Ki Tavo 5785 Volume XXXII Number 45

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

This week's parsha describes the two very different situations in Jewish life that have been present throughout our long history as a people. One situation is when we inhabited and controlled our own land – the Land of Israel. That is clearly indicated in the opening words of the parsha – ki tavo – when you will come into your land. The second much more difficult situation is outlined again in the parsha in the bitter, lengthy and detailed description of the lot of the Jewish people in exile, scattered amongst hostile nations and violent hatreds.

Over the many millennia of the Jewish story, we have been in exile far longer than we were at home in the Land of Israel. It is significant that the recounting of the troubles and persecutions of the exile of Israel from its land occupies greater space (and perhaps even greater notice) in the parsha than does the section relating to our living in the Land of Israel.

The Land of Israel carried with it special commandments and rituals as described in the parsha such as various types of 'maaser' – tithing – and 'bikurim' – the first fruits of the agricultural year. The description of the exile posed problems of demographic extinction and continued tension, fear and a constant state of uncertainty. In the words of the parsha itself, the conditions of the exile were capable of driving people into insanity and fostered hopelessness.

Yet the strange, almost unfathomable result was that the Jewish people survived, created and at times even thrived under the conditions of the exile, while our record as a national entity living in our own country was much spottier. Jews are a special people but our behavior is oftentimes strange and counterproductive. We don't seem to deal too well with success and stability.

By the grace of God we are once again back in our lands. After seeing the words of the parsha, in all of its terror fulfilled, literally, seventy years ago, we have nevertheless restored our national sovereignty, built a wonderful country and an intriguing society, and are engaged in facing great challenges as to our future development here in the Land of Israel.

We would indeed be wise to remember why we failed in the past in our nation building and why, paradoxically, we succeeded in achieving major successes while in exile and under very negative circumstances. Straying from the path of Torah and tradition has always brought us to harm. Adopting foreign cultures and fads that are temporarily popular and extolled is not the way to fulfillment of our national interest and purpose.

Our historical experiences both in the Land of Israel and in the exile have taught us this clear lesson. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to repeat these errors once more. Coming into our land carries with it the challenges of living in holiness and having a special relationship with our Creator. Our efforts should be concentrated in strengthening and broadening that relationship. It may be wise for us to discard the bath water of the exile now that we have returned home. But we must preserve at all costs the baby - the Torah and its values – that has brought us home to the land that the Lord has promised to us.

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Ki Tavo begins with the ceremony of bringing firstfruits to the Temple. The Mishnah (Bikkurim 3) gives a detailed account of what happened: "Those that were near to Jerusalem brought fresh figs and grapes, and those that were far away brought dried figs and raisins. Before them went the ox, its horns overlaid with gold, and with a wreath of olive leaves on its head.

"The flute was played before them until they came near Jerusalem. When they were near to Jerusalem, they sent messengers before them and bedecked their first fruits. The rulers and the prefects and the treasurers of the Temple went forth to meet them. According to the honour due to them that came in, they used to go forth. All the craftsmen in Jerusalem used to rise up the for them and greet them, saying, 'Brothers, men of such-and-such a place, you are welcome.'

"The flute was played before them until they reached the Temple Mount. When they reached the Temple Mount, even King Agrippa would take his

basket on his shoulder and enter in as far as the Temple Court..."

It was a magnificent ceremony. In historical context, however, its most significant aspect was the declaration each individual had to make: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders." (Deut. 26: 5-10)

This passage is well-known. It became the text expounded as part of the Haggadah on seder night on Pesach. Its familiarity, though, should not blind us to its revolutionary character. Listening to these words, we are in the presence of one of the greatest revolutions in the history of thought.

The ancients saw the gods in nature, never more so than in thinking about the harvest and all that accompanied it. Nature does not change. Natural time is cyclical -- the seasons of the year, the revolution of the planets, the cycle of birth, death and new life. When the ancients thought about the past, it was not the historical but a mythical / metaphysical / cosmological past -- the primeval time-before-time when the world was formed out of the struggle between the elements.

That is precisely what did not happen in ancient Israel. It might have been otherwise. Had Judaism been a different kind of religion, the people bringing firstfruits might have recited a song of praise to G-d as the author of creation and sustainer of life. We find several such songs in the Book of Psalms: "Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; / make music to our G-d on the harp. / He covers the sky with clouds; / he supplies the earth with rain / and makes grass grow on the hills, / and bread that sustains his heart." (Ps. 147: 7-8)

The significance of the firstfruits declaration is that it is not about nature but about history: a thumbnail sketch of the sequence of events from the days of the patriarchs to the exodus and then conquest of the land. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi gave the best analysis of the intellectual transformation this involved: "It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view... Suddenly, as it were, the crucial encounter between man and the divine shifted away from the realm of nature and the cosmos to the plane of history, conceived now in terms of divine challenge and human response... Rituals and festivals in ancient Israel are themselves no longer primarily repetitions of mythic archetypes meant to annihilate historical time. Where they evoke the past, it is not the primeval but the historical past, in which the great and critical moments of Israel's history were fulfilled... Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people." (Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, p.8-9)

This history was not academic, the province of scholars or a literary elite. It belonged to everyone. The declaration was recited by everyone. Knowing the story of one's people was an essential part of citizenship in the community of faith. Not only that, but it was also said in the first person: "My father... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt... He brought us to this place". It is this internalization of history that led the rabbis to say: "In each generation, every person should see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt" (Mishnah Pesachim 10: 5). This is history transformed into memory.

To be a Jew is to be part of a story that extends across forty centuries and almost every land on the face of the earth. As Isaiah Berlin put it: "All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews are steeped in history. They have longer memories, they are aware of a longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived... Whatever other factors may have entered into the unique amalgam which, if not always Jews themselves, at any rate the rest of the world instantly recognizes as the Jewish people, historical consciousness -- sense of continuity with the past -- is among the most powerful." (Against the Current, p. 252)

Despite Judaism's emphasis on the individual, it has a distinctive sense of what an individual is. We are not alone. There is no sense in Judaism of the atomic individual -- the self in and for itself -- we encounter in Western philosophy from Hobbes onwards. Instead, our identity is bound up horizontally with other individuals: our parents, spouse, children, neighbours, members of the community, fellow citizens, fellow Jews. We are also joined vertically to those who came before us, whose story we make our own. To be a Jew is to be a link in the chain of the generations, a character in a drama that began long before we were born and will continue long after our death.

Memory is essential to identity -- so Judaism insists. We did not come from nowhere; nor does our story end with us. We are leaves on an ancient tree, chapters in a long and still-being-written story, a letter in the scroll of the book of the people of the Book.

There is something momentous about this historical sense. It reflects the fact -- itself one of the great themes of the Bible -- that it takes time for human beings to learn, to grow, to rise beyond our often dysfunctional and destructive instincts, to reach moral and spiritual maturity and create a society of dignity and generosity. That is why the covenant is extended over time and why -- according to the sages -- the only adequate guarantors of the covenant at Mount Sinai were the children yet to be born.

That is as near as we get to immortality on earth: to know that we are the guardians of the hopes of our ancestors, and the trustees of the covenant for the sake of the future. That is what happened in

Temple times when people brought their firstfruits to Jerusalem and, instead of celebrating nature, celebrated the history of their people from the days when "My father was a wandering Aramean" to the present. As Moses said in some of his last words to posterity: "Remember the days of old; / consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you." (Deut. 32: 7)

To be a Jew is to know that the history of our people lives on in us. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For I have come to the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us." (Deuteronomy 26:3) We have already seen how and why the short expression of thanksgiving at the time of the bringing of the first fruits must be said in the first person ("My father, afflicted us, we called out, the Lord took us out"). Each Jew must see himself as the embodiment of his history, must completely identify with the generations which preceded him and feel responsible for the succeeding generations to come.

But then the Mishna places a striking limitation upon the personalized identity of the spokesman: "These are the individuals who are responsible to bring [the first fruits], but do not declaim [the narrative]: the convert brings but does not declaim, since he cannot refer to 'the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us.' If, however, his mother was an Israelite, he does bring and declaim [since the religious status of the child follows the religious status of the mother]."

And then the Mishna continues to make a similar point regarding the convert and the language of his prayers: "And when [the convert] prays [the Amida] by himself, he says, 'Blessed art thou O Lord, our God and the God of the forefathers of Israel' [rather than 'and the God of our forefathers']; when [the convert] is praying in the synagogue as the cantor [representative of the congregation], he says, 'and the God of your forefathers.' And if his mother was an Israelite, he says [with everyone else], 'and the God of our fathers!'" (Bikkurim 1:4)

Fascinatingly, however, and crucially importantly, normative Jewish law does not follow this Mishna; the convert has the same legal status as the biologically born Jew both with regard to the words of his speech accompanying his bringing of the first fruits, as well as with regards to his specific language in the Amida prayer. The Jerusalem Talmud (ad loc.) disagrees with the Mishna in the Babylonian Talmud (which only cites the view of R. Meir), citing an alternate baraita which brings the view of R. Yehuda: "The convert himself must bring and declaim! What is the reason? Because God made Abraham the father of a multitude of nations, so that Abraham [metaphysically] becomes the father of everyone in the world who enters under the wings of the Divine Presence." Every convert is ensouled into the family of Abraham!

In the Jerusalem Talmud, R. Yehoshua b. Levi declares that the normative law is to be in accordance with R. Yehuda, and R. Abahu actually ruled in the case of a convert that he bring and declaim in the manner of every biologically born Israelite. Maimonides decides similarly (Mishneh Torah, Laws of First Fruits), and even penned a most poignant responsum to Ovadia the Proselyte (MeKitzei Nirdamim, 293), which includes the ruling that a convert pray to "the God of our forefathers" as well! This is clearly why every convert becomes the son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah, with the ritual immersion at the time of the conversion, signaling their "rebirth" into the Jewish family-nation. (This does not take anything away from the biological parents, who nurtured them and so deserve heartfelt gratitude and sensitive consideration.) Hence, the convert too has Jewish history and even Abrahamic "blood" pulsating through his/her veins – and Judaism has nothing to do with race!

I would conclude this commentary with one additional point from an opposite direction: the Jew begins his declamation with the words, "My father was a wandering Aramean." Yes, we have seen from the Mishna in Bikkurim (as well as Kiddushin 3:12) that the religious status of the child is determined by the mother, most probably because the fetus is inextricably intertwined with the mother as long as it is in the mother's womb. Nevertheless, there is an important DNA contribution of the father which cannot be denied. This gives rise to a special halakhic category for a child who is born to a gentile mother and a Jewish father, known as "zera Yisrael," Israelite seed.

Such a child is not considered to be a Jew and does require a process of conversion. However, most decisors throughout the generations have felt it to be incumbent upon the Jewish community to encourage conversion for such individuals and to be as lenient as possible in order to effectuate these conversions. An important and even monumental work called zera Yisrael was recently published by Rabbi Chayyim Amsalem, in which he documents the relevant responsa, which suggest that "the religious court is duty-bound to convert" the individual with zera Yisrael status (Piskei Uziel, 64:4).

Indeed, in our daily prayer, after the Shema and before the Amida, we praise the Lord whose "words are alive and extant, devolving upon our fathers and upon us, upon our children and upon our future generations, and upon all the generations of the seed of Israel, Your servants…"

What is this reference to "seed of Israel"? Our

children and our future generations have already been mentioned? During an unforgettable trip to India for meetings with the Bnei Menashe it was pointed out to me that this must be referring to those who have Jewish DNA from their paternal – but not maternal – side, zera Yisrael! It is especially incumbent upon us to reclaim these exiled seeds of Abraham and restore them to their land and their family! *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Devarim: Moses Bequeaths Legacy, History and Covenant, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinDevarim.*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Gaze Down

The beginning of this parasha discusses the gifts of the first fruits (produce) that were brought to the Temple as thanks to Hashem for a successful year. These fruits were placed in a basket and given to the Kohein. A declaration was then said which proclaimed the history of the people, first going into Egypt, the harsh slavery there, and the redemption from Egypt, followed by the inheritance of the Land of Israel. The bearer of the gifts then declared that he had also fulfilled the appropriate tithes for these fruits, including the third-year tithe to the poor, abd the gifts to the convert, the orphan, and the widow. The entire declaration concludes with the sentence: "Gaze down from Your Holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your people Yisrael, and the ground that You gave us, as You swore to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." This sentence carries many messages which are important.

Rashi explains that this sentence declares: "We have done what You decreed upon us; You do what is incumbent upon You to do, for you have said, 'If you will go in my commandments … then I will provide your rains in their time.'" This sentence, therefore, must be understood in its context; the sentence is the conclusion of the entire declaration which spells out what "we have done" and "what You decreed upon us." The final decree before this sentence declares, "I have listened to the voice of Hashem, my Elokim; I have acted according to everything You have commanded me."

One problem which is answered by various commentaries is the use of the term, "hashkifa, gaze down." HaAmek Davar and others explain that the concept of "gazing down" always indicates a negative situation. Hashem says that He would "gaze down" on a situation that was troublesome, meaning that He would give the situation careful attention to determine whether to withhold punishment at that time or to punish immediately. This appears to be the only place in the Torah where the term "hashkifa" is used to indicate a positive situation. As with any other deviation from a pattern in the Torah, it is important to discover why this term was used here in a way that is different.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin suggests that Hashem visits the world, or a country, or an individual from time to time and assesses the behavior of that world, country, or individual. This becomes a time of great fear and trepidation, for who can claim that he is not guilty of sin? But the individual here has a redeeming quality that changes this situation. His declaration includes not just the separation of maaser rishon, the first tithe, but includes the portion of the tithe of the third year and the sixth year which is given to the "poor." In years one, two, four and five (of the seven-year shemittah cycle), two forms of tithing took place. [The first maaser is given to the Levi who then gives a portion of that to the Kohein. The Levi is given a portion because he does not own land and does not raise crops. The same is true of the convert, orphan, and the widow. Maaser Sheni, the second maaser, is brought to Jerusalem and eaten there or redeemed for money which is spent on food to eat in Jerusalem].

In the third and sixth year of this cycle, the second maaser is omitted and replaced by the maaser ani, the tithe for the poor. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the Rabbis questioned why maaser sheni was only brought four times in the seven-year shemittah cycle. Since the B'nei Yisrael were required to go up to Jerusalem three times a year (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot), they would have ample food to eat the maaser sheni or redeem it for money to spend on food in Jerusalem every year. HaRav Sorotzkin uses mathematics to show that maaser sheni would be sufficient to feed the pilgrim during his days in Jerusalem, even in the third and sixth year of the cycle when he does not set aside maaser sheni.

But it is the maaser ani, the tithe for the poor, that changes the character of the word "hashkifa." According to many of the commentators (HaRav Sorotzkin, HaAmek Davar, and the Kli Yakar), there is something about the declaration that the landowner makes concerning giving the maaser ani that calls upon Hashem to "gaze down" on the good that His people have done. The declaration states: "I have eliminated the holy things from the house (maaser sheni), and I have also given it to the Levite (maaser rishon), peah, leket, and shich'cha to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow according to the entire commandment that You commanded me." Part of that commandment is, "You shall rejoice with all the goodness that Hashem, your Elokim, has given to you and to your household – you and the Levite and the convert who is in your midst."

The Torah declares that we should be happy, rejoice, in our opportunity to serve the Levite, the widow, the orphan, and the convert. It does not

mention the poor. Each of these four cases (Levite, widow, orphan, and convert) are limited by situations beyond their control. A Levite does not choose to be excluded from inheriting land, a widow did not choose that her spouse passed on, an orphan did not choose for his parents to leave him, and a convert did not choose to be a Jew, devoid of a tribe from which he could inherit. One feels a natural desire to help those who are in need because of situations beyond their control. The problem comes with a poor person. Here one tends to second-guess his circumstances; he mismanaged his land and was forced to sell, he became addicted to drugs or alcohol, he was lazy and could not keep a paying job. One forgets about his responsibility of "don l'chaf z'chut, judging a person favorably." But, even if the poor person was at fault, one must still treat him with respect and help him to change his situation. Here the task is more difficult to accomplish while rejoicing and without blame.

Hopefully we have been blessed by Hashem with more funds than the poor person. (The Torah's definition of a poor man is well below the standards we use today to designate poverty). When we plant our fields, we already have built into our harvest the laws of leaving the corner of one's field (peah), leaving the dropped gleanings of the field (leket), and leaving over any section of the field that the workers forgot to harvest (shich'cha). All of these go to the poor, the widow, orphan, and convert. But we must leave these gleanings and maaser ani with the proper attitude; that Hashem has distributed His wealth to us for us to distribute to those who need. This parallels what we saw last week, that everything belongs to Hashem and we are only temporary possessors of that wealth. May Hashem guide us in distributing that wealth appropriately, and may He gaze down upon us for a blessing.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And you shall rejoice in all the good Hashem, your G-d, gave you and your home, you and the Levite and the stranger in your midst." (Devarim 26:11) Once again, the Torah seems to be dictating our emotions, commanding us to feel a certain way. After one brings his offering, hands it to the Kohain, and recites the declaration, he is commanded to be happy with all the good Hashem has given him and his family. Of course, it may simply be an announcement that once one has done these things, he will feel satisfied and happy, but it seems to be worded like a mitzvah.

We can try to gain more insight from the context of the verse because it includes the others. While Rashi says the Torah is telling us that both the Levite and the Ger must bring Bikkurim, there doesn't seem to be much connection to the happiness mentioned in the posuk. The Targum Yonason says that the Levite and Ger will eat with you which sounds like they are enjoying the bounty you have, which would make sense in the context.

At this point, you might think the word v'samachta, "you shall be happy," can also mean, "you shall make happy," referring to the ones with whom you share your good fortune. However, as Rashi taught us earlier (24:5), it would have to be v'seemachta to refer to making others happy. So, what is going on here?

It would seem the Torah is telling us what kind of joy we are to have, and how to reach it. When one brings his first fruits to the Bais HaMikdash, he begins by discussing all that Hashem has done for him. How he originally had nothing, and Hashem brought us to this land, gave us rain and crops, and is responsible for all we have. One who does this right, is able to share what he has, because he understands it was a gift to him to begin with.

The commentaries highlight that the posuk says to rejoice in "all the good" that Hashem has given, and Chazal say, "Ain tov elah Torah, there is no "good" but Torah." In this vein, we can explain that the way a person is able to appreciate his good fortune, even while giving his money away to the Bais HaMikdash and to other people, is to look at things through a Torah lens. By doing so, one can graciously and joyously part with his wealth, because he knows that's why it was given to him.

It therefore turns out the Torah isn't directing our emotions, that we must feel a certain way, but rather it is directing our actions. We must study Torah and gain its understanding so we get to the point where we can happily share what Hashem has given us. To Rashi's point, we can now also be happy when we see others having success; when the Levi and the Ger have their own gifts to thank Hashem for, we rejoice in that as well, because we don't feel jealous or like anything has been taken away from us.

The Torah's way of looking at the world opens new vistas of humanity for us which enable us to lose our selfishness and think on a larger scale. We begin to see everyone else as part of Hashem's plan for the world, and we are glad they are in our lives. This is so liberating as to be its own reason to celebrate.

A twelve-year old boy decided he would grow long payos, sidelocks, which are a fulfillment of the mitzvah not to 'destroy' the hair of the head at the temples. Though he came from a Chasidic background, this was still highly unusual at the time he did it, back in the 1950's. It wasn't common for Jews to be so "noticeably" Jewish.

He explained his reasoning. He loved Westerns but felt that the movies were a distracting force in his studies. He knew that if he wore long payos, he would be too embarrassed to go into a theater. At the end, this young man grew to be a great Talmid Chacham -

because he knew how to force his own hand. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA
HARAV BARUCH GIGI
Summarized by Daniel Herman;
Translated by David Strauss; Edit by Sarah Rudolph

"Because You Did Not Serve the Lord Your God with Joyfulness and with Gladness of Heart." In our parasha, Moshe Rabbeinu reaches the final stages of his great oration, which spans most of the book of Devarim. The main thrust of this part of the speech concerns the covenant between the people of Israel and God. There seem to be four verses that contain the essence of the oration and of the message that it is meant to convey to those who hear or read it: "This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances; you shall observe and do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have affirmed the Lord this day to be your God, and [for you] to walk in His ways, and keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His ordinances, and hearken to His voice. And the Lord has affirmed you this day to be His nation of treasure, as He has promised you, and [for you] to keep all His commandments; and to make you high above all the nations that He has made, in praise, and in name, and in glory; and that you will be a holy people to the Lord your God, as He has spoken." (Devarim 26:16-19)

This passage is comprised of two parts: the first two verses describe Israel's side of the covenant, while the last two deal with God's side. Israel undertakes to observe God's commandments and to set amplification of His name as their primary concern. In return, God promises to amplify Israel and to set them apart in the world. Within God's promise, however, is embedded another demand upon Israel; the status of a chosen people is not a privilege without responsibility, but includes the injunction to "be a holy people to the Lord your God." The chosen people are enjoined to ensure, via the establishment of justice and the religion of truth, that God's name is not profaned in the world.

This covenant, the covenant of Moav, is not the first between the people of Israel and God; it was preceded by the covenant of Sinai. Is there a difference between these two covenants? There seems to be nothing new here about Israel's commitment to observe the commandments of the Torah, or above the promise of the unique status of the nation of Israel as the chosen people. Both of these elements are found explicitly in God's words to Israel prior to the revelation at Sinai: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed hearken to My voice, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." (Shemot 19:4-6)

What new element, then, was introduced in the covenant of Moav? It is possible that the novelty of the covenant of Moav lies in the last words of verse 16: "And do them with all your heart and with all your soul."

At the revelation at Sinai, Israel heard God's demands of them and immediately responded: "We will do and we will listen." However, a fundamental difference exists between that response and the response to Moshe's demand in this speech. Israel's "we will do and we will listen" expresses their acceptance of God's lordship, a service motivated by fear of punishment and based on their absolute dependence on God to provide the manna and guide them through the wilderness.

On the other hand, in the plains of Moav, on the threshold of their entry into the land, Moshe demands of the people that they accept the Torah with all their heart and with all their soul, with a sense of connection and internalization.

It seems to me that it is not by chance that two of the newly introduced commandments in the book of Devarim, as noted by the Ramban, touch deeply on service of the heart and the soul: the recitation of Shema, in which it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Devarim 6:5), and prayer, which is "service of the heart," alluded to in the words "and to love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Devarim 11:13).

This principle seems to receive its greatest force in the section dealing with the curses, where it is stated that the curses will come upon the people: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart, due to the abundance of all things." (Devarim 28:47)

While Rashi on the spot interprets these words as a description of a time when a person enjoys all things good and yet fails to serve God, the plain sense of the verse pulls in another direction -- that serving God with joy is an integral part of our obligation to Him, and its absence is a blemish and a breach of the covenant. But does this interpretation make sense, when we have never before heard of such a commandment?

It would seem that this is indeed the understanding of some Amoraim and Rishonim. The Gemara in Arakhin (11a) attempts to establish from where in the Torah we learn "the fundamental [need for] song." Among the proofs proposed there is the above-mentioned verse, which is understood as a mandate for the proper way to serve God. The Rambam writes: "When a person eats, drinks, and celebrates on a festival, he should not let himself become overly drawn to drinking wine, mirth, and levity... For drunkenness,

profuse mirth, and levity are not rejoicing; they are frivolity and foolishness. And we were not commanded to indulge in frivolity or foolishness, but rather in rejoicing that involves the service of the Creator of all existence. Thus, it is stated: 'Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart.'" (Hilkhot Yom Tov 6:20)

The Rambam explicitly states that we are "commanded" to rejoice in our service of God.

With their entry into Eretz Yisrael, where the Jewish people would face challenges and begin to fulfill their mission in an institutionalized manner, as a people in their land, the demand for observance of the commandments intensified. No longer could one rely on service of fear, which ultimately focuses on the individual and his fear of punishment; rather, one would have to serve the Lord out of love, out of joy, and out of a sense of mission. Such service could rally the entire people of Israel and lead them forward on the path of sanctifying God's name in the world. *[This sicha was delivered by Harav Baruch Gigi on Shabbat Parashat Ki Tavo 5776.]*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Rashi mentions something that needs to be understood. The Torah is talking about the special viduy (confessional) a person is supposed to say upon bringing their first fruits up the Temple, and it mentions that an Arami, Lavan, destroyed our father, Ya'akov Avinu, which begs the question, how are we there to even make such a confession? No father, no son.

Thus, Rashi explains that Lavan didn't actually carry out his plan, but that was only because God had stopped him. And, unfortunately for Lavan, that was enough for God to "join his thought to the act," meaning that, for all intents and purposes, it was if he had wiped out Ya'akov and his family since he had already planned it.

The Gemora)Kiddushin 40a) says that this does not apply to a Jew. A Jew can plan to do evil, but if he is prevented from carrying out his plan then it is not assumed that he would have, and become culpable. Being Jewish, it is assumed that he would have come to his senses even if only at the last minute, either as a result of conscience or inner sense of mercy.

Ostensibly, this is not talking about just any Jew no matter the level of Torah observance. The Gemora elsewhere says: "The ways of these [the Jews] are like fire. Were it not for [the fact that] the Torah was given to the Jewish people, [whose study and observance restrains them], no nation or tongue could withstand them. And this is what Rebi Shimon ben Lakish said: 'There are three insolent ones: The Jewish people among the nations...'" (Beitzah 25b)

What's the difference? Everyone is born with a yetzer tov, a good inclination, but without the proper education it can be overlooked, forgotten about, and denied much of a voice in a person's decision making. Humans can rise above instinct but often do not, or not high enough, and are very often led by it and often at the cost of noble causes. The world, for the most part, belongs to the yetzer hara and the people who are fighting it back are those with enough moral education to know to do so.

Just ask any ba'al teshuva. They will tell you how much more challenging their life became once they began to learn Torah. It woke up their yetzer tov and put restraints on their yetzer hara which never goes down without a good fight. Things they wouldn't have thought twice about doing before becoming religious have become the source of great internal debate. They will tell you about times when they were on their way to do the wrong thing and, overcome by a newfound sense of Divine right and wrong, stopped themselves from following through.

The scary thing is what happens to a person who doesn't have that. They don't believe in God, they don't accept the idea of Divine judgment or of the World to Come and Gihenom. As far as they are concerned, right and wrong is what they believe it is, and that is what guides their decisions and actions. The yetzer hara is not some ancient foreigner to battle against and keep at bay, but an accepted and integral part of who this group is, and they're going to have a say in the direction of society.

They already do, big time. Both the GR"A and Ramchal identify four categories of Jews when it comes to be part of the final redemption. The first group are the talmidei chachamim. The second group are those Jews who may not be scholars, but they do their best to live by Torah and mitzvos. The third group are those who, for one reason or another, do not necessarily keep Torah as they should, but they definitely identify with the Jewish People. They may not be learned Jews, but they are proud Jews. The fourth group are the Erev Rav, those who divest themselves of anything traditionally Jewish and would love to impose their way on the rest of the nation.

Even within this last group, they say, some of the less intensely anti-Jewish elements might be reachable and will do teshuvah in time. Most will not, and that is part of the role of the War of Gog and Magog, to deal with those elements of the nation once and for all. And history is doing a great job of surfacing them through the issues of the day. They might seem random, like whether or not yeshivah students should be forced into the Israeli army, but they are the result of a special Divine Providence to push people to have and voice their opinions.

We can't forget, though we do, that history is about birrur, the separation of good from bad, holy

sparks from the impure Klipos. It happens either through us when we learn Torah and perform mitzvos, or because of us when we suffer because we didn't. All of the ninety-eight curses mentioned in this parsha are not random punishments for misbehavior. They are the alternative means of birrur when we don't do the job ourselves, or at least well enough.

Changing the world, or even just most of the Jewish People to think like this and get in line is too tall an order for anyone short of Moshiach, and even he'll require a War of Gog and Magog to help him out. But changing ourselves is not and even expected of us. Having an opinion about anything these days is crucial, and even more crucial to have the right one.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Eating the First Fruits

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Parshat Ki Tavo touches on the *mitzvot* of *bikurim* (first fruits) and *ma'aser sheni* (a tithe consumed in Jerusalem). However, the details relevant to eating them are found elsewhere. The mitzva of eating *bikurim* appears in *Devarim* 12:5-6, and the mitzva of eating *ma'aser sheni* is in *Devarim* 14:23.

Not only are these two *mitzvot* mentioned in Ki Tavo in close proximity to each other, but they have many similarities (for example, they are both eaten in Jerusalem in a state of purity). Accordingly, our Sages apply the laws of one to the other. There are some differences, though. For example, *ma'aser sheni* is eaten in Jerusalem by its owners, while *bikurim* are presented to the *Kohanim* when the owners arrive in Jerusalem.

The declaration said when bringing *ma'aser sheni* to Jerusalem includes the phrase: "I have not eaten of it while in mourning" (*Devarim* 26:14). This means a person is required to eat *ma'aser sheni* joyfully. When he is mourning and shrouded in sorrow, he may not eat it. Because we apply the rules of *ma'aser sheni* to *bikurim*, a *Kohen* who is in mourning may not eat *bikurim*. Others derive the latter rule from the verse that states regarding *bikurim* that "You shall enjoy all the bounty" (*Devarim* 26:11). This requirement of joy applies not only to the field owners who bring their fruit to the *Kohen*, but also to the *Kohen* who is privileged to eat the fruit of the Holy Land.

The mitzva of eating *bikurim* is so important that the *Kohen* who eats *bikurim* makes a special blessing (just as he does before reciting the priestly blessing): "*Asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu le'echol bikurim*" ("Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to eat *bikurim*").

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It is said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that the "idols of wood and stone" that Klal Yisrael will come to worship, referenced in the tochacha (Devarim 28:36 and 28:64), are hints to the religions that would come to dominate much of mankind in the future. The "wood" refers to the cross; and the "stone," to the kaaba, the stone building housing a revered stone, in Mecca.

Although there have been apostates among the Jewish people over the centuries, Rashi's comment on the latter of the references above is germane. He writes: "[This does] not [mean] worship of their gods literally but rather the paying of tributes and taxes to their clergy." Targum Onkelos (which Rashi cites) indeed translates the phrases as "You will worship [i.e. be subservient] to nations that worship wood and stone."

And indeed, history has borne out the fact that our long galus has included subservience to Muslim rulers and Christian ones. Even at times when our ancestors were not being vilified and killed by those rulers and their societies, when we were "tolerated," we were, well, tolerated, but always subjects -- subjected, that is to say, to rules, regulations and whims of the dominant religion.

Even today, when human rights are seen, at least in theory and law, as encompassing Jewish rights, the de facto situation -- imposed by members of societies if not necessarily rulers -- sets Jews apart as worthy of scorn. Whether the animus is vomited forth from the mouths of people like Louis Farrakhan, Tucker Carlson, Candace Owens or any of a host of similar deriders of Jews, or from Islamists the world over, we remain subservient -- in the sense of victims -- of champions and espousers of faiths that followed (indeed borrowed copiously from) our own.

As galus goes, the current victimization of Jews pales beside the horrific things that our ancestors, distant and not-so-distant, endured. We must hope that that signifies a weakening of the domination, a lessening of our subordination to others... and the advent of what the navi Tzephania foresaw when he channeled Hashem saying "For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of Hashem, to serve him with a unified effort" (3:9).