

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

There are times when an ancient text seems to speak more directly to where we are now than to the time when it was first written. Rarely has that been truer than in the case of the famous first comment of Rashi to the Torah, to the words: "In the beginning, God created..." Let us listen to it in its entirety: "Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have begun with the verse, 'This month shall be to you the first of months' (Exodus 12:2) which was the first commandment given to Israel. Why then did it begin with, 'In the beginning'? It began thus because it wished to convey the idea contained in the verse (Psalm 111:6), 'The power of his acts He told to his people, in order to give them the estate of the nations.' So that if the nations of the world will say to Israel, 'You are robbers because you took by force the land of the seven nations,' Israel might reply to them, 'The whole earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it and gave it to them, and by His will He took it from them and gave it to us.'"

Rashi might have been speaking directly to us in 5771/2010, in an age of anti-Zionism, boycotts, sanctions and divestments against Israel, and even a growing questioning of the State's right to exist.

Rashi (1040-1105) lived in Troyes, Northern France, at a time when the position of Jews under Christian rule was beginning seriously to worsen. He lived through the most traumatic event of that period, the massacre of Jewish communities in the Lorraine at the beginning of the First Crusade in 1096. Jews in his day were persecuted and powerless. They had no realistic hope of imminent return to the land.

As to the logic of Rabbi Isaac's interpretation, it seems strained. Why did the Torah begin with creation? Because that is a fundamental of Jewish faith. Rabbi Isaac seems to be arguing that since the Torah is primarily a book of commandments, it should begin with the first command—at least the first given to the Israelites as a collective entity. But clearly not everything in the Torah is command. Much of it is narrative. So Rabbi Isaac's question is odd.

So too is his answer. Why relate creation to a challenge to the Israelites—right to the land? Why, if Rabbi Isaac's interest is solely in commandments, not give the obvious halakhic answer: the story of creation is

told to explain the command to keep Shabbat. It is all highly perplexing.

In fact, however, Rabbi Isaac is making a very cogent point indeed. Some years ago a secular scholar, David Clines, wrote a book entitled *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. His conclusion was that the single overarching theme of the Five Books of Moses is the promise of the land. That is surely the case. There are sub-themes, but this dominates all others. Seven times in Bereishit God promises the land to Abraham, once to Isaac, and three times to Jacob. The rest of the Mosaic books, from the beginning of Exodus when Moses hears about "the land flowing with milk and honey," to the end of Deuteronomy, when he sees it from afar, is about Israel, the destination of the Jewish journey.

There is a fundamental rule of literary form. Chekhov said: if there is a gun on stage in the first act of a play, it must be part of the plot or it should not be there at all. If the central theme of the Mosaic books is the promise of the land, the beginning must in some way be related to it. Hence Rabbi Isaac's point: the creation narrative must have to do with the land of Israel. What could this be if not to signal that the promise in virtue of which the Jewish people holds title to the land comes from the highest conceivable source, the sovereign of the universe, the Author of all.

No sooner have we said this than an obvious question arises. Why should a religion be tied to a land? It sounds absurd, especially in the context of monotheism. Surely the God of everywhere can be served anywhere.

Here too Rabbi Isaac steers us in the right direction. He reminds us of the first commandment given to the Israelites as a people, as they were about to leave Egypt.

Judaism is not primarily about personal salvation, the relationship between the individual and God in the inner recesses of the soul. It is about collective redemption, about what it is to create a society that is the opposite of Egypt, where the strong enslave the weak. The Torah is the architectonic of a society in which my freedom is not purchased at the cost of yours, in which justice rules and each individual is recognized as bearing the image of God. It is about the truths Thomas Jefferson called self evident, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with



certain unalienable Rights." It is about what John F Kennedy meant when he spoke of "the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God."

We are social animals. Therefore we find God in society. That is what we discover when we reflect on the basic structure of the Torah's many commands. They include laws about the administration of justice, the conduct of war, ownership of land, employer-employee relationships, the welfare of the poor, the periodic cancellation of debts, in short, an entire legislative structure for the creation of what Rav Aaron Lichtenstein called societal beatitude.

Laws shape a society, and a society needs space. A sacred society needs sacred space, a holy land. Hence Jews and Judaism need their own land.

In four thousand years, for much of which Jews lived in exile, the people of the covenant were scattered over the face of the earth. There is no land in which Jews have never lived. Yet in all those centuries, there was only one land where they were able to do what almost every other nation takes for granted: create their own society in accordance with their own beliefs.

The premise of the Torah is that God must be found somewhere in particular if He is to be found everywhere in general. Just as, in the creation narrative, Shabbat is holy time, so in the Torah as a whole, Israel is holy space. That is why, in Judaism, religion is tied to a land, and a land is linked to a religion.

But now we come to the most perplexing part of Rabbi Isaac's comment. Recall what he said: Should anyone call into question the Jewish people's right to the land of Israel, the Jewish people can reply, "God created the universe. He divided earth into many lands, languages and landscapes. But one small land He gave to the Jewish people. That is our title to the land."

How on earth could Rabbi Isaac think of this as a compelling answer? Almost inevitably, someone who challenges the Jewish people's right to the land of Israel will not believe in the God of Israel. So how will a reference to Israel's God make Israel's case?

Ironically, we know the answer to that question. Today the overwhelming majority of those who challenge Israel's right to exist believe in Israel's God, that is to say, the God of Abraham. They belong to the large family of faith known as the Abrahamic monotheisms. To them, we must humbly say: when it comes to political conflict, let us search for a political solution. Let us work together in pursuit of peace. But when it comes to religion, let us not forget that without Judaism, there would be no Christianity and no Islam. Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism never sought to convert the world and never created an empire. All it sought was one tiny land, promised to the children of Israel by the creator of the universe, in whom Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe.

Sadly, Rabbi Isaac was right, and Rashi was

right to quote him at the beginning of his Torah commentary. The Jewish people would be challenged on its right to the land, by people who claimed to worship the same God. That same God summons us today to the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of human life, and the imperative of peace. And that same God tells us that in a world of 82 Christian nations and 56 Muslim ones, there is room for one small Jewish state. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2010 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd everyone shall be united in following the will of our Father in Heaven.” (High Holy Day Liturgy) The second Mishnah in the fourth chapter of the Tractate Sukkah (45a) opens as follows: “How do we perform the commandment of the willow?” (one of the four species we are commanded to lift up and wave in all directions as we chant the Hallel praises).

The Mishnah goes on to describe how the willow branches were gathered in Motza (a town not far from Jerusalem), and how the branches would be placed at the sides of the altar. Each day of the festival, the altar was circled; but on the seventh day, Hoshannah Rabbah, the altar was circled seven times.

This practice is imitated to this very day inside our synagogues where we take the four species during morning services, hold them aloft in one united bond as we chant the Hallel, and then – on Hoshannah Rabbah – we complete seven circuits around the bima (altar substitute), as we once did in the Holy Temple.

But what's striking about Hoshannah Rabbah is that after the seven circuits with all four species, we then separate the willow from the others and the final closing ritual of the festival involves the willow alone. Following my revered teacher and mentor, Rav J.B. Soloveitchik z'tl, I also have adopted the custom of waving these willow branches in six directions, just as we do during the week of Sukkot with all four species.

Given that the halacha (Jewish law) is especially adamant about the “united bond” of the Four Species, why on the seventh day of the festival do we focus on the act of separation, singling out the willow?

This question is especially poignant when we remember the traditional symbolism of the Four Species: the etrog (citron) symbolizes the Jew who has both fragrance and taste, Torah learning and good deeds; the lulav (date palm branch) represents the Jew who has taste but no fragrance, good deeds without learning; the hadas (myrtle) represents the Jew who has fragrance but no taste, learning without good deeds; and the willow represents the Jew who has neither fragrance nor taste, neither learning nor good deeds.

The Jewish nation must be viewed as an

aggregate whole, including all types of Jews and their unique contributions. Indeed, the very Hebrew term *tzibbur* (congregation) is interpreted in Hassidut as an acronym for *zaddikim* (righteous), *benonim* (in-between), and *resha'im* (wicked). A normal and normative Jewish community will be comprised of all three levels of human behavior. So why do we separate the willow branches, the one species devoid of any positive characteristics?

What's even more interesting is that the historical background of our High Holy Day period intensifies the allegorical interpretation of the Four Species. Yom Kippur, the tenth day of the month of Tishrei, is declared to be the day of forgiveness for all Jews because it was precisely on this day that the Almighty forgave Israel for the egregious sin of worshipping the golden calf; the sign of Divine forgiveness was the Second Tablets of the Decalogue which God instructed Moses to carve on that day replacing the First Tablets which he broke when he saw the dancing and debauchery surrounding the Golden Calf.

The Talmud describes a crucial dialogue between God and Moses at the very moment of Israel's transgression. Moses is atop Mt. Sinai – or perhaps within the supernal heavens. For the past 39 plus days he has been receiving – and transcribing – the Divine will in the form of the Torah on the Tablets. The panicked nation, disappointed and confused by Moses' continued absence, begins worshipping the golden calf, reverting back to what they remembered from their Egyptian experience.

God then says to Moses (B.T. Berakhot 32a): "Go down, because your nation is acting perversely. I only gave you greatness because of the nation Israel. Now that the nation is sinning, what need have I of you?" In effect, God tells Moses that His covenant is not only with the intellectually elite and piously observant, but with the entire nation, regardless of their levels of learning and religiosity. Moses must leave the ivory tower of Divine supernal spirituality and go down to his errant nation.

If so, why do we isolate the willow – particularly since the willow, symbolizing a Jewish life without good deeds or Torah learning – is the one species in need of as much proximity to the etrog as possible?

I believe that there are two possible reasons why our tradition discourages an elitist and exclusionist attitude concerning entrance into a Jewish community.

The first is that people are not always what they appear to be. The Talmud records a story about a sage who dreamt he was in Paradise: "It was a topsy-turvy world that I saw. Those who are on top in this world are on the bottom in that world, and those who are on the bottom in this world are on the top in that world."

God's measure of goodness and greatness are often different to ours – and God sees much deeper and much further. Hence the individual who appears to us to

be a 'lulav' may in truth be an 'etrog'; his very modesty and humility may be the reason why he is generally overlooked by those who determine the 'mizrach' (Eastern Wall) seats in the Synagogue.

Hence, we isolate the willow to teach ourselves and our community that the Jew the willow represents may be the true gadol; not that he lacks both fragrance and taste – but rather, he may be above fragrance and taste!

The second reason is because the wicked individual may have just the impudence and rebellious nature which – when utilized for good purpose – may be the secret ingredient most necessary for redemption. Rav A.Y. Kook boldly taught that the Talmud's description of the days before the Messiah as a time when "...arrogance (*hutzpah*) will be prevalent," may very well be a positive assessment. Sometimes the most religiously courageous act is a challenge to a misguided or corrupt religious establishment, which has lost sight of the universal God of love and compassion and substitutes an insular God of uniformity and religious one-upmanship. Hence the willow has the power and strength to beat down the corrupt forces of materialism, and to overcome the political self-interest which sometimes invades the most hallowed halls of religious institutions. Ironically, it is sometimes that willow that can lead us to the truly spiritual, simple and pristine Davidic *sukkah* of redemption.

At the end of the service, we strike the willow leaves on the ground. Rav Kook explains that this symbolizes the idea that the ordinary, alongside the righteous and the scholars, it is the simple Jews who will be the strongest weapon of the Jewish people in the fight against evil and in the destruction of wickedness. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

**B**ecause of the intricacies of the Jewish calendar, the end of the Torah – *Zot Habracha* – and the beginning of the Torah – *Bereshith* – follow each other in rapid succession this week. This is a timely reminder to us of the seamlessness of Torah – an understanding that will help us appreciate all of the Torah portions that we will hear and study in this new and blessed year. The rabbis of the Talmud have taught us that words of Torah which seem poor and unimportant in one Torah text contain rich and meaningful information and insight when viewed in the perspective of another text. Thus the Torah has to be viewed in its totality and not only in analysis of individual and particular words and phrases.

The immortal greatness of Rashi's commentary to Torah lies in its ability to present both the trees and the forest at one and the same time to its readers and students. Without knowing *Bereshith*, *Zot Habracha* descends into poetry and narrative devoid of its ultimate

spiritual content and purpose. And without knowing Zot Habracha, Bereshith itself remains an unfathomable mystery of creation and primordial life without apparent purpose and relevance to later human generations.

That is what Rashi is driving at in his initial comment to the Torah. Creation had a purpose; God is not a random force in human existence, and Torah – the Torah of Moshe – and the continued existence of the people of Israel are integral parts of the purpose of creation and human life. Thus, these two parshiyot of the Torah, the last one and the first one, are intimately joined in the great seamless Torah that is our inheritance. Each one accurately describes the other.

The rabbis teach us that each individual person must always believe and say to one's self that this entire wondrous universe was created only for me. By this they meant to reinforce the idea of the purposefulness of creation itself and of the role that each and every human being can play in determining the destiny of that process of creation. By fulfilling our role as devoted Jews, with a moral understanding of life and good behavior patterns, we inherit the blessings of our teacher and leader Moshe as well as becoming partners, so to speak in God's handiwork of creation.

Nothing in life is wasted and even acts that we may deem to be somehow insignificant are important in God's cosmic scheme of human existence. The blessings of Moshe are individual and particular. No two of them are alike. So too are human beings – no two of them alike. It is one of the many wonders of creation. Since the blessings are individual and human beings are unique, it is obvious that each of us has a role in the human story - each one of us individually. Thus our own individual lives take on greater purpose, influence and meaning. And that is the true blessing of creation itself. ©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**

**A** common thread extends through the Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabbah, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah festivals – a thread that binds our people. It intersects with Parashat V'zot Haberachah, read on Simchat Torah – the only weekly Torah portion read on a holiday.

Note the four species we take as the Sukkot holiday begins. Each represents a different kind of Jew. Rabbi Jack Riemer feels the most important part of the lulav and etrog is what he calls the “thingamajig” or the agudah, the strip that binds the lulav together. Without that strip, a lulav and its parts would separate, making it impossible to take as one unit, as described in the Torah (Leviticus 23:40; Sukkah 36b).

Hoshanah Rabbah adds a similar dimension.

After all, of all the species, the aravah seems least significant. It is the one without smell or taste, symbolic of the person without good deeds or knowledge (Vayikra Rabbah 30:12). Nevertheless, the aravah rather than the others plays the central role on Hashanah Rabbah (the day that completes the Days of Judgment), teaching that every individual – even the seemingly less important – play a crucial role in the fabric of our nation.

At the center of Shemini Atzeret is the prayer for geshem (rain). The mystics note that water, by definition, teaches the message of togetherness. No one molecule of water can exist alone. Hence the Hebrew word for water is only in the plural – mayim.

These spiritual motifs reach their crescendo on Simchat Torah, when, in the spirit of unity, all come to the Torah for an aliyah; all the children gather at the Torah under a tallit serving

as a chuppah and are blessed; the whole congregation also joins celebrating with those honored to complete and begin the Torah.

It is not coincidental that V'zot Haberachah is read on Simchat Torah. The central theme of V'zot Haberachah is the blessings Moses gives to the respective tribes. Unlike Jacob's blessings to his sons, which include rebuke, Moses's are purely positive. Moses offers the hope and prayer that the tribes of Israel, as different as they were, live united, recognizing they each had important and complementary roles to play.

Years back, at the first Soviet Jewry conference in Brussels, a young Argentinean spoke of how lonely he felt as a Jew in Buenos Aires. In those days, the sixties and seventies, the fascists ruled Argentina; pictures of Nazis could be seen everywhere.

The young man shared that, at the conference, he began learning the Hebrew language. He learned that the smallest letter was the yud, recalling the pintele Yid, the little spark of Jewishness in every Jew. But, he continued, if one writes a second yud near the first, it spells God's name. Two Jews together, no matter their differences, reflect the unity of God. No matter how small each may be, together they can overcome everything. That's what this young man felt at that conference – a sense of unity that made him believe that our people would prevail.

Central to the unity of our people is ahavat Yisrael, loving our fellow Jew. And the test of love is not how we care for each other when we agree but how we care for each other when we disagree. ©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

#### **RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY**

### **An Abundance of Joy**

**A** fundamental transformation takes place during the month of Tishrei, as we shift from the mood that

permeates the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to that which is felt on Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres -- Simchas Torah. The Rambam (Hilchos Chanuka 3:6) paraphrases the reason given by Chazal as to why no hallel is recited on the Yomim Noraim. Chazal (Rosh Hashana 32b) state that it would be inconceivable to celebrate with hallel at a time when the books of life and death are open. The Rambam describes these days as days of teshuva and fear and therefore not days of abundant joy. Although the Rambam does not take the approach that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have no aspect of joy associated with them, he does emphasize that the joy is mitigated by the solemnity of this time. Concerning Sukkos, however, the Rambam (Hilchos Lulav 8:12) invokes the identical phrase "abundant joy" in describing the celebration of Sukkos; what was absent during the Yomim Noraim defines the essence of the Sukkos.

The transformation from a time of non-abundant joy to a time characterized by abundant joy is a result of the proper observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. If the awe of these days inspired one to teshuva there is a tremendous sense of relief following Yom Kippur. The uncertainty about the outcome of one's judgment is resolved and there is an abundance of joy that is now felt. This feeling transforms Sukkos into a time of "zman simchasenu" to the greatest degree.

During Sukkos we reach the height of simcha in the Beis Hamikdash. The Rambam cites the passuk (Vayikra 23:40) that highlights the ultimate celebration of Sukkos as occurring in the Beis Hamikdash. As such, it appears that we, who live in a time when there is no Beis Hamikdash, lack the ability to properly observe the dimension of simcha which is so integral to this yom tov. Perhaps the celebration of Shemini Atzeres -- Simchas Torah has a special meaning for us who live during a time of churban Beis Hamikdash. What aspect of avodas Hashem do we still have that remains from the Beis Hamikdash? During Neila we recite a tefilla which concludes that after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, we only have the Torah. This tefilla is emphasizing that the Torah was a feature of the Beis Hamikdash that is still present. Torah was actually the central theme of the Beis Hamikdash -- the aron housed the luchos and the Sanhedrin sat in the Lishkas Hagazis. Thus, the Written and the Oral Torah were the heart and soul of the Beis Hamikdash. The only part of the Beis Hamikdash that remains is the Torah itself. As Sukkos comes to an end and we celebrate the last yom tov of Tishrei, the abundant joy that was once felt in the Beis Hamikdash accompanies the Torah itself. Klal Yisrael adopted the minhagim of Simchas Torah as the most appropriate way to conclude this inspiring month. Abundant joy as we celebrate with the Torah itself completes the transformation from the Yomim Noraim to Zman Simchaseinu.

It is particularly fitting that talmud Torah be the

expression of our greatest joy. In the beracha we recite every morning before beginning our study of Torah we insert a unique request: we ask Hashem that our Torah study be enjoyable. Although all mitzvos should preferably be performed in the state of joy, talmud Torah is unique in that simcha is an integral part of our study of Torah. In the introduction to the sefer Eglei Tal the theme is developed that the amount of joy one experiences during talmud Torah impacts on the mitzva proper. Thus, a plea for success in reaching that simcha is incorporated into our Birchas haTorah. As we dance with our sifrei Torah at the culmination of Zman Simchasenu, we prepare for the year ahead. We look forward to a year of simchas haTorah and daven for the opportunity to celebrate our time of abundant joy in years to come in the place of simcha, the Beis Hamikdash, may it be rebuilt soon in our days. ©2023 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb.org

### RABBI SHUI HABER

## Of Endings & Beginnings

Typically, V'zos Habracha isn't read on Shabbos. Instead, as I wrote last year, it's read right after Hoshana Rabba. However, this Shabbos, as we celebrate Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, we will be reading V'zos Habracha. So let's learn more about this final parashah.

Zig Ziglar once remarked: "You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great." A fresh start can inspire us to create positive change. It infuses our actions with purpose and do things that are more meaningful and focused. On the contrary, endings often leave us weary and seeking respite before starting again.

Yet, on Simchas Torah, moments after finishing the Torah, we quickly begin reading it again. How do we find the energy to restart so soon?

The answer lies at the conclusion of each Chumash, when we exclaim three powerful words: "Chazak Chazak Venischazeik!"

What is the significance behind this tradition?

To understand this let us take a look back at the last pesukim of the Five Books of the Torah, there is an intriguing connection between all of them. Each of these pesukim alludes to challenges the Jewish people faced:

Bereishis concludes with the descent of the Jews into Egyptian exile, marking the onset of a significant challenge for the nation.

Shemos discusses the clouds of Glory and pillars of fire that supported the Jews through their strenuous desert trek.

Vayikra ends with the ominous curses of Parashas Bechukosai, underscoring the weight of responsibility and the challenges of upholding the mitzvos.

Bamidbar details the myriad challenges faced during the forty-year desert journey.

Devarim closes the entire Torah with the heartfelt pasuk: "all of the great might and awesome feats of Hashem that Moshe carried out in front of the Jews." Chazal reference this to the sin of the Golden Calf, a disturbingly anticlimactic way to end the Torah?!

These Pesukim show a recurring theme: the Jewish people's tenacity and unyielding perseverance in the face of challenge. This also brings us to the question: Why does V'zos HaBracha conclude with the sin of the Golden Calf, a moment of profound collective failure?

The Torah serves as the ultimate guide for our daily inspiration. The majority of pesukim in the Torah begin with the letter Vav. This letter means "hook" which signifies connection, flow, and continuance. The Torah charts our path forward, guiding us during tumultuous times. The last pasuk is meant specifically as the parting advice, the summary as to how to stay strong and focused in the times of challenge. Hashem sends many challenges into our lives and it is only through these tests that we bring out our otherwise dormant greatness.

We see that no matter the depth of our descent or magnitude of our failures, Hashem's arms remain outstretched, awaiting our return. This is His greatness and His awesome actions which the pasuk describes. A most powerful and relevant message indeed!

Just as the last Pasuk of the Torah shows us how to move forward in life, the concluding Parashah, V'zos Habracha, teaches us how the Jewish people should advance collectively.

Let's go deeper into V'zos Habracha. This parashah is brief but pivotal, detailing Moshe Rabbeinu's final moments. It is here that Moshe delivered his parting words of blessing to the Bnei Yisrael.

Despite four decades of frequently reproaching them, Moshe, in his last moments, sought to extol the virtues of the Jewish people. Rashi uses the phrase "If not now, when" to explain the Bracha of Moshe.

While Moshe, or any other leader, may need to chastise the people to keep them on track. (And Moshe even took it so far that he faced his own mortality outside the Promised Land due to such rebukes). Nonetheless, it is imperative to uplift the spirit of the people as well. The time for Moshe to do that was in the moments before his death. His aim was not merely to be remembered as a disciplinarian but as a leader who recognized their worth, encouraged them and showed that they are worthy of Bracha.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz teaches that praise mirrors a bracha. Commending someone spotlights their deservingness for bracha. Historically, this approach has been a hallmark of our sages and leaders. While there are moments that necessitate admonition, it's crucial to sandwich them with praise.

One of the questions that we often ask ourselves as Jews is what is the secret of our survival?

We have suffered crushing losses and defeat throughout our history, yet we remain a people, we

remain strong. How?

It is only through our Torah.

On Simchas Torah, we're reminded that while we yearn for the vibrant festivities in a fully restored Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim and to rejoice in the Mikdash, still, even in galus, our bond with Hashem through the Torah remains unshaken. The Torah is a value system that spans continents, cultures and languages.

Rabbi Sacks poignantly observed the dichotomy of joy in Succos and Shemini Atzeres. While the former celebrates the tangible blessings of the Promised Land, by Simchas Torah, our joy pivots to the intangible: the Torah. Despite the colossal losses Jews faced over millennia, the Torah remained the beacon of hope. Rabbi Sacks remarked, "A people that can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still rejoice is a people that cannot be defeated by any force or any fear... Simchat Torah was born when Jews had lost everything else, but they never lost their capacity to rejoice."

Moshe's ultimate message was this: Despite the rebukes and the trials, the Jewish people remain worthy of blessings and praise. Their unwavering devotion to the Torah serves as a testament. They have the resilience to start afresh, and with each iteration, it can be even more enriching.

Chazak Chazak Venischazeik encourages us to bolster our resolve, and even if we falter, to find the fortitude to march forward. While harnessing this tenacity we are invigorated. We see on Simchas Torah that ending off Devarim with Chazak Chazak Venischazeik has an immediate effect and we can immediately start Bereishis again with renewed strength and resilience.

The exhilaration of concluding a book of Torah lies not just in the completion but in the anticipation of revisiting it with renewed insights. With the enhanced perception and wisdom acquired from our recent Torah reading, we eagerly embark on Chumash Bereishis once more, aiming to uncover deeper layers of understanding and grasp its teachings with even more depth and gratitude.

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## **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

### **Perceptions**

It's the last parsha of the Torah, and it's about the 12 brochos that Moshe Rabbeinu bestowed upon the 12 Tribes just prior to his death at the end of the parsha. And just like the brochos that Ya'akov Avinu gave to his 12 sons at the end of Parashas Vayechi, they make no sense to us. Thank God for Rashi.

Even if we say that these brochos are different, more like prophecy, they're still amazingly obscure. One can almost imagine the Jewish people listening to Moshe Rabbeinu saying them and scratching their heads saying, "Doesn't anyone understand what any of this means?" Someone might have answered, "Don't worry,

in about 2,000 years, Rashi will be born and explain all of it!"

Why couldn't Moshe have just given simpler and easier to understand blessings? I know that when we give blessings these days, we bless the person to get what they want...or need. Isn't that what blessings are all about?

Wait a second. If that is what blessings are all about, then how do we bless God? There is nothing He needs or wants that He doesn't already have, or could give Himself if He didn't. And if He couldn't give it to Himself, which is not possible, then how could we give it to Him since everything we have comes from Him?

The Nefesh HaChaim deals with this question in Sha'ar 2. He explains that the idea of a brochah, like the word breichah -- stream -- is a flow, a breichah being stream a flow of water in a breichah and a brochah being a channel for a flow of Divine light. When we bless God, we're really saying that He should increase His flow of light into the world and thereby increase the revelation of His Reality.

This is why the word brochah begins with a Bais, which equals two. Two may not be much, but it symbolizes a lot, literally. One is, well, only one. But two is already more than one, on the way to become a lot more than, like three, four, etc. The concept of a brochah is the idea of praying that the recipient of the brochah, or God, receive more of something.

And not just of any something, but of something good. As the expression goes, "Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it." What does that mean? If a person didn't want something, why would they wish for it? Because, as life so often has shown us, what we think we want is not always what we really want, in the long run. Sometimes dreams can become nightmares and blessings, curses.

This is why some people, when asking for something, stipulate, "...but only if it is good for me." This is also why people run to tzaddikim for brochos. They figure that a tzaddik has God's ear, and that nothing bad can come through them. This way they will hopefully get what they want, and only if it is good for them.

So what can God have more of if He is missing nothing? Revelation. When we bless God, we're really saying, "It should be that Your Reality should be increased in Creation," meaning that people should become more aware of it. Clearly that can always stand to be increased.

But if everything that exists is a function of God's will, then He is always here if only vis-a-vis everything He has created. Rather, it's only man's ability to see this, relate to it, and be real with it that has to be increased. So what we're really saying is that it should be that man should wake up to His existence and running of history. But if so, then that blessing should be given to mankind, not God.

Yes, and no. Yes, because it is really up to man

to make the world a better place so that God will be willing to reveal Himself more. But no, because after almost six millennia of history, man seems no closer to increasing God's Presence in Creation and, if anything, seems only too willing to push Him further out of the picture. So we're really asking God, when we bless Him, for help with the kind of Divine Providence that makes it happen, i.e., miracles.

But even miracles aren't enough proof. When God split the sea, every last Jew knew it was Him and was in awe. Pharaoh and the Egyptian army however thought it was their god laying a trap for the Jewish people and ran right into the dry sea after them. Only after being tsunamied out of existence could they realize their fatal error.

And that was already witnessing the destruction of Egypt through 10 plagues. Pharaoh had already admitted that the plagues were from God, and that's why he allowed the Jewish people to leave Egypt to serve Him. Why would he all of a sudden have a change of mind and heart and think that it was his god splitting the sea, and not the same God who did the plagues for the Jewish people?

The Torah hints to the answer here: "Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them turn back and encamp in front of Pi HaChiros, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Ba'al Tzephon..." (Shemos 14:2)

"And let them turn back': To their rear. They approached nearer to Egypt during the entire third day in order to mislead Pharaoh, so that he would say, 'They are astray on the road,' as it says: 'And Pharaoh will say about the Children of Israel...' (Shemos 14:3). In front of Ba'al Tzephon: This was left from all the Egyptian gods in order to mislead them, so they would say that their god is powerful. Concerning this [tactic] Iyov said: 'He misleads nations and destroys them' (Iyov 12:23)." (Rashi)

In other words, it's hard to believe that God is working on behalf of the Jewish people, or at all, if the Jewish people look weak and confused. It's like watching the child of a rich person struggle financially. We just assume that there is no real relationship between the two of them, or the parent would help their child out. We don't realize there might be other circumstances involved.

This brings us back to Moshe's blessings in this week's parsha. He wasn't just saying goodbye and wishing them good lives. He was telling that each tribe was an integral piece of a historic puzzle that had to find its proper place so that the world could function and reach its ultimate goal. When he blessed them, he gave them prophetic insight in how to achieve this, and a flow of light to help them hit their spiritual mark.

It didn't even really matter if they understood what he said, though it helped. Saying the words was like pressing numbers on a lock. Certain numbers in a certain sequence unlock the safe, regardless of understanding how or why. The lock was pre-programmed to respond



to both.

By fulfilling the purpose of each tribe, the purpose of the Jewish people would be completed as well. This would transform the spiritual environment and makes it easier for the entire world to see God in it and running it. We would become the completed keli, the vessel and channel for Divine light to flow into the world to fulfill the words, "God will be King over the entire world. On that day, God will be One and His Name, One" (Zechariah 14:9).

Every Jewish person living today descends from either the tribe of Yehudah, Binyomin, or Levi. The ten tribes that were exiled before the destruction of the Temple remain missing, whatever that means. But it doesn't mean that the mission no longer applies, or that we should not be trying to figure out how we can personally help the Jewish people as whole fulfill their ultimate destiny.

A person can take the first step of asking God for help. He made us, and for a very specific purpose, even if we have yet to become aware of it. You can pray for a bigger house, or a raise in salary, etc. But you're more likely to get answered if you realize the biggest blessing you can ever get is the one to be who you were created to be, and to accomplish what you were born to accomplish. © 2023 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

**DR. ERICA BROWN**

## Are We Hard-Wired for Happiness?

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In Isabelle Pinson's painting "The Fly Catcher," a young man in aristocratic dress ignores his studies; a fly on the window distracts him. His closed books and a stranded pen lie on the windowsill next to another fly trapped under a glass. The fly occupies very little space in the painting, yet our eyes, like his, are automatically drawn to it. We may not even see a buzzing fly, but its sound can annoy us to the point of exasperation.

This imagery is redolent of the Kohelet verse that helps us understand how a small irritant can preoccupy us. "Dead flies," we read in the opening verse of chapter ten, "spoil and ruin the perfumer's ointment; so, too, a little folly outweighs massive wisdom." The second clause of the verse is self-evident. Today, the social media universe serves up daily examples of wise people who hurt themselves and others with a foolish text, tweet, or post. There must have been ancient equivalents.

But it's the first part of the clause that is particularly intriguing. A fly in the ointment has become common parlance for our human tendency to hyper-focus on a trivial problem and lose a more expansive perspective of goodness and gratitude.

We do this all the time.

We see a crack in the ceiling, and it spoils our

intake of an otherwise beautiful room. More importantly, we find fault with something small a friend, spouse, or child does or says and cannot situate it within a larger context of love, respect, or affection. An insignificant comment becomes a recipe for an argument. We look in the mirror and find that one minor defect – a pimple, a stain on a shirt, or a hair out of place - can make our inner critic work over-time. Maybe we're just hard-wired to be critical.

The sage Ben Azzai, however, questioned the verse's supposition: "Does not one dead fly spoil perfumer's oil? Would one sin spoil all the merits one had?" (JT Kiddushin 1:9). Well, the thin, ugly wings and legs of a dead fly may very well spoil an otherwise costly and sweet-smelling ointment, or at least the user's experience of it. It's not hard to imagine the owner of a perfume disgusted by the iridescent black insect legs sticking out of a pricey unguent and throwing it away.

Rashi explains that dead flies do make a metabolic change in the composition of the perfume: "So an insignificant thing spoiled a precious thing." For Rashi, the unfortunate fly did ruin the ointment. Robert Gordis, in his book *Kohelet – The Man and His World* agrees: "Dying flies have little power to accomplish anything, yet they can destroy the oil..." Something absolutely powerless can, nevertheless, destroy something of value.

I appreciated these observations until I read one sentence in Michael Fox's outstanding commentary *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*: "...flies are not deadly, and in any case their deadliness would not spoil the ointment. Nor would their being doomed (thus still alive) hurt anything." Our initial reaction to a dead fly might be a revulsion strong enough to make us want to throw out the perfume. But, just as we step on the garbage can pedal, we have second thoughts. Let me get a tweezer. It will only take a few minutes to remove the offending matter. Why get rid of a perfectly good and expensive perfume?

When we interrogate our first reactions to small aesthetic incongruities or errors of judgment, we appreciate one reason we read Kohelet on Sukkot. In this "season of our joy," we must do all we can to protect our fragile happiness and secure it year-round. Sure, they'll be flies in the sukkah. But maybe, just maybe, in this new Jewish year, we'll be able to see past minor offenses, trivial imperfections, inconsequential faults or trifling mistakes.

We'll contextualize them within a larger, more positive, loving framework. The buzzing of our own unworthiness can soften from a scream to a whisper when we trap that mental fly before it does its damage. Then we'll realize just how small a fly really is. © 2023 Dr. E. Brown & yu.org

