

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**H**aving set out the broad principles of the covenant, Moses now turns to the details, which extend over many chapters and several parshiyot. The long review of the laws that will govern Israel in its land begin and end with Moses posing a momentous choice. Here is how he frames it in this week's parsha: See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse - the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. (Deut. 11: 26-28)

And here is how he puts it at the end: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live. (Deut. 30: 15, 19)

Maimonides takes these two passages as proof of our belief in freewill (Hilkhos Teshuvah 5: 3), which indeed they are. But they are more than that. They are also a political statement. The connection between individual freedom (which Maimonides is talking about) and collective choice (which Moses is talking about) is this: If humans are free then they need a free society within which to exercise that freedom. The book of Devarim represents the first attempt in history to create a free society.

Moses' vision is deeply political but in a unique way. It is not politics as the pursuit of power or the defence of interests or the preservation of class and caste. It is not politics as an expression of national glory and renown. There is no desire in Moses' words for fame, honour, expansion, empire. There is not a word of nationalism in the conventional sense. Moses does not tell the people that they are great. He tells them that they have been rebellious, they have sinned, and that their failure of faith during the episode of the spies cost them forty extra years of delay before entering the land. Moses would not have won an election. He was not that kind of leader.

Instead he summons the people to humility and responsibility. We are the nation, he says in effect, that has been chosen by God for a great experiment. Can we create a society that is not Egypt, not empire, not

divided into rulers and ruled? Can we stay faithful to the more-than-human hand that has guided our destinies since I first stood before Pharaoh and asked for our freedom? For if we truly believe in God - not God as a philosophical abstraction but God in whose handwriting our history has been written, God to whom we pledged allegiance at Mount Sinai, God who is our only sovereign - then we can do great things.

Not great in conventional terms, but great in moral terms. For if all power, all wealth, all might belong to God, then none of these things can rightfully set us apart one from another. We are all equally precious in His sight. We have been charged by Him to feed the poor and bring the orphan and widow, the landless Levite and non-Israelite stranger, into our midst, sharing our celebrations and days of rest. We have been commanded to create a just society that honours human dignity and freedom.

Moses insists on three things. First we are free. The choice is ours. Blessing or curse? Good or evil? Faithfulness or faithlessness? You decide, says Moses. Never has freedom been so starkly defined, not just for an individual but for a nation as a whole. We do not find it hard to understand that as individuals we are confronted by moral choices. Adam and Eve were. So was Cain. Choice is written into the human condition.

But to be told this as a nation - this is something new. There is no defence, says Moses, in protestations of powerlessness, saying, We could not help it. We were outnumbered. We were defeated. It was the fault of our leaders or our enemies. No, says Moses, your fate is in your hands. The sovereignty of God does not take away human responsibility. To the contrary, it places it centre-stage. If you are faithful to God, says Moses, you will prevail over empires. If you are not, nothing else - not military strength nor political alliances - will help you.

If you betray your unique destiny, if you worship the gods of the surrounding nations, then you will become like them. You will suffer the fate of all small nations in an age of superpowers. Don't blame others or chance or ill-fortune for your defeat. The



choice is yours; the responsibility is yours alone.

Second, we are collectively responsible. The phrase "All Israel are sureties for one another" is rabbinic but the idea is already present in the Torah. This too is radical. There is no "great man" theory of history in Judaism, nothing of what Carlyle called "heroes and hero-worship." The fate of Israel depends on the response of Israel, all Israel, from "the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers" to your "hewers of wood and drawers of water." This is the origin of the American phrase (which has no counterpart in the vocabulary of British politics), "We, the people."

Unlike all other nations in the ancient world and most today, the people of the covenant did not believe that their destiny was determined by kings, emperors, a royal court or a governing elite. It is determined by each of us as moral agents, conjointly responsible for the common good. This is what Michael Walzer means when in his recent book *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* he calls biblical Israel an "almost democracy."

Third, it is a God-centred politics. There was no word for this in the ancient world so Josephus had to coin one. He called it "theocracy." However, this word has been much abused and taken to mean what it does not, namely rule by clerics, priests. That is not what Israel was. Again an American phrase comes to mind. Israel was "one nation under God." If any single word does justice to the vision of Deuteronomy it is not theocracy but nomocracy, "the rule of laws, not men."

Biblical Israel is the first example in history of an attempt to create a free society. Not free in the modern sense of liberty of conscience. That concept was born in the seventeenth century in a Europe that had been scarred for a century by religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. Liberty of conscience is the attempt to solve the problem of how people with markedly different religious beliefs (all of them Christians, as it happened) can live peaceably with one another. That is not the problem to which biblical Israel is an answer.

Instead it was an answer to the question: how can freedom and responsibility be shared equally by all? How can limits be placed on the power of rulers to turn the mass of people into slaves - not necessarily literally slaves but as a labour force to be used to build monumental buildings or engage in empire-building wars? It was the great nineteenth century historian Lord Acton who rightly saw that freedom in this sense was born in biblical Israel: The government of the Israelites was a Federation, held together by no political authority, but by the unity of race and faith, and founded, not on physical force, but on a voluntary covenant ... The throne was erected on a compact, and the king was deprived of the right of legislation among the people that recognised no lawgiver but God ... The inspired men who rose in unending succession to

prophecy against the usurper and the tyrant, constantly proclaimed that the laws, which were divine, were paramount over sinful rulers ... Thus the example of the Hebrew nation laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has been won.<sup>1</sup>

It is a beautiful, powerful, challenging idea. If God is our only sovereign, then all human power is delegated, limited, subject to moral constraints. Jews were the first to believe that an entire nation could govern itself in freedom and equal dignity. This has nothing to do with political structures (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy - Jews have tried them all), and everything to do with collective moral responsibility.

Jews never quite achieved the vision, but never ceased to be inspired by it. Moses' words still challenge us today. God has given us freedom. Let us use it to create a just, generous, gracious society. God does not do it for us but He has taught us how it is done. As Moses said: the choice is ours. *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](http://rabbisacks.org)

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

"See, this day I present before you a blessing and a curse: the blessing when you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God... and the curse if you do not listen to the commandments... You shall give the blessing on Mt. Gerizim and the curse on Mt. Eival." (Deuteronomy 11:26–29) This important introduction to the ceremony of "the blessings and the curses" which will appear later on in the text (Deut. 27:11, 28:69) raises several important questions:

1) The very opening word, "see" (re'eh), is in the singular imperative form; the verse goes on to state "when you listen" (tishme'u), which is in second-person plural. Why the change from singular to plural?

2) Why the necessity of the two high mountains surrounding Shekhem? What do these mountains signify?

3) The content of the blessings and curses come later on in the Bible (Deut. 27:11) with the concluding words being, "These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to conclude with the children of Israel in the Land of Moab in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb [Mt. Sinai]" (28:69). What is the significance of this added covenant just prior to their entry into Israel?

I shall attempt to answer each of these questions, but not necessarily in the order in which they were asked.

The two majestic mountains just outside of Shekhem (Nablus) symbolize and physically illustrate

<sup>1</sup> Lord Acton, *Essays in the History of Liberty*, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1985, 7-8

this divinely charged mandate of our be-coming a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers to the world, that we stand “elevated above all the nations which God made...a holy nation unto the world” (Deut. 26:19). Indeed, this is the essence of the Third Covenant, just prior to our becoming a free nation-state as we are about to enter the Land of Israel. In addition to the national covenant with Abraham and the religious covenant at Sinai (the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws of our Torah), we have a mission to scale the heights of the mountain and to serve as a light unto the nations of the world, to teach at least the seven universal laws of morality to all of the people of the globe (Maimonides, Laws of Kings 8:10) and to expose humanity to the Abrahamic God of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, to a God of love, morality, and peace (Maimonides, Book of Commandments, 3). In a global village wherein one deranged despot can set the world on nuclear fire, human inviolability must be a universally accepted truth or there will be no free world to speak of.

Hence, once the Israelites cross over the River Jordan at the place from which visiting representatives of the world would enter and exit the Jewish land, they were commanded to set up large stones coated with plaster and to write upon them these laws of morality – “in a very clear manner of explanation (ba’er heitev)” (Deut. 27:8), which the Midrash interprets to mean: translated into all seventy languages. This would graphically demonstrate our message to the whole of human civilization. And, as Dr. Martin Luther King said so majestically and practically, such a taxing and daunting universal task can best be compared to climbing a great mountain.

Why is the first opening word “re’eh,” “see,” in the singular, and the continuing verb in that same verse in the plural?

In the summer of 2006, Hezbollah agents of Iran and Syria, were shooting Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, making the lives of the residents virtually impossible. Many inhabitants of more southern areas opened their hearts and homes to their embattled fellow citizens while our soldiers fought the enemy on the ground and from the air in Lebanon.

In Efrat, we opened our Neveh Shmuel High School dormitories, kitchen, and dining hall, and many families opened their homes, to temporary refugees from Karmiel and Bar Yohai. These groups included Sephardic Haredim together with Russian immigrants, some of whom came with their Christian cross-bearing spouses. Almost miraculously, the warmth and spirit of the one nation Israel conquered all differences, and everyone got along fabulously.

My sister Judi, who hosted six individuals for six weeks — breakfast, lunch, and dinner — invited my wife and me to a special Friday evening meal at her home cooked by their guests (under supervision of the

hostess), who wanted in this way to express a measure of their gratitude.

Before my sister lit the Shabbat candles, the three women (two of whom were wearing crosses) asked if they could join my sister in the kindling of the Shabbat lights. I ruled in the affirmative, since the Shabbat candles express household peace, which has universal application. After all, the Sabbath day is a reminder of God’s creation of the world, and especially the universal human being – Adam – created in the image of the Divine.

That entire Shabbat, I was certain that the Messiah would come – and I’m certain he did make significant progress in his journey. In order to truly climb the mountain, we must be able to stand together, not only as individuals but as a united nation, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, fully observant and largely non-observant, and eventually – as far as a common morality is concerned – Jews and gentiles together, united under one God of morality and peace. As the prophet declares, “For then I will change the nations so that they will speak a pure language, so that they will all call out together the name of the Lord, and worship Him with united resolve” (Zeph. 3:9). *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](http://bit.ly/RiskinDevarim). © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L**

## **Wein Online**

**T**here is a shift in mood in the book of Dvarim beginning with this week’s parsha. It no longer is a review of the events of the desert or of the Exodus from Egypt. Moshe no longer will concentrate on the faults and failures of the generation that left Egypt – a generation that saw their high hopes dashed by their stubbornness and a lack of faith. The past is the past and it cannot be changed. God, so to speak, will not turn the film back again for some sort of replay.

The direction of Moshe is now the future, the entry into the Land of Israel and the establishment of a normative Jewish society in that land. Moshe warns the Jewish people that the lessons of the past should not be forgotten or ignored. Their consequences are likely to be repeated if the Jewish people will backslide again.

Life and death, good and evil, success and failure – these are the choices that lie before the Jewish people. And Moshe advises us to choose wisely, to treasure life and do good and honor tradition and Torah. A positive future always depends upon making wiser choices than were made in the past.

The word re’ah which means “see” is the key word in the parsha. This entails a vision for the future and an understanding as to its new demands and

changing circumstances. Moshe turns the attention of the Jewish people to its future in the Land of Israel and to new commandments not mentioned before in the Torah. It appears that these new commandments are brought to the fore to help the Jewish people be successful in their new environment.

The holy days of the Jewish calendar appear in detail in this week's parsha. In the Land of Israel these holy days had a physical and agricultural content as well as their inherent spiritual nature. In the long and dark Jewish exile, the physical and agricultural aspects of the holidays were lost but the spiritual and holy qualities of those days nevertheless sustained the Jewish people.

The early pioneers who returned to the Land of Israel, secularized and Marxist to the hilt but nonetheless Jewish, attempted to reinsert the physical and agricultural qualities of the holidays of the year and at the same time to discard completely the spiritual and Torah qualities. Unfortunately, that experiment has proved to be a dismal failure.

The holidays are bereft of any spiritual content and of any agricultural or national meaning. Moshe would caution us to begin again, to include life, goodness, and tradition into the holy days so that they would have true meaning and impact – and through them to revive our attachment to the holy land and its bountiful produce.

I think that the revival of the true spirit of the holidays is one of the great challenges that face us in our land today. In its own way, it is a key to solving many of the difficulties that bedevil us currently. Moshe bids us to look clearly at all these matters and to decide wisely. © 2022 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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)

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Bal Tosif

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**I**t is forbidden to add onto the *mitzvot*. This includes extending a mitzva in time (such as adding an extra day to a holiday), increasing its quantity (such as adding a fifth species to one's *lulav*, or a fifth biblical text inside one's *tefillin*), or creating a new mitzva. An obvious question arises: how then could our Sages prohibit actions that were not prohibited by the Torah, such as eating chicken with milk?

Some answer that the prohibition of *Bal Tosif* applies only if those making an addition claim that it is a mitzva in the Torah. No one ever claimed that eating chicken with milk is biblically prohibited.

Others state that the law of *Bal Tosif* applies only to adding positive commandments. In contrast, our Sages were allowed to prohibit additional things. This

answer, though, does not explain how the Sages were permitted to create the holidays of Purim and Chanukah.

An example of extending a mitzva in time is sitting in the *sukkah* on Shmini Atzeret, the day which follows Sukkot and on which there is no mitzva to sit in the *sukkah* (at least in Israel; it is more complicated in the Diaspora). Some *Rishonim* write that one may do so if he makes sure there is a *heker*, something unusual, to make it clear that he is not trying to fulfill a mitzva. Along the same lines, Rav Kook states that a *heker* was necessary for the rabbinically-added holidays, so no one could confuse them with biblical *mitzvot*. Thus, Purim is celebrated on different dates depending upon whether or not one lives in a walled city. There is no comparable rule for any other mitzva. And Chanukah lighting has different levels of observance – the minimal requirement, the enhanced level, and the extra-enhanced level. This too is unique.

Two types of additions do not constitute a problem of *Bal Tosif* according to most opinions. One type is adding in frequency. For example, performing the same mitzva numerous times a day is not prohibited. A second type is broadening the ranks of those who perform a mitzva. For example, a woman is allowed to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt. Nevertheless, there is an opinion that even these two types transgress the prohibition of *Bal Tosif*, if the person performing an extra mitzva mistakenly believes the Torah mandates it. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

#### RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

## Cross-Currents

**“E**at to your heart's content," Hashem states at the end of the psukim that begin, "When Hashem enlarges your territory as promised and you say, 'I will eat meat,' because you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you wish...." (Devarim 12:20).

Rav Saadia Gaon reads those words not as an allowance but rather as an imperative -- that there is a Torah mitzvah (which he counts among the 613) to eat meat.

To be sure, we are admonished to consume meat only when we have a compelling appetite for it (Chullin 84a, codified by the Rambam in Hilchos Dei'os 5:10). But, at least according to Saadia Gaon, when such an appetite is present, satisfying it is a fulfillment of a d'Oryaisa commandment.

Similarly, in the Talmud Yerushalmi, at the end of Massechta Kiddushin, it is stated in the name of Rav that "One will be held accountable for not having not eaten something permitted that one found enticing." Presumably, because to do otherwise would be to decline a Divine gift.

Surrendering to appetites is not something

generally seen as consonant with a Torah-conscious life. And moderation even in permitted things is a high ideal. Yet, here, with regard to meat (and, according to the Yerushalmi, it would seem, any food), if one has a desire to consume it, one not only may but must do so.

Saadia Gaon is alone among those who enumerate the 613 mitzvos who sees the words "eat to your heart's content" as a commandment.

But the next time you feel an urge to eat a steak or a hamburger, out of acknowledgment of Saadia Gaon's opinion, it might be proper to have intent that one's enjoyment of the fare is an observance of a mitzvah. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

### **RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **No Blood, No Blood Libel**

**P**arashat Re'ei contains a section which deals with the blood of a slaughtered animal. The discussion surrounding this blood assumes that the slaughtering process was done correctly, and the animal is now kosher to consume. Yet, there is one additional process that must be followed, or one has not completed his responsibility to Hashem and to the slaughtered animal. This additional responsibility involves the blood of the animal. An animal sacrifice has its blood sprinkled or poured on the Altar. A slaughtered animal for personal consumption (not as a sacrifice) must have its blood poured on the ground and covered.

After Hashem instructs the people concerning the centrality of the Temple and the need to bring all the sacrifices of the nation there, the Torah states: "When Hashem, your Elokim, will broaden your boundary as He spoke to you, and you say, 'I will eat meat,' for it is the desire of your soul to eat meat, as all the desire of your soul you may eat meat. Because the place where Hashem, your Elokim, will choose to place His Name will be far from you, you may slaughter from your cattle and your flock that Hashem has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat in your cities according to all the desire of your soul. But as the deer and the hart are eaten, so may you eat it, the impure one and the pure one may eat it together. Only be strong not to eat the blood – for the blood, it is the soul – and you shall not eat the soul with the meat. You shall not eat it, you shall pour it onto the ground like water. You shall not eat it, in order that it be well with you and your children after you, when you do what is right in the eyes of Hashem. Only your holy offerings that you will have and your vow offerings you shall carry and come to the place that Hashem will choose. You shall perform your olah-offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the Altar of Hashem, your Elokim; and the blood of the peace-offering sacrifices shall be poured upon the Altar of Hashem, your Elokim, and you shall eat the flesh. Safeguard and listen to all these matters that I command you, in order that it be well with you

and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and what is right in the eyes of Hashem, your Elokim."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Jews in the desert were surrounding the portable Temple and were admonished not to eat any meat that had not first been brought as a sacrifice in the Temple. Now the Jews were to enter the Land of Israel, and many tribes would live too far from the Temple to bring every animal they wished to eat to be slaughtered for a sacrifice. This did not mean that the tribes that lived a long distance from the Temple would not bring sacrifices; they would indeed travel to the Temple on the three pilgrimage holidays (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) and bring personal sacrifices at that time. But Hashem understood that the people's desire for meat was greater than that which could be satisfied only three times a year. Hashem designed rules for eating meat outside of the Temple sacrifices which specified forbidding eating the "dam, blood," of the animal.

The Ramban was bothered by the phrase, "when Hashem, your Elokim, will broaden your boundary." His question concerned when the time of "broaden your boundary" took place. Hashem promised to disperse the nations that were in the land and replace them with the Jewish people. The basis of this concern for the Ramban was whether Hashem meant the seven nations that would be displaced by Yehoshua or the ten nations that were promised to Avraham. The Ramban understood that the permission for slaughtering animals for personal desire for meat and not for sacrifices could only take place after the "broadening" of the boundaries that Hashem had promised. He concluded that Hashem meant only the conquest of Yehoshua, as the conquest of the full ten tribes would not occur until much later.

The words "lo tochlenu, you shall not eat," are said three times in our section concerning the blood. HaRav Hirsch points out that there were three kinds of blood discussed in the Talmud: "dam hanefesh, the blood to which the soul, the animal-life, primarily clings ..., recognizable by its spurting out, dam hatamtzit, the blood that just flows out, and dam ha'eivarim, capillary blood, blood not contained in arteries or veins, which is forbidden once it flowed out. Rashi explains that "you shall not eat the soul with the meat" refers to "eiver min hachai," a negative commandment "against eating a limb which was detached from a living animal." The second reference against eating blood is to caution against eating blood that is squeezed out of an animal as part of the slaughtering process. The third reference concerns blood that is located in internal organs like the heart, liver, and kidneys. The Torah forbids eating any of these forms of blood, though only the last two forms carry the punishment of karet, being cut-off from the Jewish people. That punishment is reserved for eating the blood connected to the soul of the animal.

The Kli Yakar explains the phrase, "You shall not eat it, in order that it be well with you and your children after you, when you do what is right in the eyes of Hashem." The Kli Yakar tells us that our Rabbis declared that the blood from an animal can cause cruelty in the body of one who consumes it. When a father eats an animal's blood, his character changes, and that change is passed down to his children and their children after them. When one refrains from eating the blood of an animal, he prevents that cruelty from being passed on to his descendants. The Kli Yakar uses the incident of the ir hanidachat, a city which must be destroyed because of idolatry, to prove this statement. One is to totally destroy the city, together with even the women and children, because the characteristic of idolatry is so pervasive in that city that the women and children are also deemed to be too involved in idolatry to live in the Holy Land if they are spared. This idea also indicates that Jews are forbidden to be cruel, because if it were acceptable, there should be no restriction on eating blood from an animal.

Over the centuries, Jews have been unjustly accused of using the blood of young non-Jewish children to bake matzah. It should be obvious, that if a Jew is forbidden to eat the blood of an animal even though he may eat from its flesh, the Jew must certainly be forbidden the blood of a human, since we are forbidden to eat the flesh of a human being. Of course, we understand that logic plays no part in this lie. The blood libel will continue to be used against Jews no matter how many times it has been disproven. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## **Perceptions**

**F**or decades I have been writing down the issue number of the current week's Perceptions just as a matter of protocol, and without really comprehending the number. But this week, writing down the number 2110 struck me as being a very large number...over 2,000 issues of Perceptions written to date, b"H, reminding to thank God for the opportunity to have done so, and still do so, and my readers who, hopefully, have benefited from them. Thank you Torah.org as well for posting them all these years.

That aside, we need to "see" something else because, perception is everything. We do right or wrong based upon how we perceive reality, and that has been up for grabs ever since Adam made the fateful and epically historic mistake of eating from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra. It severely damaged our vision.

In fact, the main part of the sin is not even mentioned in the Torah: The warning was: Do not contemplate or glance at anything with which evil is associated, to avoid being drawn to look at the strength of the Chitzonim (evil) themselves...It is the nature of a

person to become attached to what they contemplate, since the mind, the thinker, and the contemplated, become one. Therefore, there is great danger in looking at and contemplating anything to which evil is attached...Thus it says..."a delight to the eyes and that the tree was desirable for wisdom" (Bereishis 3:6)...This is the main, deeper point of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, regarding which The Holy One, Blessed is He, warned Adam HaRishon which he transgressed, stumbled, and which damaged [him as a result]. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Drush Aitz HaDa'as, Siman 3)



It was Adam's looking at the tree that got the sin rolling, making man and the world more material and vulnerable to the yetzer hara. Chava's distorted perception of the tree recorded in the Torah and which led to her illicit eating was the result of Adam's illicit looking at the tree. Prior to that, any tree whose fruit God had prohibited could never have looked "good" to eat, but false to eat. True and false are absolutes; good and evil are subject to human interpretation.

We've witnessed this all through history, but it is becoming more pronounced now by the day. But then again, it should come as no surprise since we are living through the tenth of the six days of history, our millennium corresponding to the day of the first sin, and our period of history corresponding to the actual hour in which Adam and Chava sinned.

This is why and how you can see many people, even entire nations today backing the Palestinians over Israel today, and thinking they are doing the "right" thing when, according to the facts, it is just the opposite.

Of course I am saying this, right? I'm Jewish, even Israeli, and that makes me biased in my favor. True, because it is only human to be biased in your own direction. But the good news in this case is that I happen to be biased for the right side because the facts on the ground also support what I am saying. And those who say otherwise either don't know all the facts, are anti-Semitic to the point of falsifying the facts, or are just accomplices to the evil that the Palestinians are responsible for.

And even though many Palestinians would like to be free of Hamas, making them appear to outsiders like "innocent" bystanders in the conflict, they are far from it. They are the ones raising their children with a built-in hatred of Jews and need to murder as many of them as possible, something they are proud of. Theirs is a culture of hatred and violence.

Israel, on the other hand, not only does not work this way, they go out of their way to employ and pay Arabs well. We're the only people prepared to work side-by-side with our mortal enemy in the name of peace and cooperation. We have paid dearly for this over the years, October 7th being just one recent



example.

As the Ramchal and GR"A have said, when right becomes wrong and vice versa, Moshiach is imminent. As Kabbalah teaches, the Gemora elaborates, and Physics proves, chaos is the norm, not order. Honesty is a virtue because it is not natural. And though the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil may not be the cause of this, it certainly wasn't the tikun for it as well.

The Torah is. The Torah is a corrective lens with which to see more clearly and leave less decisions in life to mistake assumptions about reality. It is not based upon good and evil but true and false which has alluded mankind ever since we went after knowledge at the cost of wisdom. To live without Torah is to live a lie, and nothing hurts and damages people more than this.

This is why Moshe Rabbeinu says in this week's parsha, "Re'eh -- See!" He wasn't just grabbing our attention. He wasn't waking up the nation to the idea that there is more to reality than what the eyes might provide. And Moshe wasn't referring to the vision of the physical eyes, but of the mind's eye. If you have twenty-twenty physical sight but poor spiritual vision, you get all the distorted takes on history that we are witnessing today.

As the Gemora warns, "people see, but they know not what they see" (Chagigah 12b). That's the reason why the world is so distant from Zechariah's prophecy of God being King over the entire world, and His Name being one in the mind's of men. Imagine the shock and tremendous regret that those people will feel when Zechariah's prophecy does come true. And it's not much further away. ©2025 Rabbi P. Winston and [torah.org](http://torah.org)

# **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**L**ast week I took some of my grandchildren to a county fair in rural Pennsylvania. One of the more curious exhibits was a poll for locals to "vote" for or against Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City. Of course, in this deeply red area of Pennsylvania the votes ran about 10-1 against (as the board helpfully read) "the Commie running for mayor in New York City."

I was intrigued that he had received some votes despite the sign, and I asked the person running the booth how she'd account for it. She shrugged her shoulders and said that some teenagers voted "for" him. She wasn't surprised; they were either trying to be contrarian or had no understanding of economics (or history for that matter).

Yet Mamdani has clearly tapped into some deep vein of unhappy voters; perhaps those who feel left behind and are seeking some outward societal changes to improve their situation. There is a clearly growing divide between those just making enough

money to provide for themselves and those who are considered wealthy. Then there is the higher category of "ultra-rich."

According to estimates from the wealth-intelligence provider Altrata, the club of ultrahigh net worth individuals, those with more than \$30 million in assets, hit a new record in 2024. The billionaire club grew more than 50% between 2015 and 2024. Even the merely "wealthy" increased dramatically. According to the wealth management company UBS, on average, the U.S. added more than 1,000 millionaires every day last year.

In truth, what most people need is perspective, particularly those living in the U.S. In terms of relative freedom and standard of living, there probably hasn't been a time in recorded history that was "better" than today. The problem is envy. Social media constantly floods us with what we wish we had and how others seem to live. Of course, there are many suffering financial and food insecurity, but that doesn't make good clickbait, so it's largely ignored.

However, for those forced to rely on the largesse of others for survival, it is particularly debilitating to their psyche. This is why in Birkat Hamazon -- the thanksgiving grace we say after enjoying a meal -- we ask the Almighty: "Do not cause us to come to need to rely on gifts or loans from others."

Of course the Torah has something to say about improving one's financial situation and, in fact, provides a formula for achieving wealth and prosperity. In this week's Torah reading we find the following verse: "You shall surely tithe from all the crops that come forth from your field each year" (Deuteronomy 14:2).

(According to Jewish law, one must give ten percent of yearly net income to charitable causes. The etymology of the English word "tithe" is Middle English, from Old English teogotha -- a tenth.)

The Talmud (Taanis 9a) records a fascinating conversation between the sage Rabbi Yochanan and his young nephew relating to this very verse. Rabbi Yochanan asked his nephew, "Recite to me the Bible verse [you have learned today]." The latter replied, "You shall surely tithe." Thereupon his nephew asked, "Can you explain to me the meaning of these words?" Rabbi Yochanan answered, "Give tithes that you may be enriched."

In wonder, the boy asked, "How do you know this?" Rabbi Yochanan replied: "Go test it [for yourself]." Rabbi Yochanan thus explained to him that he may actually test this secret to achieving wealth through tithing from his monies and contributing to a worthy cause.

But children often don't let things go and he continued to question his uncle; "Is it permissible to test the Holy One, blessed be He? Do we not have a verse

(Devarim 6:16) that says, 'You shall not try the Almighty?'"

Rabbi Yochanan replied, "Thus said Rabbi Oshaia: Giving charity is excepted [from the prohibition of testing God], as it is said (Malachi 3:10), 'Bring the tithes unto the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and with this you may test Me.'"

In other words, God explicitly says that a person can literally test His promise to enrich those who give charity. Even though the general rule is that one may not test the Almighty; the mitzvah -- commandment -- of giving charity is exempt from this prohibition. In fact, God actually encourages us to test Him by giving charity!

This seems somewhat odd. Why is the mitzvah of giving charity an exemption to the prohibition of testing God? In Judaism we actually have two series of books analyzing and establishing Jewish law, and both are known as the Talmud; the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. As each name implies, one series originated in Babylon and the other one in Jerusalem. Even though the scholars of the Holy Land were generally considered superior, the Babylonian Talmud is the one that was chosen as the basis for almost all of Jewish Law. Why is this?

I once heard a brilliant explanation on this subject from my father. In Babylon the language in which everything was studied was Aramaic and Aramaic has a very unique feature; it is a language that is based upon the other person's perspective.

In deciding Jewish law and what it is that God is asking of us, the sages determined that it is more important to understand the other person's perspective rather than to remain entrenched in one's own. This is why the Babylonian Talmud is the basis of all Jewish law. In fact, one of the reasons that the Talmud gives for why the law follows the school of Hillel rather than the school of Shammai is that the students of Hillel always repeated the view of the students of Shammai before they put forth and articulated their own dissenting view.

One of my father's sayings that continues to reverberate in my mind is, "It's very hard to learn anything while you're talking."

The great medieval Biblical commentator Rashi explains that in Hebrew the word "chessed" means "kindness," yet in Aramaic the word "chessed" means "shame" (see Leviticus 20:17 and Rashi ad loc). Armed with the knowledge that Aramaic is the language of understanding another person's perspective, the Aramaic word for charity can now be understood.

While a charitable person may feel uplifted by sharing his good fortune with others, one has to also consider the receiver's perspective. When someone has to accept charity from another there is a devastating feeling of embarrassment that accompanies the realization that he is unable to take

care of his own needs. This is why in Aramaic the word chessed means shame -- it is the recipient's perspective.

Yet, we know that giving charity and doing acts of chessed are key components of one's obligation of acting in a God-like manner. So how do we reconcile this obligation with the pain being caused to the recipient?

This is the reason why the Almighty devised a system in which the person giving the charity is further enriched by his act of kindness. Just as a person would not be embarrassed to be paid for giving someone terrific investment advice, so too a person receiving charity feels less pain by providing the giver the opportunity to enrich themselves.

In fact, giving charity is better than ordinary investment advice because its success is actually guaranteed by the Almighty. God, in His infinite wisdom, is removing the poor person's shame in receiving charity and kindness from others by enabling him to return the favor to his benefactor.

The Hebrew language is a holy one and even ordinary words are imbued with special meaning. The Hebrew word "natan -- to give" is spelled nun -- tav -- nun. This is known as a palindrome -- as the word in Hebrew reads the same forward and backward.

The reason for this is that by taking the recipient is giving back as well. Thus, the giving goes in both directions and the actual word reflects that symmetry. A person who needs help knows that, although he needs to be on the receiving end, he is also enabling his benefactor to receive a commensurate monetary benefit as well. Therefore, he is not merely a recipient, but a giver too and there is no shame in giving, merely kindness. © 2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig & [shabbatshalom.org](http://shabbatshalom.org)

