamentation. Someone once summed up the Jewish festivals in three sentences: "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat." Yet in truth what shines through so many of the psalms is pure, radiant joy. And joy is one of the keywords of the book of Devarim. The root 's-m-ch' (the root of the word simcha, joy) appears once each in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but twelve times in Deuteronomy, seven of them in our parsha.

What Moses says again and again is that joy is what we should feel in the Land of Israel, the land given to us by God, the place to which the whole of Jewish life since the days of Abraham and Sarah has been a journey. The vast universe with its myriad galaxies and stars is God's work of art, but within it planet earth, and within that the Land of Israel, and the sacred city of Jerusalem, is where He is closest, where His Presence lingers in the air, where the sky is the blue of heaven and the stones are a golden throne. There, said Moses, in "the place the Lord your God will choose... to place His Name there for His dwelling" (Deut. 12:5), you will celebrate the love between a small and otherwise insignificant people and the God who, taking them as His own, lifted them to greatness.

It will be there, said Moses, that the entire tangled narrative of Jewish history would become lucid, where a whole people -- "you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns, who have no hereditary portion with you" -- will sing together, worship together, and celebrate the festivals together, knowing that history is not about empire or conquest, nor society about hierarchy and power, that commoner and king, Israelite and Priest are all equal in the sight of God, all voices in His holy choir, all dancers in the circle at whose centre is the radiance of the Divine. This is what the covenant is about: the transformation of the human condition through what Wordsworth called "the deep power of joy."

Happiness (in Greek eudaemonia), Aristotle said, is the ultimate purpose of human existence. We desire many things, but usually as a means to something else. Only one thing is always desirable in itself and

never for the sake of something else, namely happiness.

There is such a sentiment in Judaism. The biblical word for happiness, *ashrei*, is the first word of the book of Psalms and a key word of our daily prayers. But far more often, Tanach speaks about *simchah*, joy -- and they are different things. Happiness is something you can feel alone, but joy, in Tanach, is something you share with others. For the first year of marriage, rules Deuteronomy (24:5) a husband must "stay at home and bring joy to the wife he has married." Bringing first-fruits to the Temple, "You and the Levite and the stranger living among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household" (Deut. 26:11). In one of the most extraordinary lines in the Torah, Moses says that curses will befall the nation not because they served idols or abandoned God but "because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness out of the abundance of all things" (Deut. 28:47). A failure to rejoice is the first sign of decadence and decay.

There are other differences. Happiness is about a lifetime but joy lives in the moment. Happiness tends to be a cool emotion, but joy makes you want to dance and sing. It's hard to feel happy in the midst of uncertainty. But you can still feel joy. King David in the Psalms spoke of danger, fear, dejection, sometimes even despair, but his songs usually end in the major key: "For His anger lasts only a moment, / but His favour lasts a lifetime; / weeping may stay for the night, / but rejoicing comes in the morning..."

"You turned my wailing into dancing; / You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, / that my heart may sing Your praises and not be silent. / Lord my God, I will praise You forever." (Psalm 30:6-13)

In Judaism joy is the supreme religious emotion. Here we are, in a world filled with beauty. Every breath we breathe is the spirit of God within us. Around us is the love that moves the sun and all the stars. We are here because someone wanted us to be. The soul that celebrates, sings.

And yes, life is full of grief and disappointments, problems and pains, but beneath it all is the wonder that we are here, in a universe filled with beauty, among people each of whom carries within them a trace of the face of God. Robert Louis Stevenson rightly said: "Find out where joy resides and give it a voice far beyond singing. For to miss the joy is to miss all."

In Judaism, faith is not a rival to science, an attempt to explain the universe. It's a sense of wonder, born in a feeling of gratitude. Judaism is about taking life in both hands and making a blessing over it. It is as if God had said to us: I made all this for you. This is My gift. Enjoy it and help others to enjoy it also. Wherever you can, heal some of the pain that people inflict on one another, or the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Because pain, sadness, fear, anger, envy, resentment, these are things that cloud your vision and

separate you from others and from Me.

Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage to grieve. It takes religious courage to rejoice." I believe that with all my heart. So I am moved by the way Jews, who know what it is to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, still see joy as the supreme religious emotion. Every day we begin our morning prayers with a litany of thanks, that we are here, with a world to live in, family and friends to love and be loved by, about to start a day full of possibilities, in which, by acts of loving kindness, we allow God's Presence to flow through us into the lives of others. Joy helps heal some of the wounds of our injured, troubled world. *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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In this week's parsha the Torah continues with the theme that runs through the previous parshiyot of Dvarim, that we are always faced with stark choices in life – either blessings or curses, good or evil. The words of the Torah seemingly offer little option for middle ground on these basic issues of belief and behavior. Yet, we are all aware that the events in life are rarely, if ever, all or nothing, one hundred percent blessing or curse. In fact, Jewish tradition and teachings instruct us that hidden in tragedy there is always a glimmer of hope and goodness, and that all joy and happiness contains within it the taste of the bittersweet.

Jewish philosophy and theology has taught us that evil somehow has a place in God's good and benign world. We are faced with the problem of why the Torah addresses these matters without nuance, in such a harsh way which seemingly brooks no compromise, without a hint of a middle ground. After all, the Torah is not a debating society where one is forced to take an extreme uncompromising stand in order to focus the issue being discussed more sharply and definitively.

Many rabbinic scholars of previous generations have maintained that it is only in our imperfect, post Temple period that we are to search for good in evil and temper our joy with feelings of seriousness and even sadness. But in an idyllic world, where the Divine Spirit is a palpable entity, the choices are really stark and the divisions are 100 percent to zero. Far be it from me to not accept the opinion of these great scholars of Israel. However I wish to interject a somewhat different thought into this matter. This parsha begins with the word *re'eih* – see. As all of us are well aware, there are stages in life that we can see well only with the aid of corrective lenses. Without that correction, we can easily make grave mistakes trying to read and see what appears before us. If we have to read small print, such as looking up a number in the Jerusalem telephone directly – it is

almost impossible without the aid of corrective lenses. Well, this situation is not limited to the physical world, of just our actual eyesight, but it applies equally to our spiritual world of Torah observance and personal morality.

Many times we think we are behaving righteously when we are in fact behaving badly because we are not seeing the matter correctly. We are not wearing our corrective lenses, with the benefit of halacha, history, good common sense and a Jewish value system that should govern our lives. Without this advantage, we see blessings and curses, good and evil, blurry, and undefined before our eyes. The Torah wishes us to see clearly - to instinctively be able to recognize what is the blessing in our life and what is not. The Torah itself has been kind enough to provide us with the necessary corrective lenses to see clearly and accurately. These lenses consist of observance of Torah and its commandments and loyalty to Jewish values and traditions. © 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall smite, yes smite, all of the inhabitants of that city by the sword... and you shall burn entirely with fire the city and all of its spoils to the Lord your God, and it shall be an everlasting desolation (tel); it shall not be rebuilt again” (Deuteronomy 13:16,17). The Bible ordains the destruction of an entire city which has been seduced and deceived into practicing idolatry. And, although many sages of the Talmud maintain that such a situation “never was and was never created” (B.T. Sanhedrin), the harsh words nevertheless sear our souls.

What is even more difficult to understand are the concluding words of the Bible regarding this idolatrous and hapless city: “... [and the Lord] shall give you compassion, and He shall be compassionate towards you, and He shall cause you to increase as he has sworn to your forbearers... This is because you have hearkened to the voice of the Lord your God to observe all of His commandments... to do what is righteous (hayashar) in the eyes of the Lord your God” (13:18,19).

Compassion? Righteousness? Are these fitting words to describe such an extreme punishment?

To understand the simple meaning of the Biblical command, it is necessary to explore the actual meaning – and nature of the offense – of idolatry.

The Bible lashes out against idolatry more than any other transgression, and of the 14 verses that comprise the Decalogue, four of them focus on idolatrous worship, its evils constantly reiterated.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their

penetrating study *Idolatry*, cite various commentaries as to why idolatry is presented as so repulsive in the Bible. For Maimonides the sin of idolatry is theological; for the Meiri it was the number of innocent children sacrificed to Moloch, the eating of flesh cruelly torn from living animals, and the wanton sexual orgies associated with the Dionysian rites which so incensed the Lord. Indeed, the Bible seems to support the Meiri position; to give but two examples: “You shall not bow down to their gods and you shall not serve them; you shall not act in accordance with their deeds (Exodus 23:24)”... “You shall destroy, yes destroy [the seven indigenous nations of Canaan] lest they teach you to do all the abominations which they do before their gods (Deuteronomy 20:17,18).”

The Bible never understood monotheism in terms of faith alone; from the very beginning of God’s election of Abraham who was commanded to convey to subsequent generations not only belief in one God, but rather in a God “...whose path it is to do compassionate righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19), belief in ethical monotheism. Moses asks for a glimpse into the Divine (Exodus 32:18). The Almighty, after explaining that no mortal being can ever truly understand the Ineffable and the Infinite, does grant a partial glimpse: “The Lord, the Lord, is a God of Compassion (raham) and freely-giving love, long-suffering, full of lovingkindness, and truth ...” (Exodus 34:6).

Even Maimonides suggests that these descriptions, known as the 13 Attributes of the Divine, are not so much theological as anthropological, to teach us mortals –commanded to imitate God– precisely how to do so: just as He is Compassionate, you humans must be compassionate, just as He gives love freely, so must you humans...

Hence, the essence of Judaism is not proper intellectual understanding of the Divine, (which is impossible), but rather proper human imitation of the Divine traits, acting towards other human beings the way God would have us act, in compassionately righteous and just ways. And so Maimonides concludes his Guide for the Perplexed, written at the end of his life, with a citation from Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: But only in this should one glory if he wishes to glory: Learn about and come to know Me. I am the Lord who does lovingkindness, justice and righteous compassion on earth. Only in these do I delight, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:22,23).

From this perspective, only a religion which teaches love of every human being, which demands a system of righteousness and morality, and which preaches a world of peace, can take its rightful place as a religion of ethical monotheism. Islam, for example, has enriched the world with architectural and decorative breakthroughs, glorious poetry, mathematical genius, and philosophical writings influenced by Aristotle. And certainly, the Kalami and Sufi interpretations of the Koran, which present jihad as a spiritual struggle, place

Islam alongside Judaism and Christianity as a worthy vehicle and noble model for ethical monotheism. Tragically, however, the Jihadism, spawned from Saudi Arabia's brand of Wahhabi Islam, the Al-Qaida culture of homicide-bomber terrorism wreaking worldwide fear and destruction – from Manhattan to Bali – and threatening anyone who is not a Jihad believing Muslim, is the antithesis of ethical monotheism.

George Weigel, a Catholic theologian and distinguished Senior Fellow at the Ethical and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., cites a definition of Jihadism in his compelling study, *Faith, Reason and the War against Jihadism*. "It is the religiously inspired ideology which teaches that it is the moral obligation of Muslims to employ whatever means are necessary to compel the world's submission to Islam." He also analyzes the theology of Sayyid Qutb (d.1966), who stresses the fact that God's one-ness demands universal fealty, that the very existence of a non-Muslim constitutes a threat to the success of Islam and therefore of God, and so such an individual must be converted or killed; other religions and modern secularism are not merely mistaken but are evil, "filth to be expunged." The goal is Global Jihad. Such a perverted "theology" only transmutes true Sufi Moslem monotheism into hateful Wahabi mono-Satanism. The enemy of the free world is not Islam; it is Jihadism.

Let me return to our Biblical passage regarding the idolatrous city. An army hell-bent upon the destruction of innocent people, whose only sin is to believe differently than they do, enters the category of "...the one who is coming to kill you must be first killed by you." One cannot love the good without hating the evil, 'good' defined as the protection of the innocent and 'evil' as the destruction of the innocent.

The only justification for taking a life is in order to protect innocent lives – when taking a life is not only permitted but mandatory. Hence the Bible refers to the destruction of the murderous inhabitants of such a city as an act committed for the sake of righteousness. Just imagine the world today if the United States had not committed its forces to help fight Nazi Germany!

But even the most justified of wars wreaks havoc, collateral damage can never be completely prevented, and the soul of one who takes even a guilty human life must become in some way injured to the inestimable value of human life. Hence some of our Sages determine that such a city's destruction had never been decreed, that the Bible is speaking in theory only. Certainly all other possibilities must be exhausted before taking such a final step of destroying a city.

Nevertheless, the Biblical account – well aware of the moral and ethical ambiguities involved – guarantees that those who fight rank evil will not thereby lose their inner sense of compassion for the suffering of innocent individuals or their over-arching reverence for life. To the contrary, he who is compassionate towards

those perpetrating cruelty will end up being cruel towards those who are compassionate. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Torah tells us not to add to or subtract from the commandments (Deuteronomy 13:1). This directive seems to contravene the ongoing development of Jewish law on the part of the rabbis (17:8–13).

Consider, for example, one of the dietary laws. The Torah states that one may not eat meat and milk together (14:21). The rabbis extend the prohibition to include fowl and milk. Doesn't this extension violate the prohibition on adding to the Torah? Maimonides posits that this extension may, in fact, violate the prohibition on adding to the Torah. He codifies that if one maintains that mixing fowl and milk is enjoined by Torah law, it would add to the Torah in violation of the prohibition.

However, if the rabbis declare that as a precaution – because of the similarity between fowl and meat – they rabbinically prohibit the consumption of fowl together with milk, it would not be a violation of adding to the law (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rebels 2:9*).

This idea helps explain an aspect of the Garden of Eden narrative. While God had only enjoined "eating from the tree," Eve adds "touching." As she tells the snake, "Of the tree in the midst of the garden, God has said: You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die" (Genesis 3:3). The serpent, says the Midrash, then pushes Eve against the tree, declaring, "As you have not died from touching it, so you will not die from eating thereof" (*Bereishit Rabbah 19:3*). In the words of Rashi: "She added to the command [of God], therefore, she was led to diminish from it" (Rashi, Genesis 3:3, 4).

One could argue that Eve acted properly; after all, she, like the rabbis, only tried to protect God's commandment by extending the prohibition to touching. Her mistake, however, was saying that God had actually issued such a command. She should have declared that while God forbade eating from the tree, she had decided not to touch it either as a "fence" around the law.

The message of this distinction is that while rabbinic law is central, it is important to understand with clarity which laws are rabbinic and which are biblical in nature.

It ought also be noted that, separate from rabbinic legislation and interpretation, is the idea of *chumrah*, the imposing of a more stringent observance of the law. While one has every right to be more stringent, and at times stringency elevates one's spirituality, it is important to distinguish between *chumrah* and basic law in order to recognize that when *chumrah* becomes law, it blurs the *halachah* by redefining the line of the permissible and the prohibited.

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Bal Tosif

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

It is forbidden to add onto the *mitzvot*. This includes extending a mitzva in time (such as adding an extra day to a holiday), increasing its quantity (such as adding a fifth species to one's *lulav*, or a fifth biblical text inside one's *tefillin*), or creating a new mitzva. An obvious question arises: how then could our Sages prohibit actions that were not prohibited by the Torah, such as eating chicken with milk?

Some answer that the prohibition of *Bal Tosif* applies only if those making an addition claim that it is a mitzva in the Torah. No one ever claimed that eating chicken with milk is biblically prohibited.

Others state that the law of *Bal Tosif* applies only to adding positive commandments. In contrast, our Sages were allowed to prohibit additional things. This answer, though, does not explain how the Sages were permitted to create the holidays of Purim and Chanukah.

An example of extending a mitzva in time is sitting in the *sukkah* on Shmini Atzeret, the day which follows Sukkot and on which there is no mitzva to sit in the *sukkah* (at least in Israel; it is more complicated in the Diaspora). Some *Rishonim* write that one may do so if he makes sure there is a *heker*, something unusual, to make it clear that he is not trying to fulfill a mitzva. Along the same lines, Rav Kook states that a *heker* was necessary for the rabbinically-added holidays, so no one could confuse them with biblical *mitzvot*. Thus, Purim is celebrated on different dates depending upon whether or not one lives in a walled city. There is no comparable rule for any other mitzva. And Chanukah lighting has different levels of observance – the minimal requirement, the enhanced level, and the extra-enhanced level. This too is unique.

Two types of additions do not constitute a problem of *Bal Tosif* according to most opinions. One type is adding in frequency. For example, performing the same mitzva numerous times a day is not prohibited. A second type is broadening the ranks of those who perform a mitzva. For example, a woman is allowed to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt. Nevertheless, there is an opinion that even these two types transgress the prohibition of *Bal Tosif*, if the person performing an extra mitzva mistakenly believes the Torah mandates it. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Land's Significance

One of the ideas that Moshe had stressed over the past few parshiot is that Israel is a land which is

different than other lands in the world. Israel is a Holy Land, a land which was created with the ability to react to any corruption within it. One of the reasons that the B'nei Yisrael were able to conquer the land and dislocate the people who had lived there, is that the Land, itself, "spit out" those who had sinned. The B'nei Yisrael were cautioned to rid the Land of any sign of the corrupted nature of its previous inhabitants.

The Torah expresses this warning: "These are the decrees and the ordinances that you shall observe to perform, in the Land that Hashem, the Elokim of your forefathers, has given you, to possess it, all the days that you live on the land. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations from whom you shall take possession worshiped their gods: on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars; you shall smash their pillars; and their Asheirim shall you burn in the fire; their carved images shall you cut down; and you shall destroy their names from that place. You shall not do so to Hashem, your Elokim. Rather, only at the place that Hashem, your Elokim, will choose from all your tribes to place His Name there, you shall seek out His resting place and come there."

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains, "The first task is to clear the land from all traces of polytheism. The land is to be the Land of the One Hashem and His Torah, it may bear no reminder of any contrary way of looking at the world and life. Every trace must be eradicated." There is an emphasis on the places of worship because anything that is attached to the ground "which does not belong to the nature of things fashioned by man, does not become prohibited to be used by polytheistic misuse." Rivers, trees, and mountains are not fashioned by man, and even if they are worshipped by man, do not become prohibited as idol worship. If trees were planted specifically for idol purposes, only then would they be considered prohibited for use. The Asheirim were such trees that were planted for idol purposes, and these were to be uprooted and burned.

Rashi points out that the instruction to destroy the places of idol worship is really an instruction to destroy the idols from those places, as it is impossible to destroy a place. The Ohr HaChaim explains that when it mentions the mountains, it is telling us that the idols which are on the mountains should be destroyed there. If an idol were found in a valley, it would not be taken up to a mountain to destroy it; it would be destroyed in its place. The Ohr HaChaim makes a clear distinction between "the gods on the mountains" and "the god-mountains." He stresses that the Gemara speaks of the objects of idol worship and not the actual ground upon which those idols were worshiped.

The B'nei Yisrael were cautioned to rid the Land of all signs of idol worship. The Torah specifically says "in the Land." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why this

mitzvah was limited to “the Land” and did not include outside of the Land of Israel. He explains that we are required to avoid any participation in idol worship outside of the Land of Israel, but even the Rambam does not hold the B’nei Yisrael responsible for destroying idol worship except in Israel, where the B’nei Yisrael would have control. The Ohr HaChaim explains the Rambam’s law concerning places of idol worship outside of Israel. If a Jew would take possession of a property (either in war or by purchase) in which there was idols or symbols of idol worship, he is required to remove those objects or symbols from the property. If the entire property was built for the purpose of idolatry, the building must be destroyed. In Israel, however, the requirement is different; one must seek out those places of idol worship anywhere in the land, and one must destroy them. The entire land must be rid of any idolatrous objects or places as the whole land is Holy.

One unusual aspect of this destruction is commanded in the Torah, “and you shall destroy their names from that place.” The commentaries express that this is not only a destruction of the name of the pagan god that was worshiped in the place, but also an obliteration of the name of the place itself. Rashi explains that this was to change the name of the place from a name of praise into a name of ridicule. Bet Galiya (a House of Revelation) should be changed to Bet Kirya (a House of a Heap), Ayin Kol (an Eye that can see Everything) to Ayin Kotz (an Eye that is Limited). As we have said earlier, the land itself cannot be destroyed, but the change of the name could accomplish the desired effect of destroying the perception of holiness connected to these places.

The Torah states, “You shall not do so to Hashem, your Elokim. Rather, only at the place that Hashem, you Elokim, will choose from all your tribes to place His Name there, you shall seek out His resting place and come there.” The Ramban and others explain the words of Rabbi Yishmael, who says that these words cannot mean that we should imagine that someone would think to break down the altars of Hashem. Instead, this pasuk is used to teach that one may not erase even one letter of Hashem’s name. The language of the Sifri speaks of taking out one stone from the altar of Hashem, but we are to understand that this is a metaphor for erasing one letter from Hashem’s name.

The Kli Yakar approaches this pasuk from a different perspective. He explains that idol worshipers looked to the peaks of tall mountains and green, spreading trees as the ideal places for their gods. They chose to place their idols on these ideal places because the places honored their gods. Our pasuk makes clear that we are not to designate a place for Hashem, as He will choose the place where His Name will dwell. For Hashem, it is He who honors the place which He chooses, not the place which is special for honoring a god. It is Hashem’s dwelling in a place which makes that

place Holy.

In Israel, two things took place simultaneously: (1) The Land was Holy because of the way in which Hashem created it, and (2) Hashem’s presence in the Land gave it its Holiness. When the Jews strayed from the path of righteousness and were exiled for two thousand years, the land became desolate because Hashem’s presence also went into exile. Though the Land was conquered and reconquered by numerous nations, none could cause the land to flourish. It was barren and almost uninhabited. We live today in the flourishing Land which Hashem has reclaimed for us, and we pray that soon His Holiness will surely return to dwell forever. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"These are the statutes and judgements you shall guard to do...” (Devarim 12:1) Normally, statutes are understood as laws for which we don’t have a reason, and judgments are those which are more logical to the human mind. Here, however, the Sifri, as quoted in the Gemara in Kiddushin (37a) says the words of this posuk refer to the various ways Torah is expounded and learned, leading us to learn proper practice. Statutes, for example, says the Haamek Davar, refers to the thirteen hermeneutical principles (Familiar to those who recite R’ Yishmael Omer at the beginning of Shacharis.)

One other important point is that this verse discusses living in the Land of Israel, and living, “on the earth.” From here, Chazal learn that mitzvos incumbent on the person’s body are to be kept both in Israel and elsewhere, while mitzvos incumbent on a person’s land only apply in Eretz Yisrael. This is significant and we will come back to it in a moment.

Then, the Torah seems to make a detour, as it discusses ridding the land of Israel of idolatry. All the places of idol worship and foreign gods are to be eradicated. This is a preparation for the following verse, which discusses the various korbanos we will offer in the land we were promised. The rationale is that the presence of foreign worship drives away Hashem’s presence from resting among us, and then the sacrifices will not achieve their intended purpose or fostering closeness between Hashem and the Jewish People.

What is the message of the juxtaposition of the tools for understanding Torah alongside the commandment to remove idolatry as a preparatory step for korbanos?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that just as the presence of foreign deity worship will pervert the korbanos and lessen their efficacy, the presence of foreign concepts and ideas will do the same to our understanding of Torah. The influence of the nations and their philosophies, values, and understandings, will undermine our ability to find the truth in Hashem’s Torah.

Therefore, just after the Torah tells us the principles and methods we will use to understand what Hashem is saying in the Torah, it directs us to get rid of the things that will stand in the way of our connection to Hashem. We must ensure that our actions are not tainted by the external ideas and forces of those who do not worship Hashem and do not wish to be guided by His will.

Wherever we go, so long as we are living on this earth, we must keep this in mind so we don't falter and succumb to the mistaken beliefs that will hinder our connection to Hashem and preventing us from becoming all that we can.

A peasant who had heard much about the famed art in the Louvre took a trip to Paris to see the works for himself. He hired a wagon to take him from his small hamlet through the countryside until he reached a city where he could hop on a train to Paris. Upon his advent there, he mentioned to a museum guard that he had traveled all this way to see the beautiful masterpieces. Hearing this, the guard offered to give him a personal tour. The first work he showed the traveler was a Rembrandt.

"This is a masterpiece?" snickered the peasant. "It looks like smudges of mud!" The guard was taken aback but showed him to a work by Van Gogh. "Harumph!" snorted the visitor, "this also looks like smudges of mud."

When he heard that, the guard wheeled around to face the peasant. Instantly, he noticed that the man's face and glasses were streaked with mud from his trip! What he saw as a deficiency in the paintings was really just a problem with his own vision. © 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AHRON LOPIANSKY

TorahWeb

This week's parsha describes one of the most important changes in halachah that takes effect in Eretz Yisroel when the Beis Hamikdash will be built. It is the prohibition against sacrificing animals in any place other than the Beis Hamikdash. The Torah describes the prohibition against these sacrifices in a very peculiar way, saying (Devarim 12:8), "you shall not do there as we all do here today, each person doing that which is right [yashar] in his own eyes." Usually, the phrase "right in his eyes" is somewhat derogatory. In Tanach (Shoftim 17:6 and other places) it denotes lawlessness and anarchy. But here it refers to something which is a mitzvah in its time and in its place; it is not at all negative.

The gemara explains that 'right in his eyes' refers to a certain type of sacrifice. Before there Beis Hamikdash was built, people were indeed allowed to sacrifice on makeshift altars (bamah), and performed a mitzvah thereby, but could only do so with regards to sacrifices that were voluntary, not obligatory. Thus, the

type of sacrifices that a person would offer when he sinned, and the like, could not be brought in this makeshift altar. It is only when they came to the Land of Israel, and built the Beis Hamikdash, that they could they now bring those sacrifices that are obligatory, such as a sin offering, etc.

The characterization of this period of time is therefore, "each person as he sees fit" versus a period of time when one could bring other sacrifices as well. It's very hard to understand that this should be a core definition of Klal Yisroel before the Beis Hamikdash was built, versus the state of Klal Yisroel after the Beis Hamikdash was built. To us it seems to be a mere technical detail in the specifics of the laws of sacrificial offerings.

Let us consider people's relationship with Hashem and the truths of Torah. When a person begins his journey to finding Hashem and truth, the initiative is always one's own. The paradigm of this is Avraham Avinu, who came from nowhere and on his very own came to the realization of Hashem and the truth of His Torah. It is described in seforim as "chessed" which in a very specific sense means "kindness" but in the bigger sweep of things, chessed's main emphasis is on its voluntary nature; it is motivated by one's own personal aspiration and not by any obligation. Thus, every type of spiritual undertaking must start with that type of self-motivation. When asked, "why are you doing such and such?" the answer is, "because I have found this to be true; I have come to the realization that this is right." However, when a person has already, in fact, discovered Hashem and firmly established the emess of Hashem, an important change comes into his perception of things. Hashem is now a given, an established entity, and is no longer dependent on the person's recognition thereof.

Let's draw an analogy to this. Imagine a scientist is probing the reason for a certain physical phenomenon. He has a hunch and devises various experiments to prove the veracity of that hunch. At this point it's his theory and idea. But if, after testing and observing and recording, it is found to be in fact true, it is then understood to be a fact in its own merit. It is no longer the scientist's idea, but rather a fact, with the scientist merely getting the credit for making us aware of this fact.

The same is true concerning a person's own search for the Divine and His truth. Similarly, it is true about Klal Yisroel's search for, and eventual establishment of, the Divine truth. The era of Klal Yisroel in the desert was their era of search, of wandering. There was a lack of "permanence" to their religious recognition, for Hashem travelled with them wherever they went. Coming into the Land of Israel, however, meant that this personal type of experience and search would now become a given rock-solid point of reference. This is what the Beis Hamikdash is; it is described (Devarim 12:9) as, "the inheritance and tranquility". It means that at this point we are enabled to worship Hashem not only

through personal recognition, but through acknowledgement and obligation. We can now offer those sacrifices that stem from obligation, rather than voluntary donation.

In some ways this runs counter to our sense of things. We tend to feel that doing things voluntarily, out of personal recognition and offer, is the ultimate in Divine service. It certainly adds a lot to one's deeds when they are inspired, as well. But the ultimate recognition of Hashem lies in this statement that, "whether I feel like it or not, it is emess, and like it or not, I'm obligated". One donates willingly to a cause of one's own; but unwillingly paying taxes is the recognition of someone's sovereignty over me.

This, then, is what the psukim are telling us. At first it says (ibid), "do not do there (i.e. in the Land of Israel) as we are doing today; each person [bringing the sacrifices] that are right in his eyes." Once they come into the Land of Israel and build the Beis Hamikdash, the possuk says (Devarim 12:28), "listen to all of the things that I'm commanding you... to do the good and the righteous in the eyes of Hashem." From this point onwards, what establishes the good and the right is not our personal sense of it, but rather Hashem's. ©2023 Rabbi A. Lopiansky and TorahWeb.org

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

“Kol yimei chayecha - All the days of your life" -- is a phrase we first meet in the Torah when Hashem pronounces the fate of Adam after the sin of eating from the eitz hadaas: "Cursed is the ground because of you. Through suffering will you eat from it all the days of your life" (Beraishis 3:17).

The phrase recurs in a seemingly unrelated context, about the mitzvah of eating matzah on Pesach, in our parsha: "...so that you will remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life" (Devarim 16:3).

That pasuk, cited in the Haggadah, elicited a novel thought from Rav Avrohom, the first Rebbe of Slonim: "When recounting Yetzias Mitzrayim, one should remember, too, 'all the days' of his own life -- the miracles and wonders that Hashem performed for him throughout..."

The generation before mine, the one that came of age during the Second World War, could well relate to that idea. My father endured years of forced labor in Siberia, courtesy of the Soviet Union. My father-in-law was a veteran of several concentration camps, and suffered the deprivations and tortures for which they are infamous.

And, I know, on Pesach, thoughts of their experiences were in their minds. My father and his friends pocketing and then hiding a few wheat kernels here and there, to be secretly ground and baked in the middle of the night into matzos. My father-in-law, in a Dachau satellite camp, reciting with a friend parts of the

Haggadah they knew by heart.

But the Slonimer Rebbe's thought is appropriate for every life, even lives of relative calm and plenty like our own. Because, as a result of the sin of the eitz hadaas, adversity and tragedy entered the world and came to define all humans' lives, to one or another extent. We all have experienced things that were daunting or worse, and from which we were saved. We may not have been liberated from a literal gulag or camp, but we are all, on one or another level, survivors.

And we need to consciously recall that fact, all the days of our lives. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafraan and torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

“See, Anochi / I present before you today a blessing and a curse." (11:26) R' Yehuda Modern z"l (1819-1893; Rosh Yeshiva in Sighet, Hungary) writes: Earlier commentaries quote a Midrash stating that the word "Anochi" in this verse alludes to the first of the Ten Commandments: "Anochi / I am Hashem, your Elokim." However, the Midrash does not explain what the significance of this allusion is. It appears, R' Modern writes, that the message of the Midrash is as follows:

Our Sages teach that we are sustained in this world in the merit of our Emunah / faith. On the other hand, our Sages teach that we are not rewarded for our Mitzvot in this world; rather, the reward for our Mitzvot will be forthcoming in the World to Come. But how can this be? Is there not a commandment in the Torah that a worker be paid on the same day that he worked? Thus, we should be rewarded for our Mitzvot the same day we perform them!

The answer, R' Modern writes, is that there is an exception. Specifically the Mitzvah to pay workers the same day does not apply if workers were hired through an agent. [The reasoning for that Halachah is beyond the scope of this space.] Since Hashem gave the Torah through an agent (Moshe), Hashem is not obligated to pay us for observing the Torah on the same day as our Mitzvah performance, and He can pay us in the World to Come instead.

However, R' Modern continues, there are two Mitzvot which Hashem did teach us directly--the first two of the Ten Commandments, which our ancestors heard at Har Sinai directly from Hashem. For those Mitzvot, which encompass the commandment to have Emunah, Hashem must reward us in this world. Hence our Sages' teaching that we are sustained in this world in the merit of Emunah. "See," says our verse, "because of Anochi I give you a blessing or curse today!" (Pri Ha'eitz) ©2022 S. Katz and torah.org

