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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

What is the real challenge of maintaining a free society? In parshat Eikev, Moses springs his great surprise. Here are his words: "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."... If you ever forget the Lord your God... I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed." (Deut. 8:11-19)

What Moses was saying to the new generation was this: You thought that the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were the real challenge, and that once you conquer and settle the land, your problems will be over. The truth is that it is then that the real challenge will begin. It will be precisely when all your physical needs are met -- when you have land and sovereignty and rich harvests and safe homes -- that your spiritual trial will commence.

The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not insecurity but security, not slavery but freedom. Moses, for the first time in history, was hinting at a law of history. Many centuries later it was articulated by the great 14th century Islamic thinker, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), by the Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), and most recently by the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson. Moses was giving an account of the decline and fall of civilisations.

Ibn Khaldun argued similarly, that when a civilisation becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their asabiyah, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilised than they are but more cohesive and driven.

Vico described a similar cycle: "People first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates."

Bertrand Russell put it powerfully in the introduction to his History of Western Philosophy. Russell thought that the two great peaks of civilisation were reached in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. But he was honest enough to see that the very features that made them great contained the seeds of their own demise: "What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilised than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion."

Niall Ferguson, in his book Civilisation: the West and the Rest (2011) argued that the West rose to dominance because of what he calls its six "killer applications": competition, science, democracy, medicine, consumerism and the Protestant work ethic. Today however it is losing belief in itself and is in danger of being overtaken by others.

All of this was said for the first time by Moses, and it forms a central argument of the book of Devarim. If you assume -- he tells the next generation -- that you yourselves won the land and the freedom you enjoy, you will grow complacent and self-satisfied. That is the beginning of the end of any civilisation. In an earlier chapter Moses uses the graphic word venoshantem, "you will grow old" (Deut. 4:25), meaning that you will no longer have the moral and mental energy to make the sacrifices necessary for the defence of freedom.

Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments and injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane.

This has happened, sooner or later, to all civilisations, however great. To the Israelites -- a small people surrounded by large empires -- it would be disastrous. As Moses makes clear towards the end of the book, in the long account of the curses that would overcome the people if they lost their spiritual bearings, Israel would find itself defeated and devastated.

Only against this background can we understand the momentous project the book of Devarim

is proposing: the creation of a society capable of defeating the normal laws of the growth-and-decline of civilisations. This is an astonishing idea.

How is it to be done? By each person bearing and sharing responsibility for the society as a whole. By each knowing the history of his or her people. By each individual studying and understanding the laws that govern all. By teaching their children so that they too become literate and articulate in their identity.

Rule 1: Never forget where you came from.

Next, you sustain freedom by establishing courts, the rule of law and the implementation of justice. By caring for the poor. By ensuring that everyone has the basic requirements of dignity. By including the lonely in the people's celebrations. By remembering the covenant daily, weekly, annually in ritual, and renewing it at a national assembly every seven years. By making sure there are always Prophets to remind the people of their destiny and expose the corruptions of power.

Rule 2: Never drift from your foundational principles and ideals.

Above all it is achieved by recognising a power greater than ourselves. This is Moses' most insistent point. Societies start growing old when they lose faith in the transcendent. They then lose faith in an objective moral order and end by losing faith in themselves.

Rule 3: A society is as strong as its faith.

Only faith in God can lead us to honour the needs of others as well as ourselves. Only faith in God can motivate us to act for the benefit of a future we will not live to see. Only faith in God can stop us from wrongdoing when we believe that no other human will ever find out. Only faith in God can give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and the self-belief that leads, as Paul Kennedy argued in The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987), to military overstretch and national defeat.

Towards the end of his book Civilisation, Niall Ferguson quotes a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, part of a team tasked with the challenge of discovering why it was that Europe, having lagged behind China until the 17th century, overtook it, rising to prominence and dominance.

At first, he said, we thought it was your guns. You had better weapons than we did. Then we delved deeper and thought it was your political system. Then we searched deeper still, and concluded that it was your economic system.

But for the past 20 years we have realised that it was in fact your religion. It was the (Judeo-Christian) foundation of social and cultural life in Europe that made possible the emergence first of capitalism, then of democratic politics.

Only faith can save a society from decline and fall. That was one of Moses' greatest insights, and it has never ceased to be true. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel **zt**"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And it shall come to pass because you hearken to these laws, safeguarding and keeping them, that the Lord your God shall keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore unto your fathers, and He will love you, and bless you…in the land which He swore unto your fathers to give you." (Deuteronomy 7:12–13) How secure can world Jewry – and the citizens of Israel – feel about the future of the Jewish State? Have we returned to Israel for good, or is this "third commonwealth" only a possible opportunity, its long-term stability dependent on the moral, ethical, and spiritual commitment of its residents?

In this week's portion of Ekev we find two passages which seem to contradict each other concerning this issue. The first passage, which opens this week's portion, we've quoted above. The words speak for themselves; our entire relationship to the land depends on our keeping the biblical laws. In fact, the opening word of the portion, "ekev," is a conditional term (the desired goal will result "because of," "ekev"), underscoring the theme of qualification. No "affirmative action" gestures here! If the Israelites break the law, they will pay the price of not inheriting the land. If they keep the law, then God will bless them in the land which He promised our fathers. The keeping of the commandments may be compared to mortgage payments; default on the mortgage and the property gets taken away.

However, the Bible goes on to teach: "Not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart did you go to possess their land; but it was because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God drove them out before you" (Deut. 9:5).

Here the Almighty is presenting a different slant on our right to the land; it has less to do with our worthiness, and more to do with our neighbors' lack of worthiness. We are being judged in comparison to the nations around us rather than in the absolute terms of our own conduct.

To reconcile these passages, the Or HaChayyim HaKadosh distinguishes between two stages in the redemptive process: entering the Land of Israel is the first, and remaining there for good is the second. Our initial entry into the land comes about as a result of the evil of the other nations rather than our own righteousness, as well as God's promise to the Patriarchs. But whether or not we remain on the land, whether a particular "return" will become the anticipated redemption or a mere passing episode, depends solely upon our ethical, moral, and spiritual conduct, as indicated by the initial verse of our Torah reading.

There is also an alternate (and more comforting) way to orchestrate these verses, as Rabbi Chayyim Ibn

Attar continues to explain. Initially, when the Almighty makes His covenantal guarantee that the descendants of Abraham will inherit the promised land, He stipulates that as soon as the Canaanites demonstrate totally unacceptable moral behavior, "in the fourth generation, they [the Israelites] will return here" (Gen. 15:16). Then the biblical text continues to outline the ultimate boundaries of Israel (the ten nations): "In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying, 'Unto your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates'" (15:18).

Hence the holy Or HaChayyim suggests that whether or not we prove ourselves worthy, God promises that he will take us out of Egypt and out of every enslavement and bring us to Israel as our homeland. That is unconditional, if only because without a homeland we will not be able to maintain God's promise of our eternity. But how much of the Promised Land comes into our possession – whether or not we get to inherit the full boundaries from the Nile to the Euphrates – depends upon our actions and morality. And what is clear from the second interpretation of the Or HaChayyim, but not necessarily from the first, is that our ability – or worthiness – to remain on Israeli soil is not an "all-or-nothing" situation; if we are partially good, we have a good chance of remaining on a goodly portion of Israel.

This second interpretation is much more optimistic and heartening for us today; but it also teaches us that if we are forced to give up parts of the land, we may be receiving an important message from Above that our ethical behavior is not what it ought to be – especially in terms of how we behave amongst ourselves. It is because of His compassionate righteousness that the Almighty initially chose Abraham (Gen. 18:19) and because of Israel's lack thereof that our Holy Temple was destroyed (Is. 1).

Let me add the following, taught by my revered teacher and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, which will distinguish between the two losses of Temple and the two returns. Twice the Torah outlines the exile and disasters that await the Jewish people if we stray from the path, first in Leviticus and then again in Deuteronomy. But at least in Leviticus, God closes His awesome words with a promise: And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God. I will remember for them the covenant of their forbears whom I took out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be for them a God. (Lev. 26:44–45)

However, the second description of exile and disasters concludes rather matter-of-factly, in the midst of the tragic occurrences, devoid of hope or optimism: "These are the words of the covenant which God commanded Moses" (Deut. 28:69), with no reference to returning the Israelites to the land. Why the difference between the two "warnings"?

According to Nahmanides (Lev. 26:16), each disaster description refers to and prophesies the destruction of one of the Temples. Following the destruction of the First Temple, God promised a return, and a fairly swift one at that – after only seventy years of Babylonian-Persian servitude (586 BCE–515 BCE). Following the destruction of the Second Temple, the exile will be much longer and more severe. However, adds Nahmanides, the second group of warnings does not really conclude until one complete chapter later: "And it shall come to pass, after all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse [as outlined in chapter 28], that you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice" (Deut. 30:1–2).

In other words, after the first destruction, God guaranteed that He would effectuate deliverance no matter what. After the second destruction there would also be a deliverance, but it would be dependent upon our doing teshuva, upon our repentance, upon our religio-ethical actions! There is still one important silver lining in the cloud. At least according to Maimonides, this act of repentance is not a commandment but is rather a guarantee. God promises that we will repent and then we will be redeemed. Obviously, the sooner we repent the sooner will come the redemption, but the Almighty guarantees that redemption will arrive!

How illustrative of all this is the Hebrew calendar! Following Tisha B'Av, the memorial of the destruction of the Temple, come seven Sabbaths in which we read prophetic portions (haftarot) of consolation. This is followed by the Torah reading of Nitzavim, which we have just cited (Deut. 30), the portion which calls us to repentance (teshuva) – which falls on the Sabbath preceding Rosh HaShana, the first of our Ten Days of Repentance culminating in Yom Kippur, the day of forgiveness and redemption.

Hence we are being primed to move from the destruction of the three Sabbaths preceding Tisha B'Av – which feature a prophetic recording of the loss of our Temple – on to consolation. However, the ultimate consolation will only come if we repent, if we enter the Rosh HaShana period properly and thereby become worthy of redemption!

May we learn to take our Bible – and our calendar readings – very seriously.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Ekev – the word itself and the parsha generally – stresses the cause-and-effect equation that governs all human and Jewish history. Blessings and sadder events are conditioned on previous human behavior, attitudes and actions. Life eventually teaches us that there is no free lunch. The rabbis stated it

succinctly in Avot: "According to the effort and sacrifice, so too will be the reward."

There are really no shortcuts in life. All attempts to accommodate eternal Jewish practices and values to fit current fads and societal norms, have ended in abysmal failure. The road of Jewish history is littered with the remains of people and movements who looked to reform and improve Judaism and instead only succeeded in making it irrelevant to their followers.

The Torah emphasizes that Moshe brought the people closer to Heaven but he did not degrade heaven by dragging it down to the level of the people. The tragedy of much of American Jewry and of many secular Jews generally is not that Judaism was too hard and difficult – rather, it was rendered too easy and convenient and thus had no meaning in their lives and everyday existence. Moshe in this week's parsha (as he does generally in the book of Dvarim) emphasizes the difficult times that the people endured in their forty years sojourn and travels in the desert of Sinai. And Moshe does not deign to promise them a rose garden in the Middle East upon their entry into and conquest of the Land of Israel. He warns them of the consequences of abandoning God and Torah. The God of Jewish and general world history is exacting and does not tolerate the easy path that leads to spiritual weakness and eventual physical destruction.

Rashi in this week's parsha comments that this message is particularly true regarding the "small" things in life that one easily crushes with one's akeiv – heel. It is the small thing that truly characterizes our personality and our relationships with others and with our Creator as well.

I have noticed that there is a trend in our current society that when eulogies are delivered, they concentrate on the small things in life – on stories, anecdotes, memories and personal relationships – rather than on the public or commercial achievements of the deceased, no matter how impressive those achievements might have been. It is the small things in life that engender within us likes and dislikes, feelings of affection and love and emotions of annoyance and frustration. So our Torah is one of myriad details and many small things. The God of the vast universe reveals Himself, so to speak, to us in the atom and the tiny mite. For upon reflection and analysis there are really no small things in life.

Everything that we do and say bears consequences for our personal and national future. It is this sense of almost cosmic influence exercised by every individual in one's everyday life that lies at the heart of Torah and Judaism. We build the world in our own lives' seemingly mundane behavior.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As a child, I attended Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. Every day at morning services, I was mesmerized by an older man named Rabbi Chaim Gelb. I can still remember Reb Chaim calling out "Amen." Sometimes he'd give me a candy and ask me to recite a blessing so that he could mightily respond "Amen."

At Yeshiva University rabbinical school years later, I was deeply influenced by the saintly Rabbi Dovid Lifschitz. I can still remember Rav Dovid on Simchat Torah surrounded by his students, leading us in the niggun "V'taher Libenu" – words in which we call out to God to purify our hearts. It seemed to me that whenever Rav Dovid prayed, it was in the spirit of that niggun.

The Torah offers a halachic base that enhances the meaning of both of these foundational experiences in my religious development. It does so when stating, "u'l'avdo b'chol levavchem" (and you shall serve Him [God] with all your heart; Deuteronomy 11:13). Maimonides concludes that this is the source of prayer. U'l'avdo means that every day we are obligated in prayer (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 1:1).

For Maimonides, prayer is a religious obligation. I may not feel like praying, yet there is a religious imperative to serve God daily.

This was my sense of Reb Chaim Gelb's prayer. Standing before God, he would call out "Amen." One could sense the great responsibility he felt in fulfilling the mitzvah of prayer as an obligation.

There may be another way to understand Maimonides. Without God, many people feel a deep sense of loneliness. For these individuals, life has no meaning if God is absent. Like a lover who constantly longs for his beloved, so does one feel constant despair without God. From this perspective, one prays daily in constant search of the Lord, without Whom life is impersonal, void, and empty.

This latter approach to Maimonides fundamentally differs from the first. In the first, the desire to pray does not emanate from the petitioner but from God. We therefore have an obligation, whether we feel it or not, to serve God daily. In the second approach, the need to pray comes from the petitioner as an expression of constant angst if God is not present.

This was the feeling behind the fervent prayer of Rav Dovid Lifschitz. In his heartfelt "v'taher," I sensed a tzaddik who felt ongoing emotional spiritual pain if he was not in communion with God. Like a fish seeking water, Rav Dovid sought the ongoing presence of God.

The challenge is to realize that during prayer, both approaches are necessary. Solely praying to God without listening to our souls minimizes our individual worth. At the same time, expressing only our individual needs to God is selfish. May we be blessed to find the balance of listening to God and listening to ourselves.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Lest the land from which they were taken [Egypt] say… or from His hatred of them He took them out to kill them in the desert." (Devarim 9:28) Moshe Rabbeinu constantly defended the Jewish People. Time and again, we sinned and rebelled and each time, Moshe sought to have Hashem forgive us. Even if the worst offenders needed to be punished, the nation should continue to exist.

In this Parsha, Moshe recounts various times when he stood up for the Jews, ascending the mountain and not eating for forty days and nights, and pleading on their behalf. He even mentions how he had to save Aharon from Hashem's wrath. While these stories were certainly true, does it not seem a bit arrogant for Moshe to recall how great he was and all he had done? Certainly, this seems out of character for the "humblest of men."

In this posuk, Moshe recalls one of his arguments against destroying the Jews. If Hashem had wiped us out in the desert, the people of Egypt would say that Hashem didn't have the ability to conquer the people in Canaan, and therefore He killed us in the desert so no one would know. This would have been a terrible Chillul Hashem, desecrating Hashem's name by calling His omnipotence into question, even just to scoff.

Alternatively, the people might have said that even when Hashem took us out of Egypt with miracles and great might, it was only out of hatred, so He could kill us in the desert. This would have undermined all the miracles of Yetzias Mitzrayim. Instead of a great show of power to free a holy nation from unjust slavery and mistreatment, it would now appear to be the sinister plan of a petty god to harm people he didn't like.

This, too, would have been a terrible Chillul Hashem, as Moshe argued. To let people believe that Hashem was like their pantheon of deities who were little more than flawed humans with some supernatural powers, would be a denigration of Hashem's complete goodness and wholesomeness. Hashem had to save us lest people say He was petty.

But there is another Chillul Hashem here too. Had they said, "Hashem took them out of Egypt because He hates the Jews," that would have been blasphemous. Hashem's love and choice of the Jewish People, descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak AND Yaakov, is eternal. He will not trade us for any nation no matter what. It would be a Chillul Hashem to deny His enduring love for us.

That's what Moshe was doing here in recounting all his efforts to defend the Jews. He wasn't telling them that he was so great. He was telling the Jews that THEY were great. Hashem's love for us is unwavering, but if we deny His involvement in our lives, He has to remind us to turn to Him. What a powerful message this is as we leave Tisha B'Av and head towards the days of Elul, Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. Hashem will always love us, and we should remember that, and do all we can to be worthy of, and return, that love.

A wealthy French Jew lived in a penthouse apartment in Paris. One day, he found out his neighbor was the mother of the King of Morocco. He asked a favor that when her son came to visit, he have the opportunity to meet him. When the King came to visit, though security was extremely tight, the good neighbor was allowed to visit and he brought his thirteen-year old son with him.

The bright and respectful boy impressed the king who said to him, "I believe the Jews celebrate the thirteenth birthday of a boy (the Bar Mitzvah) and that it is customary to give a gift." The man assured the king it was not necessary.

Nevertheless, later that afternoon, the man and his son were summoned back across the hall to see the king. He handed the boy a fancy gilded envelope. Inside was a check for $50,000! The man was stunned and told the king that such as gift was too much for a Bar Mitzvah boy.

The king replied, "I did not give your son such a large gift because he deserves it, but because, as King of Morocco, my station demands that I give a respectable gift. Anything less than this would be an insult to my Kingdom." © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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Grace After Meals

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

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

Since *Birkat HaZan* was instituted by Moshe Rabbeinu, it is surprising that some versions of the blessing include the verse: "You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing" (*Tehillim* 145:16). After all, *Tehillim* was written by King David, who lived much later than Moshe. The likely explanation is that some of the verses of *Tehillim* were formulated at an

early stage, and King David wrote them down at a later stage. This is borne out by the language used in *Birkat HaZan* to introduce the verse: "As it is **said**, 'You open your hand,'" and not "As it is **written**, 'You open your hand.'"

As we mentioned, the specific formulation of the blessings was originally different from what we recite today. A person could have fulfilled his obligation (for *Birkat HaZan*) by saying in Aramaic, "Blessed is the merciful One, King, the Creator of this bread." Along the same lines, when someone sings *Tzur MiShelo* – the Shabbat song whose structure is parallel to that of *Birkat HaMazon* and incorporates the same themes – it is possible that he has fulfilled his obligation to recite *Birkat HaMazon*. Accordingly, perhaps a person should have in mind when he sings *Tzur MiShelo* that he does not intend to fulfill his obligation. This way, he ensures that his fulfillment of the mitzva takes place only when he recites the classic *Birkat HaMazon*.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Rains of Blessing

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe continued his message to the B'nei Yisrael. This section deals with the B'nei Yisrael's future in the land, "So you (p) shall keep all the commandment that I command you (s) today, so that you (p) will be strong, and you (p) will come and take possession of the land to which you (s) are crossing to take possession of it, and so that you (p) will prolong your (p) days on the land that Hashem swore to your (p) forefathers to give them and to their offspring – a land flowing with milk and honey. For the land to which you (s) come, to take possession of it – it is not like the land of Egypt from where you (p) left, where you (s) would plant your (s) seed and water it by your (s) foot like a vegetable garden. But the land to which you (p) cross over there to take possession of it is a land of mountains and valleys; by the rain of the heavens, it drinks water; a land that Hashem, your (s) Elokim, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your (s) Elokim, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end."

This short paragraph has many messages that we can learn from. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that throughout Moshe's exhortation to the B'nei Yisrael, there appears to be a constant change between singular and plural, as I have indicated. This is to enable the people to understand that "in spite of their settling down throughout the land and the decentralization of the masses of the people, they still remain united and belong together as a single unit." HaRav Hirsch also explains another message to the people, the observance of the Mitzvah (the collective Torah) "is the fulfillment of the whole duty for which Israel had received its special position amongst the nations, and now is to enter into possession of the land which was designed for that purpose." The Land of Israel is different than all the other lands of the world, and the observance of the Mitzvah is "the source of its strength and its power of overcoming all difficulties, as well as the condition for the continuance of its future on the soil of that land."

What makes the Land of Israel different? One of the first descriptions of the Land of Israel is a contrast with the Land of Egypt. In Parashat Lech Lecha in Sefer Bereishit, Avram (Avraham later) and Lot divided the land that was promised to Avram. There, the Torah describes Lot's choice, the area of Sodom, as comparable to the Land of Egypt and the Garden of Hashem (Eden). It seems unusual that Sodom and Egypt should be compared to Eden. But they are comparable in one aspect, the lack of rain. Sodom and Egypt were not blessed with rain, nor was the Garden of Eden. Rain is understood in the Torah to be a blessing from Hashem, as a judgmental barometer of righteousness and evil within the land. The Garden of Eden was a land that could only be dwelled in by Adam and Chava (Eve) when they did not know what sin was. Once they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they could then be judged as righteous or evil by their behavior. (It must be emphasized that the correct name of that tree is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.) Sodom and Egypt were both judged to be without righteousness, yet Hashem had not decided to punish them at that time. It was then incumbent on Hashem to keep them alive so that the possibility of Teshuva was still an option for them. Had they repented, they would have been forgiven and been eligible to be judged and blessed with rain. Hashem accomplished feeding the people by making the Garden of Eden surrounded by rivers, Sodom "well-watered," and Egypt irrigated by the Nile River.

The Torah alludes to Egypt and the Nile River with the words, "where you would plant your seed and water it by your foot like a vegetable garden." Rashi explains that the people of Egypt would have to walk to the Nile and carry water from the Nile uphill to the fields of Egypt to irrigate them. HaRav Hirsch explains that, "Egypt's fertility is independent of the rain. It is watered by the Nile irrigation canals cut right through the country, made and worked by human efforts. Egypt alone is depicted as not suffering when there is no rain. Somewhat doubtful is the meaning of 'by your foot;' it might mean step by step, or refer to pedaling the wheels set in the canals to force the water along."

The Torah describes the Land of Israel as "a land of mountains and valleys; by the rain of the heavens, it drinks water." Israel has rivers and wells, but according to HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin, these waters are insufficient to give water to all the people as well as the animals and farms without the blessing of rain. That is how Israel could become subject to famines caused by a lack of that rain. That is also how we see this occur in earlier Books of the Torah. Egypt was known to always have food in spite of a regional famine. And that is why

the seven years of famine that was predicted by Yosef to Par'oh was such an unusual and important message.

Rashi sees this rain as praise for Israel; in Egypt the people had to go to the Nile to gather water, but in Israel the rain came to them to water their fields. The need for rain in Israel would require the B'nei Yisrael to pray to Hashem. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the insufficient rain demanded that the people would dig pits under their houses and line them with some form of plaster so that they would not lose any water from the limited rain. A large pit was dug underneath the Temple Mount which, still today, has a large supply of water that would be used in the Temple. HaRav Sorotzkin also points out that in many countries, rain water is not good to drink, and when left in a pit becomes stale. In the Land of Israel, where the rain comes as a blessing from Hashem, the waters in the cisterns become sweet and very pleasant to drink.

The Torah continues by saying that, "the eyes of Hashem, your Elokim, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end." While Hashem created the Land of Israel to be different than the other lands of the world in that the land itself was given the power to react to the righteousness or the evil of its inhabitants, Hashem did not separate Himself from His stewardship of the land entirely. Hashem would hear the cries of the Land of Israel but would not allow the land to expel its inhabitants until He gave His permission.

We are blessed that we have been allowed to return to our land and inhabit it. But we must be cognizant of the special powers of the land that it has been granted to protect its Holiness. We must fulfill our responsibilities to Hashem for the great honor He has granted us. May our sincere observance of the Laws and Statutes of the Torah ensure that the Heavens will grant us the rains that will enable our land to give forth its blessing to all.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

In the middle of Moshe's retelling of the sin of the golden calf – which occurred in the first year after the Exodus – he includes two verses (Devarim 20:6-7) regarding Aharon's death, which occurred in the 40th year. Besides the contextual issue (why Aharon's death is inserted here), there are geographical issues as well.

The most obvious issue is that Moshe says Aharon died in Moseira, even though the Torah says he died on Hor HaHar (Bamidbar 20:22-29, 33:37-39). The travel itinerary seems to be wrong as well, as Moshe says they traveled "from the wells of B'nei Yaakan to Moseira," whereas in the list of their travels (Bamidbar 33:31) they went in the opposite direction, "from Moseiros to B'nei Yaakan." The commentators suggest several approaches to explain these issues; the most straightforward is the one found in the major midrashim, quoted by Rashi: "when Aharon died on Hor HaHar at the end of the 40 years, and the clouds of glory departed, you were afraid of the war with the King of Arad, so you appointed a leader to return to Egypt, and you went back eight encampments, to B'nei Yaakan [the 7th encampment] and from there to Moseira [the 8th encampment], and there the sons of Levi fought with you, and they killed some of you and you killed some of them, until they made you return the way you had gone back… and in Moseira you mourned greatly over Aharon's death, which caused all of this to happen, so it seemed to you as if he died there."

There are details that deserve further discussion (such as some of the sources, e.g.Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1, having the nation attribute the deaths that resulted from the civil war to not mourning enough for Aharon rather than his death causing a series of events that led to the civil war), but the main takeaway is that the reverse itinerary was the result of the nation retracing their steps, traveling in the opposite direction in an attempt to return to Egypt rather than fighting against Canaan. This, along with why they considered Moseira to be where Aharon died, seems to address the geographical issues. But does it really? A closer look leaves us wondering about some of the details.

For one thing, did the entire nation take part in the more significant mourning for Aharon in Moseira, or only those who had tried to return to Egypt? Did Moshe join the other "sons of Levi" who chased after the rest of the nation to try to bring them back? If he did, did he have the Levi'im pack up the Mishkan and bring it with them, or was it still at Hor HaHar? If he didn't, how could the "full mourning" for Aharon take place without Moshe? Secondly, if they returned to Hor HaHar anyway, why did they mourn in Moseira rather than going back to where Aharon actually died (and was buried), and do the appropriate mourning there? From a geographical perspective, the trip from Hor HaHar to Moseira and back doesn't make much sense either. One of the 8 encampments was Etzion Gever, just north of the eastern fork of the Yam Suf (the Gulf of Aqaba), while Hor HaHar, which is near Kadesh on the border of Edom (see Bamidbar 20:17 and 20:23), is close to the southern boundary of Eretz Yisroel. Did they travel from Etzion Gever all the way north to Kadesh and Hor HaHar (Bamidbar 33:36-37), then retreat south via Etzion Gever to Moseira (as Rashi and his Midrashic sources understand Devarim 10:6), then return to Hor HaHar after the Levi'im overpowered them before going back south to go around Edom, passing Etzion Gever yet again (Devarim 2:8)?

I would therefore suggest that before the nation started mourning for Aharon in Moseira, they sent word back to Moshe, who was still at Hor HaHar (with the Mishkan, and those who didn't join the attempted return to Egypt), asking whether they should do the full mourning in Moseira, or come back to Hor HaHar. Knowing that they were going to go back south anyway

to go around Edom, Moshe told them to wait there, as the rest of the nation would join them in Moseira to mourn for Aharon properly before continuing around Edom. In the end, they didn't go back and forth and back and forth; instead of everyone going south just to go around Edom, some went south trying to go back to Egypt, while others joined them in Moseira to mourn for Aharon. From there, everyone continued past Etzion Gever to circumvent Edom.

This scenario helps explain why Aharon's death and the attack by Arad that followed is the only narrative inserted in the list of the encampments (Bamidbar 33:38-40), and why only the attack is mentioned, but not the captives taken or the eventual victory over Arad. Because Aharon's death and Arad's attack affected how the nation traveled – with some traveling south in a thwarted attempt to return to Egypt and the "official" camp eventually joining them to mourn for Aharon properly – we can understand why these events were inserted in the travel itinerary. If, however, after mourning in Moseira everyone returned to Hor HaHar, Aharon's death and Arad's attack wouldn't have impacted the official itinerary, and their inclusion remains puzzling.

After Aharon's "death" at Moseira, the nation traveled to Goodgoad and then to Yutvusa (Devarim 10:7), which matches the direction they traveled going to Kadesh and Hor HaHar the first time (Bamidbar 33:33). And these are the next two stops after B'nei Yaakan (which was apparently skipped on the way back). But there were three other stops before Hor HaHar, and it seems somewhat awkward that Moshe only tells us about this leg of the trip back. If, however, they didn't return to Hor HaHar, staying parallel to Eilat and Etzion Gever rather than going back north before coming back south – without stopping before they passed Eilat and Etzion Gever (Devarim 2:8) – we can understand why only some locations are mentioned.

Because G-d was upset at Aharon for his role in the golden calf, Moshe had to pray on his behalf too (Devarim 9:20). Numerous commentators (e.g. Rav Saadya Gaon, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam) say that Moshe included Aharon's death in the golden calf narrative to show that his prayer was at least somewhat effective, delaying it until the 40th year. I would add that he was also reminding them how important it was that Aharon didn't die until the 40th year – by referencing the civil war that erupted after his death and the much larger eulogy and second mourning that took place in Moseira, which reflected how vital his presence was for all those years.

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It's remarkable how prominent eating is in the Torah. The designation of which animals one may eat, the consumption of parts of all korbonos except olos, matza on Pesach, seudos on Shabbos and Yomtov... And yet, eating would seem to be an animalistic endeavor, something to be accepted as necessary, perhaps, but not awarded religious value.

But human consumption of food is qualitatively different from animals' feeding. That is the essence of the words "[Hashem] subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you mon to eat, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to teach you that a human being does not live on bread alone, but that one must live on all the words of Hashem."

That pasuk is often understood as meaning simply that our lives are made meaningful by following Hashem's words. But its deeper meaning is something else: While we may think that our souls are nourished by the vitamins, minerals, proteins and fats in what we eat, the Torah is telling us that our true life nourishment comes from something ethereal, holy, that permeates our food, something instilled there by Hashem's will. That was the lesson of the mon, that our lives' engines and their fuel are not ultimately physical. It's a concept philosophers call vitalism.

And the wordings of our birchos hanehenim hint at that fact: Shehakol nih'yeh bid'varo, borei pri ha'etz, hamotzi [by His decree] lechem. We don't just say thank You for what we are about to eat but express the fact that the food is caused by, and imbued with, something divine, and that it is really that invisible element that provides us human life.

R' Chaim Vital quotes the Arizal as saying that the highest spiritual level is accessible by concentrating on our brachos, because they are not mere expressions of gratitude but, rather, means of sublimating and refining the base element inherent in the physical stuff we are eating. "And he [the Arizal]," R' Vital writes, "impressed the importance of that upon me greatly."

Those of us who have been saying brachos from childhood too easily fall into reciting them by rote, often mumbling them without thinking much, if at all, about their words' meanings.

We do well to watch and listen to the newly observant when they make brachos, and strive to emulate their concentration on what they are saying.