

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

In a much-watched TED Talk [youtu.be/qp0HIF3SfI4](https://youtu.be/qp0HIF3SfI4), Simon Sinek asked the following question: how do great leaders inspire action? What made people like Martin Luther King and Steve Jobs stand out from their contemporaries who may have been no less gifted, no less qualified? His answer: Most people talk about what. Some people talk about how. Great leaders, though, start with why. This is what makes them transformative.

(For a more detailed account, see the book based on the talk: Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. New York, Portfolio, 2009.)

Sinek's lecture was about business and political leadership. The most powerful examples, though, are directly or indirectly religious. Indeed I argued in *The Great Partnership* what makes Abrahamic monotheism different is that it believes there is an answer to the question, why. Neither the universe nor human life is meaningless, an accident, a mere happenstance. As Freud, Einstein, and Wittgenstein all said, religious faith is faith in the meaningfulness of life.

Rarely is this shown in a more powerful light than in Va'etchanan. There is much in Judaism about what: what is permitted, what forbidden, what is sacred, what is secular. There is much, too, about how: how to learn, how to pray, how to grow in our relationship with God and with other people. There is relatively little about why.

In Va'etchanan Moses says some of the most inspiring words ever uttered about the why of Jewish existence. That is what made him the great transformational leader he was, and it has consequences for us, here, now.

To have a sense of how strange Moses' words were, we must recall several facts. The Israelites were still in the desert. They had not yet entered the land. They had no military advantages over the nations they would have to fight. Ten of the twelve spies had argued, almost forty years before, that the mission was impossible. In a world of empires, nations and fortified cities, the Israelites must have seemed to the untutored eye defenceless, unproven, one more horde among the many who swept across Asia and Africa in ancient times. Other than their religious practices, few contemporary observers would have seen anything about them to set them apart from the Jebusites and Perizzites, Midianites

and Moabites, and the other petty powers that populated that corner of the Middle East.

Yet in this week's parsha Moses communicated an unshakeable certainty that what had happened to them would eventually change and inspire the world. Listen to his language: "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by miracles, signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" (Deut. 4:32-34)

Moses was convinced that Jewish history was, and would remain, unique. In an age of empires, a small, defenceless group had been liberated from the greatest empire of all by a power not their own, by God Himself. That was Moses' first point: the singularity of Jewish history as a narrative of redemption.

His second was the uniqueness of revelation: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:7-8)

Other nations had gods to whom they prayed and offered sacrifices. They too attributed their military successes to their deities. But no other nation saw God as their sovereign, legislator, and law-giver. Elsewhere law represented the decree of the king or, in more recent centuries, the will of the people. In Israel, uniquely, even when there was a king, he had no legislative power. Only in Israel was God seen not just as a power but as the architect of society, the orchestrator of its music of justice and mercy, liberty and dignity.

The question is why. Toward the end of the chapter, Moses gives one answer: "Because He loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them." (Deut. 4:37). God loved Abraham, not least because Abraham loved God. And God loved Abraham's children because they were his children and He had promised the patriarch that He would bless and protect them.

Earlier though Moses had given a different kind of answer, not incompatible with the second, but

different: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me... Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" (Deut. 4:5-6)

Why did Moses, or God, care whether or not other nations saw Israel's laws as wise and understanding? Judaism was and is a love story between God and a particular people, often tempestuous, sometimes serene, frequently joyous, but close, intimate, even inward-looking. What has the rest of the world to do with it?

But the rest of the world does have something to do with it. Judaism was never meant for Jews alone. In his first words to Abraham, God already said, "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you, I will curse; through you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Jews were to be a source of blessing to the world.

God is the God of all humanity. In Genesis He spoke to Adam, Eve, Cain, Noah, and made a covenant with all humankind before He made one with Abraham. In Egypt, whether in Potiphar's house, or prison, or Pharaoh's palace, Joseph continually talked about God. He wanted the Egyptians to know that nothing he did, he did himself. He was merely an agent of the God of Israel. There is nothing here to suggest that God is indifferent to the nations of the world.

Later in the days of Moses, God said that He would perform signs and wonders so that "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 7:5). He called Jeremiah to be "a prophet to the nations." He sent Jonah to the Assyrians in Nineveh. He had Amos deliver oracles to the other nations before He sent him an oracle about Israel. In perhaps the most astonishing prophecy in Tanach, He sent Isaiah the message that a time will come when God will bless Israel's enemies: "'The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people, Assyria My handiwork, and Israel My inheritance.'" (Is. 19:26)

God is concerned with all humanity. Therefore what we do as Jews makes a difference to humanity, not just in a mystical sense, but as exemplars of what it means to love and be loved by God. Other nations would look at Jews and sense that some larger power was at work in their history. As the late Milton Himmelfarb put it:

"Each Jew knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together, we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable... The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers. Big things seem to happen around us and to us." (Jews and Gentiles. New York, Encounter, 2007, p. 141.)

We were not called on to convert the world. We were called on to inspire the world. As the prophet Zechariah put it, a time will come when "Ten people from

all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:23). Our vocation is to be God's ambassadors to the world, giving testimony through the way we live that it is possible for a small people to survive and thrive under the most adverse conditions, to construct a society of law-governed liberty for which we all bear collective responsibility, and to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly" (Micah 6:8) with our God. Va'etchanan is the mission statement of the Jewish people.

And others were and still are inspired by it. The conclusion I have drawn from a lifetime lived in the public square is that non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They find it hard to understand why Jews, in countries where there is genuine religious liberty, abandon their faith or define their identity in purely ethnic terms.

Speaking personally, I believe that the world in its current state of turbulence needs the Jewish message, which is that God calls on us to be true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith. Imagine a world in which everyone believed this. It would be a world transformed.

We are not just another ethnic minority. We are the people who predicated freedom on teaching our children to love, not hate. Ours is the faith that consecrated marriage and the family, and spoke of responsibilities long before it spoke of rights. Ours is the vision that sees alleviation of poverty as a religious task because, as Maimonides said, you cannot think exalted spiritual thoughts if you are starving or sick or homeless and alone. (The Guide for the Perplexed, III:27) We do these things not because we are conservative or liberal, Republicans or Democrats, but because we believe that is what God wants of us.

Much is written these days about the what and how of Judaism, but all too little about the why. Moses, in the last month of his life, taught the why. That is how the greatest of leaders inspired action from his day to ours.

If you want to change the world, start with why. *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](http://rabbisacks.org)

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“Comfort you, comfort you, My People” (Isaiah 40:1) The Shabbat after Tisha B’Av is known as the Shabbat of Comfort, a phrase taken from the first verse of the prophetic reading from Isaiah. Additionally, a most fascinating festival day – one which is unfortunately not very well known – falls just about one week after the bleak fast for the destruction of both of our Holy Temples. An analysis of this festival, known as Tu

B'Av, "the 15th day of Av," will reveal a striking similarity between it and the Shabbat of Comfort.

The conclusion of the last Mishna of tractate Ta'anit (26b) teaches as follows: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, 'There were no greater festive days in Israel than the fifteenth day of Av and Yom Kippur, when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white dresses so as not to embarrass those who didn't have their own. They would go out and dance in the vineyards. What would they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see whom you wish to choose for yourselves. Do not cast forth your eyes after beauty, but cast forth your eyes after family. 'False is grace and vanity is beauty; a woman who fears the Lord is the one to be praised'; and the Scriptures further states, 'Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her in the gates.'"

The Talmud then cites the Tosefta, which provides a more descriptive picture: "The beautiful ones among them, what would they say? 'Cast forth your eyes after beauty, for woman was only created for beauty.' The ones with good pedigree, what would they say? 'Cast forth your eyes after family, because woman was only created for children.' The plain ones, what would they say? 'Take your wares for the sake of heaven, as long as you adorn us with gold (and then even the plain-looking women will appear to be beautiful)."

Apparently, the 15th day of Av was a kind of Sadie Hawkins day, when the women would entice the men to marry them; and each woman would emphasize her particular quality: beauty, family or "for the sake of heaven." And, as the Mishna concludes, it is chiefly the attributes of fear of God and performance of good deeds which truly count in assessing the proper wife.

The Talmud adds, "It is clear why Yom Kippur is a Festival, since it brings forgiveness and absolution, since it is the day when God gave the second tablets [as a sign of His forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf]; but what is the reason for the joy of the 15th Av?" The Talmud then gives seven possible reasons, from the suggestion that on that day members of the tribes were permitted to marry one another; to the opinion that on 15 Av, the desert generation stopped dying; to the astronomical fact that from that day on, the sun begins to lose its strength and the days begin to be shorter.

Permit me to add another possible reason, one which would also explain the unique manner in which we are to celebrate the 15th of Av.

It would be logical to assume that as Jews witnessed Jewish sovereignty going up in flames and God's very throne smoldering, they tore their garments and sat on the ground, sitting shiva not only for the lost lives, but also for the disappearing dream of at-hand redemption.

If the seven-day mourning period began on 9 Av, it must have concluded on 15 Av, the seventh day, about which our sages rule that "partial mourning on that day

is accounted as if one had mourned the complete day." Hence, they rose from their shiva on 15 Av, Tu B'Av.

It was precisely on the day that their shiva concluded that our Sages ordained the merriment of Tu B'Av. This parallels the joy when the High Priest emerged unscathed from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur; a sign that Israel had indeed been forgiven! The Holy Temple may be burning to the ground, but the Jewish nation remains alive and God's commitment to His eternal covenant remains intact, as is clear from this week's reading, which we also read on Tisha B'Av (Deuteronomy 4:25-32).

As the Midrash teaches, God exacted punishment from the wood and stones of a physical edifice, albeit a holy one, but He demonstrated His ultimate forgiveness by keeping His nation alive and His covenant operational. This is why and how 9 Av will one day be a day of great celebration.

God ordains Tu B'Av as a day of weddings; Judaism sees every wedding ritual as a ringing confirmation of the future of the Jewish people, as a personal commitment to continue the nation and the faith because "there will yet be heard on the streets of Judea and in the great plazas of Jerusalem, sounds of gladness and sounds of rejoicing, sounds of grooms and sounds of brides" (Jeremiah 33: 11).

Not only has our generation not been disappointed, but it is presently rejoicing in Israel's rebirth. God has not forsaken us, and is even allowing us a glimpse of redemption! ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he Torah as we all well know is multilayered. The rabbis have taught us that there are seventy facets to every piece of the written Torah. We are also aware that no written word can adequately convey to us all of the nuances and possible meanings that lie embedded in the written word. The Torah requires elucidation, commentary and explanation in order for any proper understanding of its message to be gained.

The entire book of Dvarim is an elucidation and explanation of the first four books of Moshe. As such, by the inherent nature of explanation and commentary, different words and phrases will be employed to describe events and commandments that were previously mentioned in the Torah.

A prime example of this appears in this week's parsha where the Torah repeats for us the Ten Commandments revealed to Israel at Sinai. The wording here in Dvarim differs slightly from the wording recorded for us in Shemot. The Talmud in its rendition of the Oral Law states that these discrepancies – such as the use of the word shamor instead of the original zachor regarding the observance of the Shabat – indicate that these words were stated simultaneously by God, so to speak, a feat

that is beyond human comprehension and ability.

The Talmud means to indicate to us with this statement that all of the possible interpretations and layers of meaning in the Torah were given to us simultaneously and at once at Sinai. Only the Oral Law and the work of the commentators to the Torah over all of the ages has revealed to us these original layers of meaning and interpretation for our study and practice. By using different words to explain what was already written, the Torah guides our understanding of the Torah only by way of the Oral Law and the great commentators of Israel over the ages.

In the final commandment of the Ten Commandments, the Torah here in Dvarim uses the word *titaveh* whereas in Shemot it used the word *tachmode*. The Torah points out to us that there are different forms of desire and wanting something. One is an impulsive, spur of the moment desire that arises out of seemingly chance circumstance – an advertisement in the media or a chance meeting or sighting. Such a desire is not planned and stems from the inherent human weakness within all of us to want to possess what we do not yet have. But there is another type of desire. It is long planned and had been part of our lives for years and decades. It borders on being an obsession or an addiction within our makeup.

Both of these types of desire can destroy a person. The Torah cautions us against these symptoms of self-destructive behavior. And by the use of these different Hebrew verbs, the Torah indicates to us that there are different types of desires and that one must be defensive against all of them. The Talmud tells us that the eyes see and the heart thereupon desires. Guarding one's eyes guards one's heart as well. This example of the Torah's self elucidation of the matter makes the lesson clear to all and challenges us to apply it wisely in one's own life. ©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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he Torah mandates that one should refrain from performing any manner of *melachah* (commonly translated as “work”) on Shabbat (Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Exodus 20:8–11). We know, of course, that *melachah* differs from physical strain or exertion. Plucking an apple from a tree, switching on an electric light, or carrying the lightest of objects in public – activities that involve little effort – are all prohibited on the Shabbat. What, then, does *melachah* mean?

Erich Fromm captured the true meaning of the word when he defined *melachah* thus: “‘Work’ is any interference by man, be it constructive or destructive, with the physical world. ‘Rest’ [*menuchah*] is a state of

peace between man and nature” (You Shall Be as Gods). On Shabbat, nature must be left untouched and unchanged; any alteration in the natural process is a violation of rest. Shabbat is the day of human harmony with nature; work is any disturbance of this equilibrium.

Thus, actions such as cutting a blade of grass or kindling a match, while requiring minimal physical effort, are therefore prohibited, as they symbolize, in Fromm's words, “human interference with the natural process” and “a breach of peace between man and nature.”

Carrying (without an *eruv*) is the one category of forbidden work in which no essential change in nature takes place. The object, although being carried in the public domain or from the private to the public domain and vice versa, remains intact. There is no interference or productive process within the natural world. Why, then, is it biblically prohibited?

The law against carrying on Shabbat, as Fromm phrases it, “is an extension of the idea of peace from the natural to the social realm. A man must not interfere with, or change, the natural equilibrium, and he must refrain from changing the social equilibrium.”

On Shabbat, the human being is enjoined from carrying in order to relate to others unadorned, in a natural state. As Rabbi Menachem Gordon of blessed memory suggested, on Shabbat one refrains from exchanging objects in favor of a significant exchange of self. Appearing without outer defenses, without any object, but only with their own being, people are encouraged to present themselves truthfully. Unable to hide behind that which one carries, one sheds the external shell, leaving only the internal self.

Like the *raison d'être* of *melachah*, the imagery, ritual symbols, prayer liturgy, and *halachot* of Shabbat all relate to the theme of *shalom* (peace).

- Shabbat begins with the imagery of bride and groom and concludes with the presence of Elijah the prophet, harbinger of the Messianic era. The unity of bride and groom is expanded to include the hope of redemption for the entire world.

- Shabbat commences and concludes with the kindling of fire. While beginning with the lighting of two independent candles, it concludes with the intertwining of two wicks, symbolic of the intensified unity that Shabbat attempts to foster.

- Shabbat begins with the Amidah prayer describing the first Shabbat in Eden, when Adam and Eve were the only people who existed, and concludes with the Amidah of hope that the oneness of God be reflected by the oneness of Israel and all people (*Atah Echad*).

- Shabbat is the time when there is a special commandment for husband and wife to engage in intimate love. In their coming together as one, the unity of God is beautifully expressed on the perfect day of unity – the Shabbat.

By integrating the inner message of Shabbat, we

may all be drawn closer to achieving the ideal era of Messianic peace, the time when “the Merciful One [will] let us inherit ‘the day’ when ‘every day’ will be Shabbat” (Tamid 7:4). ©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

## Blessing of Ga'al Yisrael

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**D**uring the morning prayer service, one may not pause or interrupt between the blessing of redemption (*Ga'al Yisrael*), and the recitation of the *Amidah*. Even standing silently between them is prohibited. However, there is also a *halacha* that one must respond with an *Amen* after hearing a blessing. Thus, it would seem that someone who hears the *chazan* (cantor) complete the blessing of *Ga'al Yisrael* must answer *Amen*. But then he is creating an interruption between the blessing and the *Amidah*! What's a person to do?

Some answer that saying *Amen* to *Ga'al Yisrael* is like saying *Amen* after one's own blessing. In general, a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, if he is concluding a subject the *Amen* is considered part of the blessing and thus is not considered an interruption. (The classic example of this is in *Birkat HaMazon*, when we conclude our own blessing of “*Boneh Be-rachamav Yerushalayim*” by saying *Amen*.) Perhaps the *Amen* after *Ga'al Yisrael* is in the same category.

Others insist that the reciting of *Amen* at this point is an interruption and should be avoided. How can a person avoid taking sides in this disagreement?

The *poskim* offer three suggestions:

1. The person praying should try to reach *Ga'al Yisrael* a little before the *chazan*. He can then wait, recite *Amen* to the *chazan's* blessing, then recite the blessing himself, and immediately begin the *Amidah*. However, this solution is not without its problems. First, one is not supposed to pause in the middle of the blessings following *Keriat Shema*. Second, ideally one is meant to begin the *Amidah* at the same time as the *chazan*.

2. The person praying should recite the blessing together with the *chazan*. In such a case, he is not required to say *Amen*, as a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, as we have seen, there is an opinion that in the case of *Ga'al Yisrael* a person does say *Amen* to his own blessing.

3. The person praying should start the *Amidah* before the *chazan*. Once someone is in the middle of the *Amidah*, he does not respond *Amen* under any circumstances. However, once again, this means one is not beginning the *Amidah* with the *chazan*.

A fourth solution is very commonly followed nowadays. Namely, the *chazan* recites *Ga'al Yisrael*

under his breath. Since no one hears the blessing, no one needs to answer *Amen*. Interestingly, this practice is not mentioned anywhere in the literature. Can it be that there truly is no source for it? ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

### RABBI DAVID LEVIN

## Hashem's Rebuke of Moshe

**M**oshe was told that he would not enter the land because of the sin at Miriam's Well where he failed to sanctify Hashem's name before the people. Moshe had hoped that Hashem would change this decree and allow him to enter the land. Part of Hashem's reluctance to permit Moshe to enter the land was His decree against the B'nei Yisrael that they would suffer the loss of both the First and Second Temples on the same day that they cried because they accepted the negative report of the spies. Moshe's request to enter included “this good mountain and the Levanon.” HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that “this good mountain” was a reference to Jerusalem and Levanon referred to the Temple. Hashem knew that if Moshe had entered the land and gone to Jerusalem, he would have built the Temple and it would never have been destroyed.

Moshe told the people, “I implored Heaven at this time, saying. My Master, Hashem-Elokim, You had begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, for what power is there in the heavens or on the earth that can perform according to Your deeds and according to Your mighty acts? Please let me cross over and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Levanon. But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me; Hashem said to me, ‘It is much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.’”

It is important to determine when Moshe spoke to Hashem. Many wish to say that it occurred before Moshe told the people in last week's parasha, “and also Hashem was angry with me because of you.” Rashi and Ramban say that this is referring to the time that immediately followed the conquest of Og, the King of Bashan, and Sichon, the King of the Amorites. Moshe had begun the conquest of the nations that would become displaced by the B'nei Yisrael. Moshe distributed these lands which were on the other side of the Jordan River to the tribes of Reuvein and Gad and half of the tribe of Menashe. Moshe believed that Hashem had allowed him to begin the conquest and would possibly agree to allow him to continue inside of Israel.

As part of Moshe's request from Hashem, he says, “Please let me cross over and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Levanon.” Our Rabbis discuss the

Hebrew, “ebra na v’er’eh, please let me cross and see.” Rashi explains that “na, please” is the language of seeking. The Or HaChaim questions why the term, na, is used here. The Or HaChaim indicates that Moshe used the term, na, for two reasons. Moshe understood that it was time for one King to be replaced with another. The old King does not continue when the time has come for the new King. But Moshe also knew that the people would continue to sin even after they entered the land, and that this would cause Hashem to punish them. Moshe believed that he would still be able to break any cycle of sin that the people would begin, and would also be able to act as a shield between Hashem and the people as he had done in the past. The Or HaChaim quotes a Midrash that explains that Moshe did not wish to take away any time from Yehoshua’s leadership; he wished to enter as a commoner, just like all the other men of the B’nei Yisrael. That same Midrash said that Hashem called Yehoshua to speak with Him, and Moshe asked him afterwards what Hashem had said. Yehoshua told Moshe, “I did not ask you to tell me about your private conversations with Hashem.”

The Or HaChaim and the Kli Yakar deal with the two verbs in this phrase, “let me cross and see.” Both ask why it was necessary to say both. Certainly, if one crossed into the land, he would see it. The Kli Yakar explains that when Avraham first entered the land, he was told, “Look to the West, East, North, and South. All the land that you will see I will give to your children.” Later Avraham was told, “Get up and walk in the land.” The Kli Yakar explains that the ownership of a land depends on taking possession of it. If one pays for something but does not take control of it, the Law does not accept that the object or land has changed ownership. One must perform an act of ownership of the property. This could be accomplished by planting or harvesting the land, but this was not an option at the time. Walking the boundaries of the land is also a form of taking possession and demonstrating ownership. Moshe was told that he would only be able to look at the land of Israel from the top of a mountain on the other side of the Jordan. He prayed to Hashem that he would be allowed to walk in the land and possess it.

Interestingly, the phrase, “But Hashem became angry with me (vayitabeir) because of you, and He did not listen to me,” uses a word that has the same root as we saw in the words, “Let me cross (ebra).” HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Moshe told Hashem that he wished to see the land, “for in it lies the purpose of all the ordinances of which Thou hast made me aware hitherto.... Seeing this land would open for me a further insight in the greatness and might of Thy future rule of the world.” But Hashem became angry with Moshe (vayitabeir bi). Hirsch explains that the word is in the reflexive form. It means “to pass out of oneself, to pass over the border of one’s own personality, i.e., to speak quite decidedly against somebody.” Hashem

explained to Moshe that he had reached the limit of his possible understanding of Hashem, and no further insight was available to him. Hashem explained to Moshe that whatever mysteries of Hashem that he had not already discovered would never become available to him.

HaRav Sorotzkin discusses Hashem’s statement to Moshe. “Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.” In Gemara Yevamot (64) we learn that Hashem desires the prayers of the righteous. There was no greater righteous man than Moshe, yet Hashem tells him to be quiet. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that this only applies when the results of this prayer will sanctify Hashem and strengthen people’s trust in His power. Hashem desires the prayers and supplications of His subjects, and He delights in answering our prayers. There are times, however, when the greater plan of Hashem must take place. The G’ra explains that had Moshe used the word “please” a second time, Hashem would have had to change His plan. This is similar to when Hashem told Rivka to stop crying for the Jews who were going into exile. The exile was necessary for the history of the people, and one more tear would have caused Hashem to relent on His decree.

We all turn to prayer when our family faces hardships. We are troubled when it appears that Hashem does not answer our prayer. We must remember that Hashem does listen, but He will not always agree with our desires. May we learn to accept His decree, just as Moshe did. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

### **Migdal Ohr**

**"W**e have seen that G-d can speak to a person and [the person] will live. And now, why should we die..." (Devarim 5:21-22) The logic here seems odd. The Jews witnessed the fire and grandeur of Hashem’s presence, and recognized that humans could be spoken to by Hashem and still live. Then why did they immediately say, “Why should we die...”, hearing Hashem would kill them?

We must understand the context. When the Jews stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, they expressed a desire to hear Hashem speak to them. Immediately, He displayed His glory and said, “Anochi Hashem Elokecha – I am the L-rd your G-d.” Upon hearing this, the souls of all the Jews left their bodies. Hashem returned them to life, and then at hearing the second of the utterances, they died again, and were revived again.

At this point, the Jews told Moshe, “Why should we die? You speak to us and tell us what Hashem commands.” That is what happened, and the rest of the Torah was taught to us by Moshe. Moshe was such a righteous person that he was able to withstand Hashem’s voice without dying. He was able to hear it directly and pass it along to everyone else.

The question is, if Hashem brought them back to

life anyway, why not continuing listening to the Torah directly from Hashem? Why dilute the experience by having a middleman? Why were they afraid to keep hearing?

Some commentaries explain that the purpose of Hashem speaking to all of them was to prove that prophecy exists. They learned that it was possible for a human to hear Hashem's word and continue to live on. However, once that was proven, Hashem might not continue to perform the miracle of reviving them.

Others explain that by hearing Hashem's voice, and heeding His words, one becomes closer to Him. The closer a person comes to Hashem, the more he sheds the physical world. They were afraid that if they continued hearing Hashem speaking the Ten Commandments, they would completely cleave to him and leave this world permanently - and that would be a bad thing.

It was not that they had a desire for a physical existence, but rather because they desired to fulfill Hashem's will that man live a spiritual life within a physical body. Unlike the angels, Man has the ability to bridge the gap between worlds and turn physicality into spirituality. By harnessing this world and directing it towards Hashem, we can achieve greater things than even the celestial beings of Heaven.

The Bais HaMikdash will one day come down from Shomayim, but it will be because we sent the building materials up from this world below.

*A yeshivah bochur in Bnei Brak was found with inappropriate reading material. His Roshei Yeshivah wanted to expel him, but first they consulted with Rav Shach, the Gadol Hador and Rosh Yeshivah of Ponevezh. Rav Shach wanted to meet the bachur before he offered his opinion, and realized that the boy was having doubts in emunah. Rav Shach spoke with him at length, and asked the bachur, from Tel Aviv, to meet with him again over the Pesach break.*

*After Pesach, the boy's Rabbi asked Rav Shach if the boy had indeed made the effort to travel to Bnei Brak to see him. Rav Shach replied that the boy did not have to come to him, because he himself traveled to Tel Aviv twice to see him over the Pesach break.*

*At the beginning of the new session, the bochur returned to yeshivah ready to learn, and reported to his rebbe that his faith was now strong and steadfast. He said, "If Klal Yisrael includes someone so caring he traveled twice to Tel Aviv to see me, I have no more questions in emunah." ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

## Cross-Currents

**T**he Kotzker Rebbe likely meant it as a poignant joke when he reportedly remarked that the reason the Ten Commandments had to be both seen and heard (Chazal describe the revelation at Har Sinai as a

synesthetic experience -- e.g. Yalkut Shimoni 299) was that the word "lo" in lo signov would clearly be seen written with an aleph, not a vav.

That is to say, the commandment is to be understood as "Do not steal," not "Steal for Him" -- which would imply that, for a holy cause, theft is a virtue. But the Kotzker certainly intended his quip as a serious lesson: Lofty ends don't justify forbidden means. If a Jew should "bend the rules" with regard to business or governmental dealings, he is guilty of gezel akum. Even if his intention is to benefit a charity or Jewish institution.

Hopefully, we all realize that. But when, on occasion, we have read of some such liberty-taking, it behooves us to consider the fact that even those of us who would never consider doing such a thing ourselves might have reason for introspection.

Because a fundamental concept in Judaism is the idea of arvus, that all Jews are intertwined, that we are all responsible for one another. And so, if a Jewish thief exists, it is the "fault," in a sense, of us all. That's why we say "Ashamnu..." -- "We have sinned" -- in first person plural.

That outright Jewish violator of "Do not steal" may have been empowered by our own, less blatant, thievery. Like gneivas daas, stealing another's mind (misleading him); or gezel sheina, depriving another of sleep; or what Chazal consider to be "stealing from a poor person," namely, not returning a greeting (Berachos 6b).

Many are the understandings of nachamu nachamu ami -- the repetition of the word for "be comforted" in the haftarah of Vo'eschanan. But, considering that the word nechama can mean both comfort and change of heart (as in Beraishis 6:6), perhaps the repetition reflects, too, the fact that our repentance from small transgressions have an effect on preventing larger ones.

And some comfort surely lies in that fact. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

**I**n this week's Parashah, we read (for the second time) of the giving of the Aseret Ha'dibrot / Ten Commandments. The Gemara (Kiddushin 31a) relates: When Hashem said, "I am Hashem, your Elokim, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery," the nations said, "He is concerned with His honor." When he said, "You shall not recognize the gods of others in My Presence," they said again, "He is concerned with His honor." This continued until He said, "Honor your father and your mother." Then, the nations acknowledged the legitimacy of the earlier commandments. [Until here from the Gemara]

R' Nosson Lewin z"l (1857-1926; rabbi of Rzeszw, Poland) asks: Could anyone really think that Hashem needs respect from the puny creature--man--



that He created? Of course not! Rather, R' Lewin explains, this is a parable meant to teach us a lesson--that Hashem did not give us the Torah only to tell us what our obligations are to Him. Instead, He is also teaching us a way of life that will make organized society and the existence of nations possible.

This way of life, writes R' Lewin, begins with honoring parents. Even those nations that could not fathom the great spiritual heights to which a person can rise when he believes in "I am Hashem, your Elokim" and "You shall not recognize the gods of others" could acknowledge the benefits of the Torah's laws between man and his fellow--the first of which is the Mitzvah to honor parents. (Petach Ha'bayit to She'eilot U'teshuvot Bet Yitzchak: Choshen Mishpat)

"Who will make it that this heart of theirs will continue to fear Me and observe all My commandments all the days...?" (5:26) The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 5a) relates: Moshe said to Bnei Yisrael, "Ingrates the children of ingrates! When Hashem said, "'Who will make it...?' you should have responded, "You should make it so!" [Until here from the Gemara]

R' Daniel Haymann shlita (Tel Zion, Israel) writes: Granted that Bnei Yisrael should have responded thus, but why does Moshe call them "ingrates"? He cites three explanations from earlier commentaries:

First, Bnei Yisrael did not respond, "You should make it so" because they did not want to feel indebted to Hashem; they did not want to owe Him gratitude.

Second, Bnei Yisrael did not make this request of Hashem because they failed to recognize and be grateful for all of the goodness He had done for them until that point. This was reflected in their failure to ask for more goodness.

Third, Bnei Yisrael did not view it as being a good thing if Hashem would implant fear of Heaven in them. They were considered ungrateful for not appreciating that potential gift.

R' Haymann notes that there is a novelty in the third answer. We might have thought that not recognizing the beauty of a gift is simply foolishness. No! say the commentaries. That failure originates from a character flaw. (Hakarat Ha'tov Ke'halachah p.26)

"If your child asks you tomorrow, saying, 'What are the testimonies and decrees and ordinances that Hashem, our Elokim, commanded you?'" (6:20) In the Pesach Haggadah, this question is attributed to the wise son. What distinguishes him from the wicked son, who also asks why we perform Mitzvot? R' Gedaliah Silverstone z"l (1871-1944; rabbi in Belfast, Ireland and Washington, D.C.) explains: The wise son asks "tomorrow," i.e., he performs the Mitzvot as he is taught, whether he understands them or not. Not so the wicked son; he demands to know now, before he agrees to

perform the Mitzvah, what the purpose of the Mitzvah is. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Korban Pesach [2nd ed.] p.24)

"You shall love Hashem, your Elokim, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources." (6:5) The Gemara (Berachot 61b) relates: The hour when the Romans took Rabbi Akiva out to be killed was the time to recite Kri'at Shema. As they were torturing him, he was accepting the yoke of Heaven upon himself [i.e., he was reciting Shema Yisrael]. His students asked him, "Even this [you accept without complaints]?" Rabbi Akiva answered, "All my life I was pained by the words, 'With all your soul'--which our Sages interpret, 'Even if He takes your soul.' I said, 'When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this commandment?!' Now that I have the opportunity, should I not take it?" [Until here from the Gemara]

R' Yosef Yozel Horowitz z"l (1847-1919; the Alter of Novardok) writes: Rabbi Akiva was prepared to give everything, even his life, for Hashem because he recognized how much Hashem had given him. This is not true of most people, as the Gemara (Niddah 31a) teaches: "The beneficiary of a miracle does not recognize that a miracle was done for him." Most of the time, we are unaware when we are in danger, whether physical or spiritual; therefore, we do not recognize that we are saved.

We read (Mishlei 6:23), "For a Mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light, and Mussar / reproving discipline is the way of life." The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni explains by way of a parable: A man walking in the darkness of night must worry about thorns and thistles, wild animals, and thieves, and he does not know which way to go. When he reaches a crossroads, he is saved [Until here from the Midrash]. The Alter quotes R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon), who writes: Our material world can cause a person spiritual harm in three ways--it can keep him so busy that he has no time for spiritual pursuits, it can place prohibited temptations in front of him, and it can distract him from finding the true path to character perfection. As long as he is far from Torah, he is in danger of erring, as the Midrash says. But, when he reaches the crossroads, i.e., when Mussar puts him on the correct path, then he will be saved from spiritual ills. Until then, however, he does not even realize the danger he was in.

Similarly, with regard to physical dangers: The Gemara (Arachin 16b) teaches, "What is considered suffering [that can atone for a person's sins]? Reaching into one's pocket to retrieve three coins and coming up with only two." If a person did not experience seemingly trivial inconveniences like this, he would never even know he was being judged for his sins, and he would not know that he was being saved from a worse fate. (Madreigat Ha'adam: Ma'amar Yir'ah Ve'ahavah ch. 17) © 2023 S. Katz and torah.org

