

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Not with you alone do I establish this Covenant and this oath, but with those who are here with us standing today before the Lord our God and with those who are not here with us today.” (Deuteronomy 29:13–14) So begins this week’s biblical portion of Nitzavim which is usually read on the Sabbath before Rosh HaShana. We must question the connection between our biblical portion and Rosh HaShana, especially since our Talmud records that “Ezra decreed that the curses of the book of Deuteronomy be publicly read before Rosh HaShana” (Megilla 31b).

Furthermore, the Almighty continues to proclaim that “it is not with you alone that I am entering into the covenant and this oath, but it is rather with those who are not here with us today” (Deut. 29: 13–14). To whom is the Lord referring when He includes “those who are not here with us today”? Are these our ancestors, who dreamt and may even have fought and died for the Promised Land, but never lived to see the day when Israel would be poised to enter it? Or are these our descendants yet unborn, to whom this eternal covenant certainly applies but who are not themselves here to agree to enter into it together with this generation of Israelites? Or perhaps to neither of the above, referring to another group entirely?

To add a further question to our analysis of this covenant, you will remember that in last week’s biblical portion of Ki Tavo, wherein this covenant is described as the writing of the universal laws of blessings and curses on stones to be set up in all seventy languages immediately after Israel passes through the Jordan River, God describes His relationship with Israel using a word which the commentaries struggle to define and understand: “This day the Lord your God commands you these laws and commands.... You have joined [cleaved, united – which is the way Targum translates the Hebrew “he’emarta,” presumably from the verb a-m-r] with the Lord this day to be for you a God...and to obey His voice. And the Lord has joined [cleaved, united] with you this day to be His treasured nation...and to establish you as higher than all the nations which He has made for [His] praise, renown, and glory and to establish you as a sanctified nation to the Lord your God.” (Deut. 26:16–19)

What does this strange Hebrew causative (hif’il verbal form) verb, he’emir actually mean? And in what

way are we “the treasured nation (segula), higher than all other nations”?

Rashi, the most classical of all commentaries, tells us (ad loc.), “this word (amor) has no witness to testify on its behalf [as to its meaning] throughout the Bible,” which is to say that such a causative verbal usage for a root which usually (in its simple form) means “to speak” appears nowhere else in the Bible. He nevertheless goes on to say that it means “to separate” or “to set apart”; God has separated or set apart Israel unto Himself (to the exclusion of all other nations) and Israel has separated God unto itself (to the exclusion of all other gods). Targum apparently accepts this basic understanding in his translation as well.

Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak) maintains that it means “uplifted,” which may perhaps be linked to a word used for marriage, nissuin (the groom lifting his bride across the threshold of the new home he is providing for her, a metaphor for covenant). The Malbim suggests that it means “sanctified” in the sense of betrothed (kadosh, kiddushin); from the Hebrew ma’amar, an engagement (of a levirate wife). The linguistic logic of all of this emanates from the fact that marriage is the entrance into a totally new status of being – change in personal status by two individuals, on the strength of an acquisition which must be accompanied by a verbal declaration: “Behold you are sanctified unto me with this ring in accordance with the laws of Moses and of Israel.” And marriage with the words of our prophets is certainly the prime metaphor for God’s covenant with Israel (especially Hosea, “I shall betroth you unto Me forever,” recited while winding the tefillin on one’s finger as a prelude to prayer, a symbol of our – Israel’s – engagement with the Lord).

Let us take our verbal understanding one step further. The Kohanim, or Aaronite priest-teachers in Israel, are commanded to call upon God to bless the Jewish people during specified times of prayer and Temple ritual. The Bible commands in God’s name, “Speak to Aaron and his sons saying, so shall you bless the children of Israel, say unto them (amor lahem)...” (Num. 6:23). This last phrase seems superfluous. The Talmudic sages deduce from it that the cantor must first declare (amor, speak out) each word of the blessing, after which the word is to be repeated by the Kohen. One French commentary explained the Hebrew amor as coming from the Latin-French-Spanish word amore which means love, thereby explaining why the priestly

benediction must be recited by priests “with love” (be’ahava). Perhaps our verb in the Third Covenant is truly linked to this verb surrounding the priestly benediction, with both verbs related to a covenantal love relationship between God and His nation Israel

Now certainly I am not claiming that the Hebrew amor comes from the French amore; that would be absurd. But what I would suggest is that if indeed our God is a God of love (Y-HVH) (Ex. 34:6), and if indeed He created the human being, as an expression of His love (love requires another being to love, love does not exist in a vacuum), and if the essence of the human being created in the image of the Divine is his power of communication, of speech, amira becomes closely identified with love (see Gen. 2:1, Targum Onkelos ad loc.). Having said this, I would presume to provide a different understanding to Rashi’s interpretation of the verse Ki Tavo; God has “separated” Israel unto Himself not to the exclusion of the other nations of the world but rather for the sake of the other nations of the world. After all, God created the world, not only Israel, and God loves all of humanity, not only Israel. Did not R. Akiva teach, “Beloved is the human being who was formed in the divine image” (Mishna Avot 3:18)? And is not this Third Covenant focused on the world? For what other reason would the Bible have its laws translated into all seventy languages of the world (Deut. 26:8)?

Just as the Kohanim are the priest-teachers of the Israelites, so is Israel the priest-teacher of the nations of the world, a “goy kadosh umamleket Kohanim” (holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers). (See Sforno, Ex. 19:6).

God has entered into a covenant or engagement with and betrothal of Israel which has two parts: Israel must bear God’s message of morality and peace to the world (a message which Israel accepted at Sinai) and God, in turn will guarantee Israel’s eternity.

This is the divine charge in Ki Tavo, where God defines us as being above the nations not in terms of our being qualitatively higher than them – we were all formed in the womb of the Shekhina – but rather functionally higher in terms of our mission to teach them the ways of God. It is our task as a people to educate the world towards recognition of a God of morality, love, and peace; in our global village, the nations must become united as a source of praise and glory to a God of compassionate righteousness and moral justice rather than a means of nuclear weaponry which will destroy the world in a Jihadic race for totalitarian power.

Now we understand that those who did not stand at Sinai and Arvat Moab – the seventy nations of the world – must stand with us when God’s Revelation will be “repeated a second time before the eyes of all living beings,” as the Third Covenant becomes universally accepted and realized (see the Sabbath Amida, the Kedusha of Musaf). Indeed God’s covenant must encompass Jew and gentile alike. And it makes perfect

sense that our biblical reading precedes Rosh HaShana, when Jews must realize their true mission: to turn the wicked of the world towards a God of morality, to perfect the world with the Kingship of the Divine. And this, after all, is the entire point of the Third Covenant. *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. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L

Wein Online

Ah! The covenant once more. The basis of the relationship between the Jewish people and their Creator is the covenant that exists between them. The covenant is central to the story of the Jewish people. Our father Avraham entered into and created the terms of this eternal covenant. The covenant was embodied in his flesh itself and sanctified by the sense of sacrifice that the historical narrative of Avraham and Yitzchak reinforced.

Yaakov received the covenant from his father – after contests with Eisav and Lavan and bequeathed it to his sons, the twelve tribes of Israel. His family took the covenant with them down to Egypt and it was miraculously preserved throughout centuries of slavery. Yosef had promised them redemption and belief in the existence and efficacy of the covenant. And that promise of redemption for all ages and future conditions was attached to the overriding theme of the covenant.

To this historical and faith narrative was added the holy spirituality and Divine laws of the Torah granted at Mount Sinai. This combination of holiness, the discipline of behavior, the historical narrative of tradition and family, all combined to form the foundation of the covenant.

This has remained the great backbone of Jewish survival during our long and painful exile and dispersion. It is this covenant that unites Jews the world over as a family, not only as a faith and not only as a nationality.

The continuity and presence of this covenant – alive and well as it assuredly is in our time now – was and is the leitmotif of the rhythms of Jewish life everywhere. The covenant was binding upon all Jews even though many Jews, especially in modern times, were completely unaware of its existence and the grip it exerted on their lives and society.

It is this covenant that governs Jewish history and our current events as well. There is no other rational way to look at our story, past, present and undoubtedly future, in the absence of the overriding influence and presence of the covenant that Moshe and Israel entered into as recorded in this week’s Torah reading.

The demands of the covenant are strong and oftentimes appear to be severe. But an “easy” covenant

would be useless considering the challenges and rigors of Jewish history. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein often stated: "People say it is difficult to be a Jew and they are correct in that assessment. But I say that it is even more difficult for a Jew not to be a Jew!" Such is the nature of God's covenant with us and it has proven to be eternal and binding for all of the millennia of Jewish existence. That is why this is the final major public act of the career of Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people. As long as the covenant holds, he is assured of the eternity of Israel and his own immortality. © 2017 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 LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to God – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, 'Please let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon' (Deut. 3:25). His request was simple. Please let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no: 'It is enough!' the Lord said... 'Never speak to Me about this again!' (Deut. 3:26)

God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.¹

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He told the people: 'At the end of every seventh year, the year of remission, of cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that He will choose, you shall read out this law in the presence of all Israel, for them to hear. Assemble the people - men, women, and children, including migrants living in your towns - so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully keep all the words of this Law, and so that their children, who do not know it, may listen and learn to be in awe of the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.' (Deut. 31:10-13)

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings, covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their

history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The entire book of Deuteronomy is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is a similar occurrence in Tanach, after Joshua fulfils his mandate as Moses' successor, brings the people across the Jordan, leads them in their battles, and settles the land.² Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering (among other things) the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was during this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,³ sealed in a hiding place to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly: Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets - all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord - to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant.' II Kings 23:1-3

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read out the Torah, after positioning Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah culminated after Succot when the people collectively "bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord" (Neh. 10:29).

The other command from our parsha – the last Moses gave the people – was contained in the words:

¹ There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically "in the midst of others" who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.

² See chapter 24 of the Book of Joshua.

³ This is Radak and Rambam's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses' own Torah, written by his hand.

'Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites,' understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses' request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. 'Enough!... Never speak to Me about this again.' Is this the Torah, and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands, God was teaching Moses - and through him, Jews throughout the ages - what immortality is, on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.⁴

God showed Moses, and us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address - every four years since 1789 - has been explicitly or implicitly a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of "covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance." America's duty, he said, is "to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling - the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God."⁵

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moses' way of saying

to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago - by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality - not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). Moses died, but what he taught, and what he sought, lives on. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Coming Destruction

At the beginning of our double parshiot, Hashem reestablished His covenant with the Jewish People; a new covenant established with a new

⁴ See Jeremiah 31.

⁵ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

generation of the twelve tribes. These tribes then heard the Tochacha from last week, standing on Har Gerizim and Har Eival, where they answered Amen to the blessings and curses for observing or not observing this covenant. And with this new covenant, Moshe warned the people of the future failure of the Jewish People to maintain the difficult standards that Hashem had commanded of them. They would turn to other “gods” who came to them without those difficult restrictions and structures, and Hashem would respond to their abandonment of Him by destroying the land He had promised their forefathers on the condition that their children would maintain their loyalty to Him. What follows is the effect that this destruction would have on those who would see this destruction many years later.

“The later generation will say – your children who will arise after you and the foreigner who will come from a distant land – when they will see the plagues of that land and its illnesses with which Hashem has afflicted it. Sulphur and salt, a conflagration of its entire land, it cannot be sown and it cannot sprout, and no grass shall rise up on it; like the upheaval of S’dom and Amorah, Admah and Tzevoim, which Hashem overturned in His anger and His wrath. And all the nations will say, ‘For what reason did Hashem do so to this land; why this wrathfulness of great anger?’ And they will say, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of Hashem, the Elokim of their forefathers, that He sealed with them when He took them out of the land of Egypt. And they went and they served the gods of others, and they prostrated themselves to them; gods that they knew not and He did not apportion to them. So Elokim’s anger flared against that land, to bring upon it the entire curse that is written in this Book. And Hashem removed them from upon their soil, with anger, with wrath, and with great fury, and He cast them to another land, as this very day!’ The hidden things are for Hashem, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to carry out all the words of the Torah.”

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explained what their children saw and what other nations would see when they came to this desolate land after the destruction: “Your descendants and also all the nations of the world will see the catastrophe that will come upon you and your land, and they will see that all these things were predicted in this Book. Thus, the catastrophe of the people and land will be manifest historical testimony to Hashem and His rule.” HaRav Hirsch explains that the reason for this destruction was Hashem’s need to demonstrate His rule over the people. But this is only a portion of Hashem’s message. Included in this message was the idea that observing the Torah brings rewards while a lack of observance brings punishment and destruction. HaRav Hirsch also says that all nations should know that “wherever they are, they are not in their original homeland, and wherever they may find themselves, they are not there by chance. The Hashem

of the history of men has “cast” them there.” We know that the conquering armies of the Persians and the Romans specifically erased connections to each nation’s homeland in the hopes that this dispersion would discourage rebellions. Only the Jewish nation was brought back to its original homeland by the Persians after the story of Purim.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the punishment that the B’nei Yisrael experienced after they had abandoned Hashem and worshipped other gods was different than the punishment given the people of S’dom and Amorah. The people of S’dom and Amorah were inherently evil, mistreating strangers and acting devoid of any decency. Their land was destroyed along with them when Hashem overturned their land. The B’nei Yisrael, however, were removed from their land and sent into exile, but they were still alive and still a nation. The land ceased to produce food, but the land itself remained intact and not overturned. When the Jewish People sin and are punished, they seek to return to Hashem. Though they sinned, they seek to reestablish their covenant with Hashem by fulfilling their part of that covenant. As HaRav Sorotzkin states, even in these strange lands, the B’nei Yisrael continued to serve Hashem and His commandments. Their land was punished, not for anything that it did, but for the sins which its inhabitants performed on its soil. It stopped producing food like a “land flowing with milk and honey,” and its produce ceased until its people could return as a deserving nation once again. During the last two thousand years of exile, the land was barren, but the potential for producing food was not taken away; it was only dormant until which time that the righteous would return.

HaAmek Davar states that there are two lessons for us to learn from the fact that Hashem decreed that “the hidden things are for Hashem, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever.” He states that: (1) Hashem continued His connection to the B’nei Yisrael even when they worshipped other gods and abandoned His covenant, and (2) that the act of worshipping other gods, as well as inappropriate relations and spilling of blood, are not the foundational support for these sins, but that the lack of devotion to the study of Torah caused these sins to appear. Without this devotion to Torah, other sins would enter our lives to fill that void.

The Ramban explains that when the Torah states, “The hidden things are for Hashem, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever,” it means that the people are permitted to punish an act of idol worship, but only when the sin is done before witnesses who can testify. When there are no witnesses or when the action was done privately, Hashem will still know that the sin of idol worship had taken place and He will punish the sin without a human court. While the Ramban limited his commentary to the sin of idol

worship, this concept applies to all laws; if testimony can be given, then human punishment can be given by the courts; when testimony is insufficient, Hashem is still aware of the sin and will punish when He chooses.

Hashem explains that He would punish the people eventually. This was a prediction of the upcoming destruction discussed earlier. We are returning from that destruction, and we must keep in mind that our return must be cautioned by our observance of the Torah. May we prove that we are worthy to fulfill our commitment to His covenant with us.
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RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Dovid HaMelech said, "One thing I ask of God, that I seek...that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life" (Tehillim 27:4). These are such beautiful words and a profound sentiment, and they even made a song from it.

The question is, what did Dovid mean? Did he want to move into the Bais HaMikdosh on a permanent basis? How could he if the Temple wasn't even built in his day? The Mishkan? Perhaps, but there wouldn't have been much space to do much if he had to share his living quarters with the officiating kohanim and the Temple service.

The implication is that by "house," Dovid didn't necessarily mean a physical structure. He meant what the concept of house embodies, which is basically a safe enclosure from the outside world. That's what a house means to most people, a calm place of refuge from the dangers of the outside world, real or imagined.

But, even though Dovid had reason to be concerned about his security, that's not what bothered him. He wasn't pining for a physical fortress, which he could have built, but a spiritual fortress, one that would protect him from all the forces of the world distracting him away from his true desire, to think only about God and to work on becoming increasingly closer to Him every moment he could.

And, he didn't mean in just one place. He knew he was king, and he knew as king he had national responsibilities and expectations. He knew that he had enemies, which also ended up including his own son. He had spent so much time fleeing the army of Shaul, his own king, and it forced his focus away from God in order to deal with his situation.

He also knew that none of it was accidental, but completely a function of Hashgochah Pratis -- Divine Providence. People carried out what they did, but it was always by Divine design. He understood that no one could plan or do anything against him unless God sanctioned it.

So many people in life start off with admirable spiritual goals. But then life gets in the way, and it forces them to divide their attention between what they want to

think about and what they'd prefer not to have to think about. For 63 years, Ya'akov Avinu barely ever stepped outside the Bais Midrash until Divine Providence decided otherwise, and he spent the next few decades distracted by this issue or that one.

So at first, people try to steal time away from their life responsibilities to continue pursuing their spiritual goals, having limited or no success. Then, as time goes on, some people get so worn out by life that they put their spiritual dreams on the back burner, where they boil out over the years and, eventually, disappear altogether.

That's what Dovid HaMelech was telling God. Despite all you have put me through, despite all that I have had to deal with, my desire to be close to you has not waned at all. Though life has done its best to wear me down and make me like everyone else, I refuse to go down. My center still remains You, and being as close to you as I can be...even if it takes years before I can.

This is what it means to "Choose life that you may live" at the end of the first of this week's parshios. It means stay focused on the real goal of life, and if you do, you will be able to live in the full sense of the word even before you reach it. God wants our hearts, and the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. It's nice when physical life can align with spiritual life, but even when they don't, they do if a person's heart is pointing in the right spiritual direction...at God.

We're going to have plenty of time to think about it come this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, b"H. Make the best of the opportunity and do that. Make sure that when you step into Shemonah Esrai you're not actually stepping out of it by allowing yourself to walk a path that doesn't lead to God. © 2026 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

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Hakhel

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather (*hakhel*) the people – the men, women, children, and the strangers in your midst, in order that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your G-d" (*Devarim* 31:12). This refers to the mitzva of *Hakhel*, which takes place on Sukkot at the conclusion of the *Shemita* year. The Torah specifies the categories of people who are obligated to attend. Nevertheless, the verse's inclusion of women may be limited, as we shall see.

Our initial assumption would be that women are not obligated in *Hakhel*. Since it takes place once every seven years, it seems to be a positive time-bound commandment (from which women are exempt). Yet the Mishnah tells us that *Hakhel* is an exception to the rule. There is another reason why women would might still be exempt. According to many opinions, the obligation of attending *Hakhel* is connected to the obligation to travel to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals. Only property owners are obligated to do so. Someone who

does not own land is exempt from both the pilgrimage and *Hakhel*. Thus, it is possible that the verse's inclusion of women in *Hakhel* is limited to the small minority of women who own land.

There is a disagreement about who is included in the category of children (*taf*) for this purpose. Some say that even the smallest children, namely nursing babies, must be brought to *Hakhel*. Others maintain that only children of educable age must be brought. According to this second opinion, who is watching over the little ones when all the parents are gathered in the *Beit HaMikdash*? If most women are exempt because they do not own land, this problem is solved. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the whole nation gathers to hear and study the word of G-d, while leaving all the little children to run wild (or under the supervision of non-Jews, or impure Jews who are forbidden from entering the Temple. This is further support for the possibility that most women stayed at home for *Hakhel*.
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RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Hashem will not want to forgive that man, for then His wrath and vengeance will burn against that man and all the curses shall descend on him..." (Devarim 29:19) Our Parsha opens with Moshe telling the Jews that on that day, every single one of them was joining a binding covenant with Hashem. Not only was this covenant with the people there, but with all future generations as well. The ancestors were entering this treaty on behalf of their descendants, as the Jews committed to being the Chosen People.

Every Jewish person, from that moment, until the end of time, has been pledged to serve Hashem, love Hashem, and not worship any other gods or powers. Then the Torah says something scary. When someone hears of this covenant, and chooses to exclude himself, he is not excused from it. On the contrary, one who laughs it off, saying, "I will follow my own truth; I will act as my intellect sees fit," will bear the wrath of an angry G-d, Who will eradicate that person and wipe his soul off the map.

While this should be terrifying, the person who so disregards the will of Hashem Who created the world and gives him life, is generally the last to realize his own folly. Instead, he ridicules those who follow the Torah, and considers himself enlightened, though drowning in the darkness of his foolishness.

But we are on the cusp of Rosh HaShana, the day of judgment, and this verse teaches us a much different lesson as well. The Torah tells us Hashem will not wish to forgive one who so callously disregards His commands, thinking he is wiser than the Master of the Universe. Such a person will be wiped out and erased from history.

However, short of this behavior, one does not

lose Hashem's favor. One who sins but feels bad about his failures; who tries to avoid them even if he falters anyway, is still someone that Hashem WANTS to forgive! What an empowering message as we approach the holy days of judgment.

A person could waste his life, succumbing to temptation on a daily basis, but if he's trying to serve Hashem - even if he's not succeeding in defeating his Yetzer Hara - as long as he feels bad about it and wishes to improve, Hashem wants to hold him close.

One of the most powerful tools of the Satan is convincing us that we are not worthy of Hashem's love. He tries to instill hopelessness and despair in us. "How could Hashem ever love a sinner like me?" But this isn't the case. The Baal Shem Tov is quoted as saying, "If only I could love the greatest tzaddik like Hashem loves the greatest sinner."

We are Hashem's chosen people, and as long as we are willing to be the chosen ones of Hashem, by battling our inclinations and striving to do what He wants us to do and become who He wants us to become, then we will never be cast away by Him, nor forgotten. Instead, He wishes to help us pick up the pieces and come back to Him whole.

As the King made his rounds through the prison, he spent a few moments listening to the stories of his prisoners. "I am innocent," explained one. "It was mistaken identity."

"My neighbor framed me," said another. "He wished to steal my property so he lied to the magistrate about me." A third called out "It was not my fault! I was orphaned at a young age and had to take to a life of crime. I am a victim of circumstance."

One by one the men clamored at their cells to be heard, for the opportunity to plead their cases. Only one man remained silent, and it struck the King. "What is your story?" he asked the solemn man. "Sire," he replied, "I am guilty as charged and am ready to serve my time."

"Release him!" said the ruler. "He obviously has no business in here with all these innocent men." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YAAKOV WOLBE

Bais Hamussar

"Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I've done it thousands of times." -- Mark Twain Is it easy to change behavior? Is it easy to repent? In Parshas Nitzavim we see conflicting stances on this matter. In one verse (30:2), repentance is described in a similar way to martyrdom: "And you shall return (repent) to Hashem your God, and you shall hearken to his voice as all that I command you today, you and your sons, with all your hearts and with all your soul." Reb Chaim Volozhiner notes the overlapping word usage with the verse in Shema, "And you shall love Hashem your God... with all your soul", which Chazal explain to mean that we must

even forfeit our lives for the love of our Creator. By utilizing the same verbiage for repentance, the verse is hinting that changing behavior and adopting a new way of life is akin to the ultimate self-sacrifice. Walking away from ingrained character and behavior demands similar courage, resolve and intestinal fortitude as allowing oneself to die for God. Apparently, repentance is pretty hard. That sentiment is likely shared by those who are intimidated by the myriad components and draconian conditions necessary for complete repentance of Rambam's "Laws of Repentance" and Rabbeinu Yonah's "Gates of Repentance."

Contrast that with a string of verses (30:11-14) later on in the chapter, describing an inordinately easy mitzvah: "This mitzvah that I command you today -- it is not hidden from you, nor is it distant. It is not in the Heavens that you may say, 'who will ascend to Heaven, and take it for us, and teach it to us, so that we may do it'. Nor is it across the sea that we may say, 'who will cross the sea for us, and take it for us, and teach it to us, so that we may do it'. Rather, the matter is exceedingly close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it." While the verses themselves do not explicitly identify which mitzvah is being referenced, the great commentaries do. Rashi explains that it refers to the mitzvah of Torah.

Ramban disagrees and interprets the verse to be referring to the mitzvah of repentance. How can we understand labeling repentance as being so easy -- "In your mouth and in your heart"? Also, how can it simultaneously be exceedingly difficult? Another point to ponder is the characterization (30:6) of repentance as "circumcision of the heart." What is intended by this odd classification?

What is the essence of repentance? There is a misconception that repentance is exclusively sin-centric: To repent you must act in opposition to the sin. My grandfather, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe zt"l, explained that this was precisely the miscalculation of the ma'apilim (Bamidbar 14:44), the Jews that defiantly attempted to ascend to Israel after the Almighty decreed that the nation will languish in the wilderness for 40 years due to the sin of the Spies, only to be slaughtered by Amalek. Their decision was not without reason. They assessed that the core of the sin of the Spies was resistance to enter the Land of Israel and even proposing to return to Egypt (14:4), and therefore attempting to enter Israel in disregard of the entailed dangers can be the only remedy. But they were mistaken. Repentance, Teshuva, means to return to the Almighty and to His Will. At that time His Will mandated that they remain in the wilderness for 40

years, and thus accepting that was the correct avenue to repentance. My grandfather would also invoke this notion with regard to the repentance of Rosh Hashana. The days of Rosh Hashana make up the first two of the "Ten Days of Repentance" yet unlike Yom Kippur, there is nary a mention of sin. At its root, repentance is returning to your Creator. On Rosh Hashana that is manifest by us coronating Him as King of the world, and on Yom Kippur the same objective is approached from a different angle by addressing sin.

Given that repentance is about man achieving closeness to his Creator, the process of repentance is bridging the gap between man and the Almighty, between the created and the Creator. Hence, the degree of difficulty in achieving it is contingent upon the distance between the two. In essence, the question of, "Is repentance easy or hard?" is precisely the same question as, "Is man close or distant from the Almighty?"

The answer to the latter question hinges upon which of the disparate elements of man is being referenced. The "body" of man, the physicality, the ephemeral -- has no commonality with the Almighty. However, our Neshama (Soul) is very similar to its Creator. In one teaching in the Talmud (Brachos 10a), five parallels between the Almighty and the Neshama of man are enumerated; another (Niddah 30b) plainly equates the purity of the two. As such, we indeed have an element of our being that is already extremely close to the Almighty and thus repentance for it is natural and seamless.

With this understanding, the conflicting messages about the difficulty of repentance can be reconciled. It is true that repentance is really difficult. By default we identify as an ephemeral body, and in that state repentance is unachievable. To repent we must shed ourselves clean of that attitude and identity. That is a painful process, akin to martyrdom. However, once we identify as our true and lasting element of self, our Neshama, we are already in close proximity to our Creator, and have achieved repentance. This process is illustrated by the circumcision of the heart.

We already have everything that is needed to be close to the Almighty, it is just concealed. All we must do to reach our goal is to peel away the inhibiting factors, and reveal our true self that was all ready to go, lying dormant and awaiting liberation. This is a helpful and heartening thought to take with us during the season of repentance. It is very difficult to repent. But it is comforting to know that all we are really doing is clearing out the path for our true self to shine. It may be back-breaking labor to dig out buried treasure, but it's made easier knowing that the treasure is there, and it is complete, and once it is unearthed it's yours. © 2017 Rabbi Y. Wolbe & aishdas.org

