

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**hat very day the Lord spoke to Moses, 'Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession. And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people...For you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.'

With these words there draws to a close the life of the greatest hero the Jewish people has ever known: Moses, the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver, the man who brought a group of slaves to freedom, turned a fractious collection of individuals into a nation, and so transformed them that they became the people of eternity.

It was Moses who mediated with God, performed signs and wonders, gave the people its laws, fought with them when they sinned, fought for them when praying for Divine forgiveness, gave his life to them and had his heart broken by them when they repeatedly failed to live up to his great expectations.

Each age has had its own image of Moses. For the more mystically inclined sages Moses was the man who ascended to Heaven at the time of the giving of the Torah, where he had to contend with the Angels who opposed the idea that this precious gift be given to mere mortals. God told Moses to answer them, which he did decisively. "Do angels work that they need a day of rest? Do they have parents that they need to be commanded to honour them? Do they have an evil inclination that they need to be told, 'Do not commit adultery?'" (Shabbat 88a). Moses the Man out-argues the Angels.

Other Sages were more radical still. For them Moses was Rabbenu, "our Rabbi" -- not a king, a political or military leader, but a scholar and master of the law, a role which they invested with astonishing authority. They went so far as to say that when Moses prayed for God to

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in loving memory of my dear parents  
Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakauhen  
Paul Kahn  
and  
Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehauschua  
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt  
By Fernand Kahn

forgive the people for the Golden Calf, God replied, "I cannot, for I have already vowed, "One who sacrifices to any God shall be destroyed" (Ex. 22:19), and I cannot revoke My vow." Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, have You not taught me the laws of annulling vows? One may not annul his own vow, but a Sage may do so." Moses thereupon annulled God's vow (Shemot Rabbah 43:4).

For Philo, the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Moses was a philosopher-king of the type depicted in Plato's Republic. He governs the nation, organises its laws, institutes its rites and conducts himself with dignity and honour; he is wise, stoical and self-controlled. This is, as it were, a Greek Moses, looking not unlike Michelangelo's famous sculpture.

For Maimonides, Moses was radically different from all other prophets in four ways. First, others received their prophecies in dreams or visions, while Moses received his when awake. Second, to the others God spoke in parables obliquely, but to Moses He spoke directly and lucidly. Third, the other prophets were terrified when God appeared to them but of Moses it says, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). Fourth, other prophets needed to undergo lengthy preparations to hear the Divine word; Moses spoke to God whenever he wanted or needed to. He was "always prepared, like one of the ministering angels" (Laws of the Foundations of Torah 7:6).

Yet what is so moving about the portrayal of Moses in the Torah is that he appears before us as quintessentially human. No religion has more deeply and systemically insisted on the absolute otherness of God and Man, Heaven and Earth, the infinite and the finite. Other cultures have blurred the boundary, making some human beings seem godlike, perfect, infallible. There is such a tendency -- marginal to be sure, but never entirely absent -- within Jewish life itself: to see sages as saints, great scholars as angels, to gloss over their doubts and shortcomings and turn them into superhuman emblems of perfection. Tanakh, however, is greater than that. It tells us that God, who is never less than God, never asks us to be more than simply human.

Moses is a human being. We see him despair and want to die. We see him lose his temper. We see him on the brink of losing his faith in the people he has been called on to lead. We see him beg to be allowed to cross the Jordan and enter the land he has spent his life

as a leader travelling toward. Moses is the hero of those who wrestle with the world as it is and with people as they are, knowing that "It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it."

The Torah insists that "to this day no one knows where his grave is" (Deut. 34:6), to avoid his grave being made a place of pilgrimage or worship. It is all too easy to turn human beings, after their death, into saints and demigods. That is precisely what the Torah opposes. "Every human being" writes Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance (5:2), "can be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam."

Moses does not exist in Judaism as an object of worship but as a role model for each of us to aspire to. He is the eternal symbol of a human being made great by what he strove for, not by what he actually achieved. The titles conferred by him in the Torah, "the man Moses," "God's servant," "a man of God," are all the more impressive for their modesty. Moses continues to inspire.

On 3 April 1968, Martin Luther King delivered a sermon in a church in Memphis, Tennessee. At the end of his address, he turned to the last day of Moses' life, when the man who had led his people to freedom was taken by God to a mountain-top from which he could see in the distance the land he was not destined to enter. That, said King, was how he felt that night: I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

That night was the last of his life. The next day he was assassinated. At the end, the still young Christian preacher -- he was not yet forty -- who had led the civil rights movement in the United States, identified not with a Christian figure but with Moses.

In the end the power of Moses' story is precisely that it affirms our mortality. There are many explanations of why Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. I have argued that it was simply because "each generation has its leaders" (Avodah Zarah 5a) and the person who has the ability to lead a people out of slavery is not necessarily the one who has the requisite skills to lead the next generation into its own and very different challenges. There is no one ideal form of leadership that is right for all times and situations.

Franz Kafka gave voice to a different and no less compelling truth: "He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life; incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it is a human life." (Franz Kafka, Diaries 1914-1923, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt,

New York, Schocken, 1965, 195-96.)

What then does the story of Moses tell us? That it is right to fight for justice even against regimes that seem indestructible. That God is with us when we take our stand against oppression. That we must have faith in those we lead, and when we cease to have faith in them we can no longer lead them. That change, though slow, is real, and that people are transformed by high ideals even though it may take centuries.

In one of its most powerful statements about Moses, the Torah states that he was "one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength unabated" (34:8). I used to think that these were merely two sequential phrases, until I realised that the first was the explanation for the second. Why was Moses' strength unabated? Because his eyes were undimmed -- because he never lost the ideals of his youth. Though he sometimes lost faith in himself and his ability to lead, he never lost faith in the cause: in God, service, freedom, the right, the good and the holy. His words at the end of his life were as impassioned as they had been at the beginning.

That is Moses, the man who refused to "go gently into that dark night", the eternal symbol of how a human being, without ever ceasing to be human, can become a giant of the moral life. That is the greatness and the humility of aspiring to be "a servant of God." *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

“Remember the days of yore, understand the years (shenot) of each generation.” (Deuteronomy 32:7) Are we commanded to study world history? Certainly, I would say, on the basis of the simple meaning of the verse cited at the head of this commentary in accordance with the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808–1888).

A proper study of history will reveal the consistent interplay between Israel and the nations of the world, the intellectual streams which influenced us – and in turn – which we influenced, and the hidden finger of God which guaranteed Jewish survival under the most difficult of conditions. And I would argue that the proper translation of the biblical verse cited above, as one may deduce from the biblical commentary of Rabbi Hirsch, is “understand the differences [shenot, not from ‘shana – year,’ but rather from ‘shinui – difference, change’] of each generation.”

It has aptly been said: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery, today is a gift granted to us by God, and that is why it is called ‘present.’” I would add that “today” is all that we really have to utilize, and we must utilize it well, with wisdom and with dispatch.

But we cannot treat “today” with proper understanding and circumspection unless we are sensitive to the forces of history which preceded it, especially to the changes in zeitgeist (the temper and spirit of the time), which makes “today” different from “yesterday,” and the new opportunities which may enable us to set the stage for a better tomorrow.

The truth is that God revealed Himself to Moses as the God of history. It is also true that in the Book of Genesis El Sha-ddai or Elo-him is revealed as the God of power and creation; however, when in the book of Exodus, Moses asks God for His name, the divine response is “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,” literally, “I shall be what I shall be” (Exodus 3:14).

In effect, God is here introducing Himself first and foremost as the God of future tense, the God of history, the God of becoming, the God of future redemption (“Jehovah,” literally “He will bring about” redemption). This is very much in keeping with Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi’s Kuzari, who sees God as revealing Himself first and foremost in history, based upon the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord thy God, who took thee out of Egypt, the house of Bondage” (20:2).

And take note that this Name Ehyeh is very different from Maimonides’ emphasis on the God of power and creation, Elo-him; Indeed Maimonides even goes so far as to explain Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh to mean I am that I am, I am the God of being, I am the Ground of Being (Paul Tillich), I am the essence of creation (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Foundations of Torah 1:1), completely overlooking the fact that Ehyeh is literally a future verb, “I will be.” Hence both ideas are correct: God is the powerful God of Creation and God is also the Redeeming God of history.

And this name Ehyeh is not as definitive as is Elo-him, the God of creation. The God of creation “worked” (as it were) alone in creating the world; in contrast, the God of history is dependent upon the world scene first and foremost on Israel. For example, according to most interpreters, redemption was in the divine plan almost immediately after the Exodus, but the refusal of Israel to conquer the land delayed the process immeasurably. There will eventually be redemption, as all our prophets guarantee in God’s name, but since redemption requires Israel’s intervention, and the eventual cooperation of the entire world of nations, God must leave the “end of days” open-ended.

And so, the Bible after presenting the name Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh goes on to say, “So shall you [Moses] say to the children of Israel: ‘The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent Me to you; this is My name forever, and this is My remembrance for all generations’” (Ex. 3:15).

Note an interesting linguistic nuance: In Deuteronomy chapter 32, the text reads “dor vador,” understand the differences “of each generation” whereas

in Exodus chapter three, we find “dor lador,” “this is My remembrance for all generations.” There are two names of God expressed in this passage in Exodus: the God of the patriarchs is the God of Jewish tradition from generation to generation – the God of eternal Torah and halakhic continuity, the God of the Shulhan Arukh, if you will; the God of history is the God of each generation, with that generation’s specific demands conditioned upon the historical situation of the specific time.

Hence Rabbi Shimon Schwab records in his memoirs how, as a studious bar mitzva youth, he decided to go to the Yeshiva in the city of Rodin because he was anxious to have contact with the Hafetz Hayim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, the gadol hador – the great luminary of the time, who lived in Rodin. The sage asked the youth if he was a Kohen-priest. When young Shimon answered in the negative, the Torah giant commiserated that when the Messiah will come, only he – a Kohen – would be privileged to enter the sacred precincts of the Holy Temple. The reason for the priests’ elevated status is that their tribal ancestors answered positively to Moses’ call, “Whoever is with God, come to me.” Since young Shimon’s tribal ancestors did not heed that call, he would be excluded. The Hafetz Hayim concluded:

And, I do not say these words lightly in order to hurt you. I merely wish to prepare you: in every generation a Divine Voice calls out the particular summons, challenge, and opportunity of that generation. Do not repeat the mistake of your forbears. Listen for God’s voice in your generation, and make sure that you respond to God’s call!

Clearly the Divine Voice in our generation is calling out to us to come to Israel, to prepare for our palpable redemption, to world redemption. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he special nature and all of the events of Jewish history are outlined for us in this week’s parsha.

Ramban in the 13th century comments that anyone who can, so many centuries earlier, accurately foretell the later fate of a people is an exceptional prophet. Moshe certainly fits that description and test. And what more can we add to this phenomenon, now more than seven hundred-fifty years after Ramban!

The rabbis of the Talmud attributed the crown of wisdom to the one who has a vision of the future. Even though Moshe is the greatest of all prophets, his title amongst the Jewish people is Moshe the teacher, indicating his wisdom and knowledge are translated into his ability to view the future.

Moshe lays down the basic pattern of all of Jewish history – the struggle to remain Jewish and not succumb to the blandishments of current cultures and beliefs, the illogical and almost pathological enmity of the world to Judaism and the Jewish people, the awful price

paid by Jews throughout history and the eventual realization of Jews, and the non-Jewish world as well, of God's guidance in history and human life.

This entire, very complex story is foretold to us in this week's most remarkable parsha. It is no wonder that Jewish tradition dictated that Jewish children should commit this parsha to memory, for within it is recorded the entire essence of Jewish history.

Though we never really know the exact details of the future of the Jewish people, the broad outlines of the story have been known to us for millennia. Just read and study the words of this parsha.

Moshe establishes heaven and earth as witnesses to the covenant and the historical fate of the Jewish people. Rashi explains that not only are they honest and objective witnesses but most importantly they are eternal witnesses. Human witnesses are mortal and passing. Later generations cannot hear their testimony, and even though current video technology attempts to correct this deficiency, much of the personal nuance and force, which colors all human testimony, is lost.

So we rely on heaven and earth to reinforce our belief and commitment to the eternal covenant. It is the very wonders and mysteries of nature itself that point to the Creator. And it is all of human history that rises to testify as to the uniqueness of the Jewish story and the special role that the Jewish people played and continue to play in human events.

The witness testimony of heaven is found in the wonders of the natural world. The witness testimony of earth is found in the history of humankind and of the role of the Jewish people in that amazing, exhilarating and yet depressing story. Moshe begs of us to listen to these two witnesses for it is within their and our ability to know our past and future through their testimony.

Much of their testimony is frightening and worrisome but it is even more frightening to be unaware of our past and future. We should listen carefully to the parsha. It has much to teach us about our world and ourselves. ©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 SHAFRAN**

### **Cross-Currents**

**T**he Gemara (Shabbos 88a) quotes "a certain Galilean" as having said "Blessed is the Merciful One, Who gave a three-fold Torah [in the broad sense, Torah, Neviim and Ksavim] to a three-fold nation [Cohanim, Levi'im and Yisraelim] by means of a third-born [Moshe] on the third day [of separation of men and women] in the third month [Sivan]." ("Galilean," interestingly, in Hebrew, contains the gematria letter for "3" and -- twice -- "30".)

The stress on threes concerning the giving of the Torah, it occurs to me, may reflect the essence of mesorah itself, that is to say, its transmittal. Just as the most elemental physical chain needs three links, so, too, the conceptual one. Each of us is a middle link; we must have received the mesorah and then transmitted it. And our recipients then become middle links themselves.

In parshas Haazinu, we read, similarly: "Ask your father and he will tell you, your grandfather and he will say to you" (Devarim 32:7). The threesome chain again.

And, intriguingly, the word employed for the father's telling is "viyagedcha", from the root lihagid -- which Rashi elsewhere (Shemos 19:3) says implies an element of harshness; and for the grandfather's telling, the word is viyomru -- whose root, omer, Rashi (ibid) characterizes as a "soft" communication.

The Torah may mean to teach here that a father must be an authority figure, and his transmittal of the mesorah more demanding, while a grandfather's guidance is to be, well, grandfatherly, imparted with a more gentle touch. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**G**od protects His people. This is the message of the Ha'azinu song, which proclaims that God can be compared to an eagle stirring its nest, hovering over its young (Deuteronomy 32:11).

The biblical term for hovering is merachefet. What is the precise meaning of this term?

Writing after a long illness, Rabbi Milton Steinberg stresses the importance of cherishing what one has. Embrace the sunlight, he urges; treasure those who are close to you. Having survived a life-threatening disease, he came to realize the importance of the everyday. But when holding, don't hold too tight, as nothing lasts forever ("To Hold with Open Arms," in his book *A Believing Jew*).

It is futile to hold on to being young as we all grow older. Though there is beauty in youthfulness, there is also beauty in aging. We must learn to age gracefully. When we're seventy, we should not dress and act like we are twenty.

It is futile to hold on to our children. Though we teach them values, they must be free to choose their own paths, flying their own routes with the wings we gave them. Our challenge is to love them unconditionally.

It is futile to hold on to our professions without acknowledging that one day we must step back. The greatest test of success is how we transition to the next generation.

One wonders how this tension between holding on and letting go can be resolved. Here Rabbi Steinberg suggests that feeling God's presence may be the pathway.

When taking into account that God created the

world, it follows that everything in it is infinitely precious. And so, we ought to hold and embrace it, warmly and tightly.

And yet, acknowledging that everything ultimately belongs to God enables us to let go because these beautiful things do not belong to us. While we are blessed to enjoy them, we can do so only for a limited time. We know they are only loaned to us for a brief time.

This analysis may explain the meaning of *merachefet*. God hovers over us like a mother bird over its nest: protecting but not suffocating, shielding but not crushing.

In the spirit of *imitatio Dei*, this is precisely what we should do in our relationships with those closest to us. When journeying through life, we should cradle our precious ones, our precious lives – with open arms.

Postscript: The blessing *baruch sheptarani* (“Blessed is He who has released me from the responsibility for this child”) recited by parents at the bar or bat mitzvah of their children may now be better understood. While the blessing is normatively interpreted to be a declaration that parents are no longer responsible for the sins of their son or daughter, in reality, its message is much deeper. In love, it is, in some ways, easier to hold on than to let go. Celebrating their child’s bar or bat mitzvah, parents do just that – gently letting go – trusting that their children will assume responsibility, and begin to maturely navigate life’s challenges. Thus, *baruch sheptarani* is a profoundly spiritual blessing – it is a *merachefet* moment, a moment of embracing...with open arms. ©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

### Haziv Lach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**N**o, this title is not the beginning of a liturgical poem recited on Shabbat Shuvah (the Shabbat before Yom Kippur). In fact, *Haziv Lakh* is an acronym that tells us where to start each *aliyah* of Parshat Ha’azinu.

The *Kohen aliyah* starts from the letter *Heh* of the word “*ha’azinu*” and is 6 verses. The *Levi aliyah* starts from the *Zayin* of “*zechor*” and is six verses. The third *aliyah* starts with the *Yud* of “*yarkivehu*” and is five verses. The next *aliyah* starts with the *Vav* of “*va-yar*” and is ten verses. The fifth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Lamed* of the word “*lu*” and is 11 verses. The sixth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Kaf* of “*ki esa*” and is four verses, which takes us to the end of the poem. The seventh and final *aliyah* is nine verses and ends the *parsha*.

This division is codified in *Shulchan Aruch* 428:5. (There is an alternate division of Ha’azinu, which still follows the acronym of *Haziv Lakh*.) Thus, we cannot readily add *aliyot* or divide the *parsha* differently. The most we can do is split the final *aliyah*.

The Rambam states that the reason to divide the *parsha* according to *Haziv Lakh* is to rebuke the people so that they will repent (*Hilchot Tefillah* 13:5). It’s not clear what he means, since all of Ha’azinu is about rebuke. Some explain that what the Rambam has in mind is the rule that we follow the rest of the year, namely to avoid beginning or ending an *aliyah* with words of rebuke. The custom of *Haziv Lakh* does exactly what we usually avoid! The Rambam is justifying the custom by saying that it may bring about repentance on Shabbat Shuvah, which is focused on repenting. Alternatively, perhaps it is thinking about the acronym of *Haziv Lach* that can help bring about repentance. For the phrase itself means “Glory (*ziv*) is yours (*lakh*),” a reminder that we have great potential to repent.

If this second reason is correct, perhaps it is necessary to follow the division only on Shabbat Shuvah itself (when we read the entire *parsha* and the entire acronym is spelled out), but not at the shorter Torah readings beforehand (on Monday, Thursday, and the previous Shabbat Mincha). This is a subject of disagreement among the *poskim*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

## RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

### Migdal Ohr

**"F**or this is not an empty thing from you, for it is your life! And through this thing you will extend your days...” (Devarim 32:47) After he and Yehoshua finished teaching the song of Haazinu to the Jewish People, Moshe warned them not to take the requirement to learn and follow the Torah lightly. He then said this line to them, so they might appreciate the Torah for what it’s really worth – not merely an obligation, but an opportunity!

A number of commentaries take the approach that Moshe was telling the Jews what was in it for them. The study of Torah is not empty and without reward. On the contrary, there is tremendous reward for studying Torah. First of all, by studying, one knows what he should and mustn’t do. In this way, he safeguards his life, lest he transgress for lack of knowledge.

Secondly, since it is Hashem’s will that we study His Torah, as that is how He communicates with us, then there is intrinsically a benefit of studying, and we will be rewarded for it. Not only that, but when we make the attempt to understand the Torah, even if it’s beyond us, we are earning tremendous reward because we are trying to fulfill Hashem’s will.

However, the wording of the verse undermines this a bit. If this were the case, teaching us that the Torah is beneficial to us, the *posuk* should have said, “*lachem – to you.*” Instead, it says, “*lo davar raik hu mikem – it is not an empty thing from you,*” implying something else.

From the usage of the word meaning “from you,” we draw the understanding that Torah is so full of meaning that we have no right or standing to imagine any

of it is empty of meaning. Indeed, Rashi shows us a deep insight and an entire cultural understanding of how the world perceived Avraham Avinu, from a few words that one could easily have imagined were just telling us a simple fact of who was who. But the Torah's depth is not determined by our perception.

Instead, we are told that the Torah is so full that there is no way for us to imagine or describe it as being empty, meaningless, or shallow. Moshe was telling us to study it carefully for inside we would find treasure upon treasure, and it would add length to our years and days. Man's search for meaning is what drives him forward and gives him the strength to stretch himself beyond his limits and persevere. With these words, Moshe was making sure we knew where to look.

*On the last Yom Kippur of his life, R' Yehudah Leib Chasman, z"l, the mashgiach of Yeshivas Chevron, returned to his house after neilah, due to his weakness from the fast. A minyan of bochurim accompanied him. Rav Chasman's face was shining with happiness that he was zocheh to complete the fast.*

*As the bochurim sat down to await the time to daven Maariv, R' Chasman said, "Yona Hanavi told the men on the ship to 'lift me and throw me into the sea.' The words 'lift me' seems to be extra. What was Yona adding with these words? Wouldn't it have been enough if he said only, 'Throw me into the sea'?"*

*The answer is Yona was requesting they delay throwing him into the sea as much as possible – even for a split second. Because there is nothing more valuable in the world than the life of a human being. Even when death has already been decreed, it's still worthwhile to lengthen one's life as much as possible. Who knows how valuable the life of person can be in his last moment."*

*The mashgiach concluded, "We have to understand that we now still have another moment of kedushas Yom Kippur! Come, let us grab hold of it, do not weaken! Let us not lose this precious stone without a thought!" © 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**P**arshat Ha'azinu is the third time that Moshe admonishes the Jews. The other accounts in the Torah (Bechukotai and Ki Tavo) explain what will happen if we kept the Torah, and what would happen if we didn't. What's left to reproof?

Commentaries explain that here we are being told something very different: Think. Contemplate. Weigh. Decide. No ultimatums. No threats. You think it through and decide what makes the most sense. What's the best thing for you to do? How will you gain the most? Just as G-d then shows Moshe the land he yearned to reach, Moshe shows us the people we should yearn to be! That is who we are, and what truly defines us. Decide to take the steps to return there. No threats-just decisions. We would be wise to carry over this Parsha's

lessons into the character of the Yom Kippur that follows, and into the character of the people we should yearn to be! © 2002 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed Inc.

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

## Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA SICHACH OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

*Summarized by Itai Weiss*

*Translated by David Strauss*

**“R**emember the Days of Old" The Torah is full of things that we are obligated to remember, such as the incident of Amalek and the revelation at Mount Sinai. In Parashat Ha'azinu, we find an interesting reference to the very duty of remembrance: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will declare to you, your elders, and they will tell you." (Devarim 32:7)

Unlike other verses that mention an obligation to remember, here there is no commandment to remember a specific event, but rather a general command to remember "the days of old" -- to remember history.

However, this obligation to remember does not stand alone. It is closely connected to the commandment to "write this song" (Devarim 31:19), which our Sages interpreted as a commandment to write the entire Torah. How so? While it is true that the explicit command in the parasha specifies writing the song, the song cannot be written without a context; therefore, in order to write the song, one must write the entire Torah.

Though in practice, the mitzva is to write the entire Torah, it is clear that writing the Song of Ha'azinu is in itself very significant. The plain meaning of the mitzva is that the Torah commands us to study history - to understand the processes that have occurred, and thus to know what is happening to us.

At first glance, it does seem important to study history, gleaning its lessons and learning to avoid the mistakes of the past, as a tool in our service of God. However, two challenges confront us when we attempt a religious study of history.

The first is the difficulty of understanding the course of history. This is true with regard to uncovering the meaning of what is happening in the present, but it is also true for looking at the past; even in that framework, it is not always so easy to reach clear conclusions, if it is possible at all. History is full of events that seemed completely marginal at the time, but in hindsight turned out to be fateful. This phenomenon stems from the gradual nature of history: trends often develop gradually over the course of history, which makes it difficult to put a finger on the moment when a change occurred. For example, there is no moment to which we can point as the moment when the industrial revolution took place, because it happened slowly.

Beyond the gradual nature of history, it can be difficult to determine the correct interpretation of events

even after the trends that took place have become clear. A good example of this is found in the famous passage in Gittin, which relates how Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked Vespasian to save Yavneh and her sages, and immediately afterwards brings Rabbi Akiva's harsh criticism of this decision: "Rabbi Yosef, or some say Rabbi Akiva, applied to him the verse: '[God] turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish' (Yeshayahu 44:25) -- He should have said to him: Let them [the Jews] off this time. He, however, thought that so much he would not grant, and so even a little would not be saved." (Gittin 56b)

Rabbi Akiva, who lived in a slightly later period, read the situation differently. It is clear that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai would not have agreed with him, and it must be admitted that even today it is difficult to decide who was right.

Thus, the first challenge in studying history stems from the fact that it is difficult to understand history in itself, even before introducing a religious perspective on it.

The problem of understanding the meaning of history does not stop with understanding the course of events and identifying the various trends, but relates to uncovering religious meaning as well. The Song of Ha'azinu was written so that the people of Israel would read it in a time of crisis and understand what led to the difficult historical moment in which they find themselves. This is an exceedingly challenging task, especially in our generation, as we will see.

Later in the song, we read: "But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked -- you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become coarse -- and he forsook the God who made him, and spurned the Rock of his salvation. They roused Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations did they provoke Him. They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, gods that they knew not, new ones that came up of late, who did not stir your fathers... For a fire is kindled in My wrath, and burns to the depths of the netherworlds, and devours the earth with her produce, and sets ablaze the foundations of the mountains. I will heap evil upon them; I will spend My arrows upon them. The wasting of hunger, and the devouring of the fiery bolt, and bitter destruction; and the teeth of beasts will I send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust. The sword shall bereave without, and terror within; slaying both young man and virgin, the suckling with the man of gray hairs. I said I would make an end of them, I would make their memory cease from among men." (Devarim 32:15-26)

If we try to apply this to the events of our generation -- I don't think there is any verse that more closely describes what happened in the Holocaust than: "I thought I would make an end of them, I would make their memory cease from among men." Despite this, it is well known that our revered teacher, Rav Amital zt"l, believed that it would be a brazen display of impudence

toward God to try to explain the causes of the Holocaust at a time when there is no prophet. On the other hand, Rav Yitzchak Hutner integrated the Holocaust in the framework of the succession of afflictions that the people of Israel have experienced throughout history. It is not my intention to decide this question, but it illustrates -- once again -- the challenge of studying history: the same events can be charged with different, even contradictory, religious meanings.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the difficulties of learning from history do not exempt us from the obligation to do so. Despite the challenge of understanding history itself in the first stage, and despite the complexity of deriving religious lessons from it, it is clear that history must be studied and that one must try to learn its lessons: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations." [*This sicha was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat Parashat Ha'azinu 5778.*]

#### **RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **Why the Heavens and the Earth as Witnesses**

I chose this week to embellish part of a theme which was presented in last year's drasha.

The song that Moshe taught the B'nei Yisrael and insisted that they memorize it, was Moshe's final words before he was to die. Moshe had spent the last few parshiot describing the serious punishments awaiting the people should they choose to abandon Hashem and worship other gods. Moshe stressed Hashem's control of the world as well as His special relationship with the B'nei Yisrael. Hashem reestablished His covenant with the Jewish People and called on the Heavens and the Earth to witness this covenant. Our Rabbis discussed why the Heavens and the Earth were chosen for this responsibility.

The Torah states, "Give ear, O Heavens, and I will speak; and may the Earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drip like the rain, may my utterance flow like the dew; like storm winds upon vegetation and like raindrops upon grass." Towards the end of last week's parasha, as well as in other places in the Torah, we find a similar call for the Heavens and the Earth to be witnesses: "Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, and I shall speak these words into their ears, and I call the Heavens and the Earth to bear witness against them." In Parashat Nitzavim, we find, "I call the Heavens and the Earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you may live, you and your offspring, to love Hashem, your Elokim, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days to dwell upon the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'acov, to



give them.”

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that when one wishes to help an artist or a professional understand, one will give as an example a parable chosen from within his field of expertise. Since Moshe turned to the Heavens and the Earth to hear his song, he then used the terminology with which the people would be familiar, “May my teaching drip like the rain, may my utterance flow like the dew; like storm winds upon vegetation and like raindrops upon grass.” Rain is an art of the Heavens, and dew is an art of the Earth. Rabeinu Bahya explains that the word used in the first part of the sentence to describe the rain is from *arof*, which means heavy rains that nourish the trees, while the term *s’irim* used in the second part of the sentence indicates light, misty rain, which like dew is beneficial to the seeds and the low grasses.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains the responsibility of the Heavens and the Earth; “witnesses have to warn offenders against the attempted crime, and if the warning is ignored, have to bring about the punishing for it, yea, in the first place are responsible for inflicting it.” This warning acts like the words of the Torah directly to remind the potential sinner of Hashem’s Laws and the punishments for ignoring those Laws. As a consequence of this warning, the Heavens and the Earth also become the vehicles of the reward for following Hashem’s Laws. The Sun and the rain help to produce the food which is planted in the nourishing Earth and which is necessary for survival. Rashi and Ibn Ezra explain that the Heavens can also punish by withholding the rain which can bring about the famines which plague the B’nei Yisrael when they stray from Hashem. This becomes very clear in the chapters of the entire Book of *Shoftim* (Judges).

HaRav Hirsch also discussed the relationship between the Heavens and the Earth. “The carrying out of the expected representation of the covenant of Hashem by Heaven and Earth, comes in the first place from Heaven, only indirectly is it then consummated by the Earth. The Heaven is primarily active, the Earth, more passive, for all blessing and the reverse, of the physical development of the Earth, and as far as they are dependent on that, also human social conditions are dependent on extraterritorial cosmic conditions which exist in what we call ‘the Heavens.’”

Our Rabbis were not entirely satisfied with the explanation given above, as several wished to make the entire understanding of Heaven and Earth into a parable. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the “Heavens” refers to the righteous, religious leaders of the people, and the “Earth” refers to common man. If the leaders listen to the “curses” of the previous chapters and hear their warnings, the common man will also become familiar with that warning. As explained by HaRav Hirsch, word of this Covenant will come from the great Rabbis (Heaven) and will be received by the common populace

(Earth).

The Ramban explains that when Hashem began creating the world, He began by setting a foundation for all that He would create. The first words of the Torah indicate this, “In the beginning, Hashem created the Heavens and the Earth.” Hashem then went about filling the Heavens and the Earth with the objects that He created. Since the Heavens and the Earth were the foundations, they acted as parents to all that was created. The Heavens and the Earth existed before all the other objects and creatures of the universe, and will be the last remainders of Hashem’s Creation. As parents, they also have earned the right and the responsibility to ensure their children’s proper behavior.

According to the *Kli Yakar*, Man is the connection between the Heavens and the Earth, as Man was created from the dust of the land and the spirit of Hashem. Man is a combination of the Holiness of Hashem and the mundane existence of the Earth. Here we see an even closer relationship than a parent, as man, if he is in contact with his innermost thoughts and connection to the order and control of Nature, can discipline himself and correct his path to be more in line with the Will of Hashem. It is in his very being that he has the means and the ability to correct his mistakes and refocus his life.

This is also the message of the Days of Awe, the Ten Days of Repentance. When we approach Hashem at this time of year, when we read the words of these last few chapters of the Torah, we begin to understand that it is our own responsibility to correct our relations with others and our relationship with Hashem. We are given outside assistance: the sounding of the Shofar, the Selichot prayers every morning expressing our regret for our sins, the Vidui (Confession) of our sins on Yom Kippur, and the familiar haunting melodies by the Chazzan. Still, we must remember the message of the song of Ha’azinu and the “witnesses,” the Heavens and the Earth. We must allow the Heavens and the Earth, which were partners in our own Creation, to guide us in returning to the proper path of Hashem. © 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

