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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

There is a statement made towards the end of Parshat Va'etchanan, and it is so inconspicuous that we can sometimes miss it, but it is a statement with such far reaching implications that it challenges the impression that has prevailed thus far in the Torah, giving an entirely new complexion to the biblical image of the people Israel: "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples." (Deut. 7:7)

This is not what we have heard thus far. In Bereishit, God promises the patriarchs that their descendants will be like the stars of the heaven, the sand on the sea shore, the dust of the earth, uncountable. Abraham will be the father, not just of one nation but of many. At the beginning of Exodus we read of how the covenantal family, numbering a mere seventy when they went down to Egypt, were "fertile and prolific, and their population increased. They became so numerous that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7).

Three times in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses describes the Israelites as being "as many as the stars of the sky" (Deut. 1:10, Deut. 10:22, Deut. 28:62). King Solomon speaks of himself as set among "the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number" (1 Kings 3:8). The prophet Hosea says that "the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted" (Hos. 2:1).

In all these texts - and others - it is the size, the numerical greatness, of the people that is emphasised. What then are we to make of Moses' words that speak of its smallness? Targum Yonatan interprets it not to be about numbers at all but about self-image. He translates it not as "the fewest of peoples" but as "the most lowly and humble of peoples." Rashi gives a similar reading, citing Abraham's words "I am but dust and ashes," and Moses and Aaron's, "Who are we?"

Rashbam and Chizkuni give the more straightforward explanation that Moses is contrasting the Israelites with the seven nations they would be fighting in the land of Canaan/Israel. God would lead the Israelites to victory despite the fact that they were outnumbered by the local inhabitants.

Rabbenu Bachya quotes Maimonides, who says that we would have expected God, King of the Universe, to have chosen the most numerous nation in the world as His people, since "the glory of the king is in the multitude of people" (Prov. 14:28).

God did not do so. Thus Israel should know they are a people extraordinarily blessed that God chose them, despite their smallness, to be His am segulah, His special treasure.

Rabbenu Bachya finds himself forced to give a more complex reading to resolve the contradiction of Moses, in Deuteronomy, saying both that Israel is the smallest of peoples, and also "as many as the stars of the sky." He turns it into a hypothetical subjunctive, meaning: God would still have chosen you, even if you had been the smallest of the peoples.

Sforno gives a simple and straightforward reading: God did not choose a nation for the sake of His honour. Had He done so He would undoubtedly have chosen a mighty and numerous people. His choice had nothing to do with honour and everything to do with love. He loved the patriarchs for their willingness to heed His voice; therefore He loves their children.

Yet there is something in this verse that resonates throughout much of Jewish history. Historically Jews were and are a small people: today less than a fifth of one per cent of the population of the world. There were two reasons for this. First is the heavy toll taken through the ages by exile and persecution, directly by Jews killed in massacres and pogroms, indirectly by those who converted – in fifteenth century Spain and nineteenth century Europe – in order to avoid persecution (tragically, even conversion did not work; racial antisemitism persisted in both cases). The Jewish population is a mere fraction of what it might have been had there been no Hadrian, no crusades, and no antisemitism.

The second reason is that Jews did not seek to convert others. Had they done so they would have been closer in numbers to Christianity (2.2 billion) or Islam (1.3 billion). In fact, Malbim reads something like this into our verse. The previous verses have said that the Israelites are about to enter a land with seven nations, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Moses warns them against intermarriage with them, not for racial but for religious reasons: "they will turn your children away

from following Me to serve other gods." Malbim interprets our verse as Moses saying to the Israelites, 'Don't justify outmarriage on the grounds that it will increase the number of Jews. God is not interested in numbers.'

There was a moment when Jews might have sought to convert others (to be sure, there was one instance when they did. The Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus I forcibly converted the Edomites, known as the Idumeneans. Herod was one of their number). The period in question was the Roman Empire in the first century. Jews numbered some 10 per cent of the empire, and there were many Romans who admired aspects of their faith and way of life. The pagan deities of the Hellenistic world were losing their appeal and plausibility, and throughout the centres of the Mediterranean, individuals were adopting Jewish practices. Two aspects of Judaism stood in their way: the commandments and circumcision. In the end, Jews chose not to compromise their way of life for the sake of making converts. The Hellenistic people who sympathised with Judaism mostly adopted Pauline Christianity instead. Consistently throughout history, Jews have chosen to be true to themselves and to stay small rather than make concessions for the sake of increasing numbers.

Why have Divine Providence or human choice or both, eventuated in the sheer smallness of the Jewish people? Could it be, quite simply, that through the Jewish people God is telling humankind that you do not need to be numerous to be great. Nations are not judged by their size but by their contribution to the human heritage. Of this the most compelling proof is that a nation as small as the Jews could produce an ever-renewed flow of prophets, priests, poets, philosophers, sages, saints, halachists, aggadists, codifiers, commentators, rebbes and roshei yeshivot; that they could also yield some of the world's greatest writers, artists, musicians, film-makers, academics, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and technological innovators. Out of all proportion to their numbers Jews could and can be found working as lawyers fighting injustice, economists fighting poverty, doctors fighting disease, and teachers fighting ignorance.

You do not need numbers to enlarge the spiritual and moral horizons of humankind. You need other things altogether: a sense of the worth and dignity of the individual, of the power of human possibility to transform the world, of the importance of giving everyone the best education they can have, of making each of us feel part of a collective responsibility to ameliorate the human condition, and a willingness to take high ideals and enact them in the real world, unswayed by disappointments and defeats.

Nowhere is this more in evidence today than among the people of Israel in the state of Israel: traduced in the media and pilloried by much of the world, yet still, year after year, producing human miracles in medicine, agriculture, technology, the arts, as if the word "impossible" did not exist in the Hebrew language. When, therefore, we feel fearful and depressed about Israel's plight, it is worth returning to Moses' words: "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples."

Small? Yes. Still surrounded, as the Israelites were then, by "nations larger and stronger than you." But that small people, defying the laws of history, outlived all the world's great empires, and still has a message of hope for humanity. You don't have to be large to be great. If you are open to a power greater than yourself, you will become greater than yourself. Israel today still carries that message to the world. *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

"But God was wroth with me because of you, and He would not listen to me. God said to me, 'Enough! Do not speak to me anymore about this.'" (Deuteronomy 3:25–26) Why does the Almighty reject Moses' heartfelt plea? And why does Moses blame the Hebrews? A startling midrash gives a totally unexpected and very different response. But allow me first an important introduction.

Judaism is not a religion of pacifism; our Bible provides for the contingency of warfare, especially if we are attacked by an enemy poised to destroy us. Had we not justified wars fought in self-defense, we could never have maintained our State of Israel during these many decades. However, unlike the Greco-Roman culture which gloried in military victories – witness the opening line of Virgil's Aeneid, "Of arms and military courage do I sing" (Arma virumquo cano) – the Jewish tradition admits of the necessity of war, even calling such wars milchamot mitzva, obligatory mitzva wars. But the Bible never idealizes the enterprise of warfare. Our end goal has always been peace, and our vision of the millennium is a period when "nation will not lift up sword against nation and humanity will not learn warfare anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

Indeed, the Mishna records a most revealing dispute concerning weaponry on the Shabbat: is a weapon considered an adornment, which one wears (and is therefore permissible to wear on the Sabbath), or a burden, which one carries (and is therefore prohibited on the Sabbath – unless a human life is at stake)?

R. Eliezer declares, "It [the weapon] is an

adornment for him"; but the sages maintain: "It is only an object to be reviled (genai), as Scripture states, 'And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks'" (Shabbat 6:4). And normative Jewish law decides in accordance with the sages.

A startling illustration of the profound reverence for life maintained by our Jewish tradition, and hence the ambiguity associated even with "obligatory" wars of self-defense, concerns the status of a priest who has been to the battlefront and killed an enemy in the line of duty. Under ordinary circumstances the halakha forbids a priest with blood on his hands from participating in the priestly blessings which the priests bestow during the repetition of the Amida – each morning in Israel, and each festival in the Diaspora. If a particular priest was responsible for the death of another – even an accidental death – it affects the priest's status in terms of his ability to bless the congregation.

And the logic is persuasive. If these hands, raised now in the shape of the letter "shin" (the first letter of Sha-ddai, Almighty God), had once been used to bring an end to a human life, how can they now be used to bless life? "The accuser dare not become the defender (ein kateigor na'aseh saneigor)" is a well-known Talmudic adage (Berakhot 59a)! And it was precisely for this reason that King David, albeit involved in obligatory wars to conquer the Land of Israel, was disqualified by God from building the Holy Temple (I Chr. 2:8).

Obviously for much of our diaspora history, the question of a priest with blood-stained hands from a mitzva war never came up. But since in the last seven decades Israelis have been to battle in defense of our state, what is the ruling regarding priests in our wars of self-defense in Israel?

Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel (1880–1953), one of the early chief rabbis of Israel, rules (Mishpetei Uziel, part 3, Orach CHayyim, section 10) that a priest who has shed blood, even the blood of a gentile, cannot perform the priestly blessing. Apparently, he based his opinion on an earlier similar decision of the Tzeida Laderekh, Rabbi Yissakhar Ellenberg (p. 69).

My own Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (in Nefesh HaRav, section 132, par. 5) goes one step further, maintaining that "any priest with blood on his hands, even if it comes from one of the obligatory wars of self-defense, shall not bless the people."

To be sure, the opinions cited above are not the only ones. It would certainly be difficult to tell a young soldier who happens to be a priest, defending his country and his people, that his commitment unto death on the army front will disallow him from bestowing the priestly benediction in his local synagogue. And so, in a halakhic inquiry regarding a priest who fought in Israel's wars against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013), one of the leading decisors in modern Israel, argued forcefully that such soldiers must be allowed to rise to bless the congregation: "There is no doubt they are fit and worthy, and they must participate in the priestly benediction" (Yechaveh Da'at 2:14). After all, the soldier was obligated by God's law to fight in the battle, and he took the lives of enemies who were out to murder innocent Jews!

The parameters involved in this halakhic debate may very well be what is behind the startling midrash to which we referred in the beginning of this commentary (Otzar Midrashim, Eisenstein, Midrash Moshe, p. 363). (This midrash is cited by Prof. Y. Leibowitz in his work, He'arot al Parashat Hashavua, p. 115.) Moses supplicates with all his heart and soul to be al-lowed to enter the Promised Land, but God is adamant in His refusal: "Get you up into the top of Pisga, and lift up your eyes westward, and north-ward, and southward, and eastward, and behold these places only with your eyes, for you yourself shall not cross over this Jordan" (Deut. 3:27).

Clearly Moses finds it very difficult to accept the punishment prohibiting his entry into Israel, the very goal of his leadership. Moses now asks, according to the Midrash: "Now if it is pleasing in your eyes, do not cause me to die; allow me to live so that I may declare the acts of the Lord." The Holy One, blessed be He attempts to explain to him why he must die, no different than the righteous patriarchs, who never-theless died. Moses continues to remonstrate with God, arguing that Abraham bore the wicked Ishmael, and Isaac bore the wicked Esau. Teaches the Midrash: God says to Moses, "You seek [an extension on your] life? As for you yourself, [you took the life of an Egyptian]. Did I ever com-mand you to kill the Egyptian [taskmaster]?" Moses attempts a defense: "But you, God, killed all the first-born of Egypt!" God argues in return, "You dare to compare yourself to Me? I am the Giver of Life. I may slay, but I also revive. Do you then have the power to give life?"

This dialogue between the Almighty and Moses is strange, to say the least. Are we to assume that Moses committed a transgression by slaying the Egyptian taskmaster? It was precisely that action – an act of selfless commitment which meant abdicating his position in Pharaoh's palace as prince of Egypt and identifying with a beleaguered slave people – that propelled this greatest of all prophets onto center stage of Jewish history. Moreover, the Egyptian was smiting an innocent Hebrew slave. Had Moses done nothing, he would have violated the prohibition: "neither shall you stand idly by the [shedding of the] blood of your brother" (Lev. 19:16). How can he be punished for having acted in accordance with Torah morality even before God revealed His will at Sinai?

Apparently, the Midrash is teaching that although Moses did the proper act in killing the

Egyptian, the blood on his hands nevertheless creates a blemish in his spiritual, prophetic person which defiles him from entry into the Holy Land. Despite the opinions to the contrary, this mid-rash would most probably support the position that a priest who killed in a necessary obligatory war cannot rise to bestow the priestly benediction of peace upon the congregation. And so, in Moses' remonstration with God, he says it was "because of you," because of his commitment to the Hebrews in slaying the Egyptian, that his exalted soul became stained to the extent that he could not enter Israel.

I was once taking a walk with a beloved friend of mine, Yehuda Noiman, of Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, who was one of the original founders of the kibbutz when it was in Gush Etzion, and who fought valiantly in the early wars of Israel. Suddenly, a few yards from the outskirts of the kibbutz, he stopped dead in his tracks with a pained expression on his face. "It was after the War of Independence, when I was freed from Jordanian captivity," he began to reminisce, apparently now reliving an event which had taken place many years before. "We were just settling this area, and I had guard duty. Suddenly, about 4:00 AM, I heard a strange noise coming from the trees, right at the spot on which we are presently standing. I sensed strange footsteps and ordered the individual to reveal himself with raised hands. Instead, I could hear the concealed footsteps running towards me, the stranger taking pains to remain hidden from view. I had no choice but to shoot. He was a weapon-bearing Arab, and he is buried underneath us. But whenever I pass this spot, I can hear his final 'aiyee' and death throttle, which even three decades later, still causes my heart to constrict and the tears to well up in my eyes." *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.*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Blessing of Ga'al Yisrael

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

During the morning prayer service, one may not pause or interrupt between the blessing of redemption (*Ga'al Yisrael*), and the recitation of the *Amidah*. Even standing silently between them is prohibited. However, there is also a *halacha* that one must respond with an *Amen* after hearing a blessing. Thus, it would seem that someone who hears the *chazan* (cantor) complete the blessing of *Ga'al Yisrael* must answer *Amen*. But then he is creating an interruption between the blessing and the *Amidah*! What's a person to do?

Some answer that saying *Amen* to *Ga'al Yisrael* is like saying *Amen* after one's own blessing. In general, a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, if he is concluding a subject the *Amen* is considered part of the blessing and thus is not considered an interruption. (The classic example of this is in *Birkat HaMazon*, when we conclude our own blessing of "*Boneh Be-rachamav Yerushalayim*" by saying *Amen*.) Perhaps the *Amen* after *Ga'al Yisrael* is in the same category.

Others insist that the reciting of *Amen* at this point is an interruption and should be avoided. How can a person avoid taking sides in this disagreement?

The *poskim* offer three suggestions:

1. The person praying should try to reach *Ga'al Yisrael* a little before the *chazan*. He can then wait, recite *Amen* to the *chazan*'s blessing, then recite the blessing himself, and immediately begin the *Amidah*. However, this solution is not without its problems. First, one is not supposed to pause in the middle of the blessings following *Keriat Shema*. Second, ideally one is meant to begin the *Amidah* at the same time as the *chazan*.

2. The person praying should recite the blessing together with the *chazan*. In such a case, he is not required to say *Amen*, as a person does not say *Amen* to his own blessing. However, as we have seen, there is an opinion that in the case of *Ga'al Yisrael* a person does say *Amen* to his own blessing.

3. The person praying should start the *Amidah* before the *chazan*. Once someone is in the middle of the *Amidah*, he does not respond *Amen* under any circumstances. However, once again, this means one is not beginning the *Amidah* with the *chazan*.

A fourth solution is very commonly followed nowadays. Namely, the *chazan* recites *Ga'al Yisrael* under his breath. Since no one hears the blessing, no one needs to answer *Amen*. Interestingly, this practice is not mentioned anywhere in the literature. Can it be that there truly is no source for it?

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

The obvious problem posed by the commandment to love Hashem (Devarim 6:5) is that love is an emotion. How can one possibly be told to love?

One understanding of that commandment is provided by Abaye in the Talmud (Yoma 86a): "That [one should cause] the name of Heaven to be beloved [by others] through you."

He explains that if one conducts himself properly, studying Torah, serving scholars and conducting business with honesty, people will say "Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah, fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah" -- thereby engendering observers' love for Hashem.

The Rambam (Yesodei HaTorah 5:11) echoes that statement, adding the importance of taking care to not "separate [oneself] too far [from normal life]".

Causing others to love Hashem is arguably easier today than ever. Since society is so often crass and rude, even conducting oneself in a normal, reasonable way does not go unnoticed. A "please" or "thank you" or "good morning," not to mention a smile, stands out. And if offered by an identifiable Jew, can create love for Hashem.

Another approach to the mitzvah of loving Hashem is recorded in the name of Rav Akiva Eger, based on the fact that emotions can be cultivated and harnessed.

A key to observing the "love Hashem" commandment, he suggests, is provided each day just before we recite the Shma, which introduces it. The final brachah before krias Shma in the morning ends with "Who chooses His nation Yisrael with love"; and the one before the evening recitation, with "the One who loves His nation Yisrael."

In other words, recognizing Hashem's love for us yields reciprocal love for Him.

As Shlomo Hamelech teaches in Mishlei (27:19), Kamayim hapanim lapanim... -- "As water reflects a face back to a face, so is one's heart reflected back to him by another."

What is true in human relationships is equally true in our relationship with our Creator. *© 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah as we all well know is multilayered. The rabbis have taught us that there are seventy facets to every piece of the written Torah. We are also aware that no written word can adequately convey to us all of the nuances and possible meanings that lie embedded in the written word. The Torah requires elucidation, commentary and explanation in order for any proper understanding of its message to be gained.

The entire book of Dvarim is an elucidation and explanation of the first four books of Moshe. As such, by the inherent nature of explanation and commentary, different words and phrases will be employed to describe events and commandments that were previously mentioned in the Torah.

A prime example of this appears in this week's parsha where the Torah repeats for us the Ten Commandments revealed to Israel at Sinai. The wording here in Dvarim differs slightly from the wording recorded for us in Shemot. The Talmud in its rendition of the Oral Law states that these discrepancies – such as the use of the word shamor instead of the original zachor regarding the observance of the Shabat – indicate that these words were stated simultaneously by God, so to speak, a feat that is beyond human comprehension and ability.

The Talmud means to indicate to us with this statement that all of the possible interpretations and layers of meaning in the Torah were given to us simultaneously and at once at Sinai. Only the Oral Law and the work of the commentators to the Torah over all of the ages has revealed to us these original layers of meaning and interpretation for our study and practice. By using different words to explain what was already written, the Torah guides our understanding of the Torah only by way of the Oral Law and the great commentators of Israel over the ages.

In the final commandment of the Ten Commandments, the Torah here in Dvarim uses the word titaveh whereas in Shemot it used the word tachmode. The Torah points out to us that there are different forms of desire and wanting something. One is an impulsive, spur of the moment desire that arises out of seemingly chance circumstance – an advertisement in the media or a chance meeting or sighting. Such a desire is not planned and stems from the inherent human weakness within all of us to want to possess what we do not yet have. But there is another type of desire. It is long planned and had been part of our lives for years and decades. It borders on being an obsession or an addiction within our makeup.

Both of these types of desire can destroy a person. The Torah cautions us against these symptoms of self-destructive behavior. And by the use of these different Hebrew verbs, the Torah indicates to us that there are different types of desires and that one must be defensive against all of them. The Talmud tells us that the eyes see and the heart thereupon desires. Guarding one's eyes guards one's heart as well. This example of the Torah's self elucidation of the matter makes the lesson clear to all and challenges us to apply it wisely in one's own life. *© 2025 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is called "Shabbat Nachamu -- Sabbath of Consolation." It is named after the first words of the haftarah (a scriptures reading in synagogue after the weekly Torah portion). This week's haftarah begins with the opening verse of Isaiah 40, and refers to the Almighty instructing his prophets to bring solace to the Jewish nation, "Comfort my people, comfort them."

Shabbat Nachamu is no ordinary Shabbat; it is seen as a spiritual turning point. After three weeks of sorrow and reflection on the many tragedies that befell our people, this Shabbat offers the first rays of comfort, signaling a movement toward healing and renewal. In

many communities, the atmosphere is notably joyful. Some traditions include special meals, singing, and even communal gatherings or outdoor celebrations. Some sages (see Ritva on Ta'anit 30a) say that the food we eat on this Shabbat should be extra special, like that of a chag -- festival.

It is also a popular time for weddings, as the period of semi-mourning known as the Three Weeks has ended and the spirit of hope and consolation makes it an auspicious time to celebrate new beginnings. This is particularly relevant to this week's Torah reading where we find one of the consequences of straying from the Almighty: "God will scatter you among the nations, and only a small number will remain among the nations to which God will lead you" (Deuteronomy 4:27).

This, astonishingly accurate, predictive statement can be better understood with the following comparison. According to a Chinese censuses taken around 2 CE, there were about 50 million Chinese people in the world. Today, there are about 1.5 billion Chinese people. Columbia University's Professor Salo Baron, who was considered among the most important researchers and historians of Judaism of that period, estimated the number of Jews in the world at that time to be about eight million.

If the Jewish population had grown at the same rate as the Chinese, there would be close to 240 million Jews in the world today. Yet, as the Torah presciently foretold, the worldwide Jewish population hovers around 13 million. Obviously, worldwide dispersion, persecution, and outright annihilation all contribute to this rather depressing statistic. However, this week's Torah reading also closes with a message of hope: "God did not desire you, nor choose you, because you were greater (in number) than any people. Rather, He chose you because you were the least of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7).

At first blush, the presumption that any people should qualify to be chosen as "God's Nation" merely on the strength of population size seems rather odd. Why should that be a qualifying feature at all?

The great Biblical commentator known as Rashi takes a novel approach to this verse. He explains (ad loc) that the Torah is not discussing population size at all. Instead, Rashi says that the verse is telling us that the Jewish nation was specifically chosen because they do not ascribe greatness to themselves. As the verse goes on to say, "because you were the least of all peoples."

Rashi cites examples of Jewish leaders who, despite their lofty status, did not ascribe any greatness to themselves. Abraham was the founder of Judaism and, according to the Torah, took on a role in world leadership (Genesis 17:5). Nevertheless, immediately after that designation, he referred to himself as nothing more than "dust and ash" (Genesis 18:27).

Again, shortly after the great miracles of the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Red Sea, and the freeing of the Jewish nation from bondage, Moses and Aaron referred to themselves as "totally insignificant" (Exodus 16:7). If we examine the royal line of Jewish kings, we see a similar pattern -- the first king of the Jewish people was King Saul who was chosen for his humble and modest personality. In fact, even after Samuel anointed him king he simply went home and did not even tell his family that he had been appointed king. When Samuel wanted to present him to the people Saul actually hid!

There is an extraordinary lesson here in how Judaism views leadership. The Talmud says that kingship is in reality servitude (Horayut 10a and 10b). When King Solomon died and the people came to his son (and heir to the throne) Rechovam to complain that King Solomon's tax burdens were too great, he sought advice from the elders that advised his father. They told him. "If you will be a servant to these people and speak gently to them, they will be your subjects forever" (Kings I 12:7). In other words, for a king to be successful must view himself as a servant of the people. He ignored their advice and the kingdom became divided; 10 of the 12 tribes established a separate monarchy.

Elsewhere (Kiddushin 82b) the Talmud suggests the jobs to which certain animals would be best suited, e.g. a fox who is cunning would make a good salesman. The Talmud projects that a suitable vocation for a lion would be a porter. This seems very strange, how is it possible that the king of all the animals would be a lowly porter? The Talmud is teaching us that a king's main function is to empower others. A king, to be both effective and accepted as a leader, must ensure that his position is never solely about him; his focus must be on making everyone around him great. Regarding the Almighty Himself, the Talmud states, "Said Rabbi Yochanan, 'Everywhere you find His greatness you'll also find His humility'" (Megillah 31a).

This means that God Himself ensured that creation is not about Him; it is about man fulfilling his ultimate potential. The essence of creation is for man to have a space he perceives as his own and then to use his free will to build a relationship with the Almighty and achieve the most blissful existence possible, in this world and the next.

To summarize Newton's Law of Universal Gravity, objects exert a force on one another equal to their mass. Imagine an elephant playing tug of war with a mouse; even though they both exert equal force on the rope, the mouse does all the moving. This gravitational force or "attraction" of smaller objects to larger ones is a law of physics and simply a reality of life. This concept is used all the time to get individuals to join larger groups; Apple, McDonald's, and Amazon

continually urge people to join the hundreds of millions of others who enjoy their product.

Because of this tendency to want to belong to something "bigger" the Torah dispels the presumption that the Almighty chose the Jewish people because of their large population. In theory, one might think that it would make sense for the Almighty to choose the largest and most influential people as his emissaries in this world; this way everyone would "see the light" and quickly hop on the popular bandwagon. But that would be a colossal mistake.

When one simply joins a movement to belong to something larger, it also means giving up personal development and growth. Consider monolithic societies like communism where individual achievement is meaningless. Nobody in that society has any incentive to develop themselves. Because man was created to develop himself and achieve, this arrested development leads to overall misery, low morale, and a downward spiral of the human spirit.

It is exactly for this reason that, according to Rashi, the Almighty chose the Jewish nation to be His ambassadors to the world. We are small in number; we are not seeking more adherents; in fact, Judaism wholeheartedly discourages it! Judaism is totally unique in that it has a non-threatening universal message for the world: "You do not have to change your affiliation. You can develop yourselves through the seven Noachide laws -- i.e. worship the one true God (monotheism), be moral (don't kill, don't steal, etc.), don't abuse animals, and set up a just society through court systems." That's it!

Simply put, Jews believe that you do not have to be Jewish to build a relationship with the Almighty and go to heaven. As Jews, our goal should be to practice the leadership of our founding fathers Abraham and Moses whose approach to others was always about making them great and never focusing on their own personal achievements. We should focus on helping others build an awareness of the Almighty and teach how they too might live in a theocentric universe. This is the role of the Jewish nation in the world.

The superiority complex that many Jews maintain as "God's chosen people" is totally unjustified. We were chosen to help others become great; we are not "better" than others. Moses -- for all his greatness -- did not feel that he was "better" than anyone else. The example set by the founders of Judaism is that true leadership is about helping others achieve greatness and not focusing on your own self-aggrandizement.

Sadly, this very message is lost on many. There are whole segments of Jewish society that have chosen to live within large monolithic communities and have all but forsaken helping their brethren achieve similar personal development. There is an air of elitism about them that should be particularly alarming to anyone who is paying attention. This self-congratulatory attitude results in self-absorption, which leads to moral decline.

Unfortunately, when we forget our roots and Jewish society becomes too self-absorbed then division grows within our ranks. Subsequently, the Almighty has to remind us, painfully, that we need one another and that we should be focused on others' needs. This is the message of Shabbos Nachamu. It is a beacon of light after darkness, inviting individuals and communities to console one another and restore unity, and embrace hope as they move forward and heal as a unified nation.

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

One of the highlights of Parshat Va'etchanan is the repetition of the Ten Commandments. In vivid detail, Moses recalls the scene as the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moses also describes this monumental event later in the Torah, saying, "G-d came from Sinai, having shone on them from Seir, having appeared from Mount Paran..." (Deut. 33:2). According to Rashi (Avodah Zara 2b), Seir is a location associated with Esav, whereas Mount Paran is associated with Yishmael.

We know that G-d first offered the Torah to the other nations of the world before He gave it to the Jewish people. Each nation wanted to know the contents of the Torah before accepting it. When the nation of Esav discovered that the Torah contained the commandment "You shall not murder," they refused to accept it. Similarly, the nation of Yishmael did not want to accept the Torah once they heard the commandment, "You shall not steal."

It seems odd that the nations refused to accept the Torah based on these basic restrictions. The seven Noachide laws-that every nation must uphold as universal law-include the prohibitions against murder and theft. What made the acceptance of Torah any different? Why would the nations refuse to do something so easy-that in fact they were already doing?

The commentator Ohr Gedaliyahu suggests an explanation based on the purpose of mitzvot. According to his view, the Ten Commandments are intended to sanctify us to such a degree that the mitzvot become part of our basic nature. In other words, through performing the mitzvot, we become so attached to G-d, and so aware of Him in our thought, speech, and action, that our very essence changes.

We see a support to this in the Mechilta (Parshat Yitro, citing Rebbe Akiva), which states that the Jewish people answered "hein" (yes) when they were informed of the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments. Instead of responding, "No, we won't murder," they replied, "YES, we won't murder." What is

the significance of a positive response to a "thou shalt not" command?

According to the Ohr Gedaliyahu, this positive response hints to a transformation that the Jewish people underwent when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. When they heard the command, "You shall not murder," they became filled with such love for each other that it was impossible for them to even entertain the idea of harming another person. In other words, this "thou shall not" command brought them to a level of connection with G-d that their very essence changed.

Based on this idea, we can understand why the nations of the world refused to accept the Torah. Previously, the nations with a proclivity toward murder had refrained because it was against the Noachide Laws. The Torah was altogether different. It was not a reiteration of universal law, but rather an expectation of positive change. The nations refused to accept this offer. Sometimes it is easier to hold on to our pockets of darkness and negative baggage than to attempt to make positive changes in our lives. The Jewish people were the only ones who were willing to transform themselves in order to fulfill the Torah.

This idea will help us gain an insight into another highlight of the parsha: the Shema. Our intention when reciting "Shema Yisrael" should be that we are willing to give up our life for G-d if the situation requires (Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 417). Where do we find a hint to this idea in the words of the Shema?

According to the Slonimer Rebbe, the word "echad" (one) carries the same implication as the verse "Ein od mil'vado"-There is nothing besides Him (Deut. 4:35). Nothing exists outside of G-d. Therefore, by working on ourselves to grow ever closer to Him, it is as though we have already given up our life. Our whole life is totally given over to G-d.

This also helps us understand why, in Parshat Shoftim, the officers of the Jewish army begin their pre-battle talk to the soldiers by telling them, "Shema Yisrael! You are going out to war against your enemies" (Deut 20:3). According to the Talmud (Sotah 42a), the officers' phrasing implies that, even if the soldiers have only the merit of saying the Shema, that is reason enough for G-d to protect them. This makes sense according to the reasoning of the Slonimer Rebbe. If a soldier says Shema properly, and connects to G-d with his whole life, of course he will be victorious, because he will have aligned himself as much as possible with the unlimited power of G-d: the only force that exists.

We therefore learn from both the Shema and the Ten Commandments the importance of having a close connection to G-d. But how do we achieve this attachment? Connection to G-d grows out of loving Him. We see this on a practical level-since, when we love someone, we want to be with that person every possible minute. The Torah even commands us to love G-d (Deut. 6:5). Yet how can we be commanded to feel an emotion?

The Slonimer Rebbe suggests that, rather than being commanded to love G-d, we are commanded to do things that bring us to love G-d. One of these is to study Torah (Deut. 6:6). Once we start studying Torah and doing mitzvot, it is much more natural for us to begin feeling love for G-d.

May we soon see the day when, in the merit of this connection to the Divine, our true enemies will disappear, and we will enjoy an era of everlasting peace.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Perhaps the most famous sentence in the Torah is found in this week's Torah portion -- "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Deuteronomy 6:4). Interestingly, the last letter of the Hebrew word for "Hear" (Shema) is enlarged in the Torah scroll (Ayin), as is the last letter of the Hebrew word for "One" (the Daled in Echad). Among the many possible explanations, one understanding of the combination of these two letters (Ayin and Daled) may reveal why the text calls specific attention to them: The letters Ayin Daled can be read "ade" which means "to bear witness." In reading the "Hear O Israel" one is in effect testifying that God exists.

This Shabbat being the first of the seven weeks leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, one more thought comes to mind: Maybe the letters are large to teach us that even the smallest of changes could pervert the meaning of the text. For example, if one would read the Shema as having an Aleph as its last letter instead of the Ayin (after all the Aleph and Ayin are both silent letters) the word Shema would mean "perhaps" (sheh-mah). This would change this firm declaration of belief into an expression of doubt. And if the Daled would be mistaken for a Reish (after all, there is only a slight difference in the writing of a Daled and Reish) -- the word echad (One) would be read acher (other). This would change the critical Jewish belief in One God into a belief in two gods. If baseball is a game of inches, the Torah is a guide of millimeters -- sometimes the smallest thing makes all the difference. As we move towards Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, all of us ought be careful with every word, every gesture and every action, because you never know where the smallest changes may lead you.