

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In majestic language, Moses breaks into song, investing his final testament to the Israelites with all the power and passion at his command. He begins dramatically but gently, calling heaven and earth to witness what he is about to say, sounding ironically very much like "The quality of mercy is not strained", Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*.

"Listen, you heavens, and I will speak; / Hear, you earth, the words of my mouth. / Let my teaching fall like rain / and my words descend like dew, / like showers on new grass, / like abundant rain on tender plants." (Deut. 32:1-2)

But this is a mere prelude to the core message Moses wants to convey. It is the idea known as *tziduk ha-din*, vindicating God's justice. The way Moses puts it is this: "He is the Rock, His works are perfect, / And all His ways are just. / A faithful God who does no wrong, / Upright and just is He." (Deut. 32:4)

This is a doctrine fundamental to Judaism and its understanding of evil and suffering in the world -- a difficult but necessary doctrine. God is just. Why then do bad things happen?

"Is He corrupt? No -- the defect is in His children, / a crooked and perverse generation." (Deut. 32:5)

God requites good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us it is because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but ourselves.

Moving into the prophetic mode, Moses foresees what he has already predicted, even before they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy he has been warning of the danger that in their land, once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens they will bring disaster on themselves:

This issue of *Toras Aish* is dedicated
in loving memory of my dear parents
Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakauhen
Paul Kahn
and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehaushua
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt
by Fernand Kahn

"Jeshurun grew fat and kicked -- / You became fat, thick, gross -- / They abandoned the God who made them / and scorned the Rock their Savior... / You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; / And forgot the God who gave you birth." (Deut. 32: 15-18)

This, the first use of the word *Yeshurun* in the Torah -- from the root *Yashar*, upright -- is deliberately ironic. Israel once knew what it was to be upright, but it will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a ravaging wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. It is a stark and terrifying message.

Yet Moses is here bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been there from the beginning. God, creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally good: the word that echoes seven times in the first chapter of Genesis. It is humans, granted freewill as God's image and likeness, who introduce evil into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses' insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The defect is in us, His children.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation. If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people? This is the question asked not by skeptics, doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham's plea, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" We hear it in Moses' challenge, "Why have you done evil to this people?" It sounds again in Jeremiah: "Lord, you are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jer. 12:1).

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the *kinot*, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and echoes still when we recall the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the one to which God did not give an answer. (Berakhot 7a) The simplest, deepest

interpretation is given in Psalm 92, "The song of the Sabbath day." Though "the wicked spring up like grass," they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast, "flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon." Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, the righteous like a tree. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King said in the spirit of the Psalm: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. They are three. The first is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. Homo hominis lupus est, "Man is wolf to man". As Thucydides said in the name of the Athenians: "The strong do as they want, the weak suffer what they must." History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in my new book *Not In God's Name*, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the sages, who called it *shtei reshuyot*, "two powers or domains" (Berakhot 33b), were right to reject it utterly.

The third, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the world to come, in life after death. Yet though this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanakh is on this world, and life before death. For it is here that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanakh almost never takes this option. God does not say to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice so characteristic of Judaism would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect through history of leading us to say: if bad things

have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. It was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like Jacob after his encounter with the angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.

Out of such humility, a momentous strength is born. *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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The Lord remembered Sarah as he had promised... Sarah conceived and bore a son..." (Genesis 21:1,2) Rosh Hashanah always portends new beginnings and fresh opportunities: "This day the world was born," or at least the world beckons with possibilities of rebirth and renewal.

Hence I would have thought that Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we "enthroned" G-d as Lord of the Universe - and not Shmini Atzeret-Simhat Torah - would be the festival on which we should begin the new Torah reading cycle of the year, the most apt occasion for reopening our Book of Books with "In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth." And to do so would not even be much of a stretch; after all, we are certainly on target, having reached the last chapters of the final Book of Deuteronomy during our regular Shabbat readings at this time of year.

So why have our Talmudic Sages ordained that we read of Isaac's birth and sacrificial binding on the two days of Rosh Hashanah? However, on second thought, I truly believe I understand the deep wisdom of our Sages. Yes, Rosh Hashanah is probably the most universally oriented of all of our festivals, and yes, the Jews of Israel have certainly returned to the global family of nation-states after a hiatus of close to 2,000 years, taking center stage on the world arena. Nevertheless, the "world" which initially and most compellingly consumes most of our day-to-day thoughts and activities is the more personal world of our individual families.

And perhaps on an even deeper level, the building blocks of every national society are the individual families within the country's borders; the Nation of Israel emerged from the family of Abraham! Moreover, it is the family that is the necessary medium of communicating a specific national narrative from generation to generation. G-d elected Abraham as the first Hebrew because he was commanding his children and his household after him to observe [be responsible for] the path of the Lord, to do acts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Indeed, virtually all of our familial feasts and celebrations are dedicated to nurturing and transmitting our national narrative, values and lifestyle to our children and grandchildren.

From this perspective, since the road to new beginnings must be paved by acts of repentance - Rosh Hashanah ushers in our 10 Days of Repentance - we must concentrate our repentance and our resolutions for change upon our sins against family, spouse and children, rather than our sins against G-d. It is easier, and less personally threatening, to objectively assess our personal standing before the Unseen Seer of the Universe than before the parents, spouses and children with whom we have personal dealings every single day.

Permit me three stories:

1. The Talmud (BT Rosh Hashanah 16) provocatively suggests that the various and numerous sounds of the shofar call to repentance are meant to confound Satan. Who is Satan? Another passage of the Talmud (BT Gittin 52) explains: "A certain couple lived in one dwelling together with Satan; every Friday night they would argue with each other. R. Meir entered the household and lived there for three consecutive Friday evenings until he made peace between them.

He heard Satan cry out, 'Woe unto me; I have been forced out of the house because of R. Meir...' Satan is family discord.

2. The Talmud further records (BT Brachot 8) the custom of one community that the morning after the wedding night, a friend of the groom would ask him, "Matza or Motzi?" "What kind of wife have you found? Which verse applies to you? Is it 'one who has found [matza] a wife has found only good' (Proverbs 18:22), or is it 'I find [motzi] that more bitter than death is the woman' (Ecclesiastes 7:26)." What kind of question is this? It decries all prohibitions against slander. How dare the friend ask, and the groom answer, concerning the wife he has just married? I would suggest that the friend is asking the groom about the groom, not about his bride. Now that the wedding is over and your life together has just begun, who do you think about first when you arise in the morning? Is it "one who has found [matza] a wife," your wife whom you are concerned about first, then you have "found only good"; but if it is "I find [motzi]," yourself that you think about first, then your life will be more bitter than death..."

3. When I was a young rabbi in Manhattan with a growing family, I got into a cab. During my conversation with the driver, he told me he had been married to the same woman for 35 years, had four professional children and had never been schooled beyond the eighth grade. "To what do you owe your incredible success?" I asked. He explained: "As long as the children lived in the house, all of us had to be around the dinner table at 7 p.m., without radio, television or newspaper. Everyone had to tell the best moment of the day, and the worst moment of the day. That's how I brought the family together, and was able to give over how important I think education is."

I burst into tears; that taxi driver who never went past elementary school was much wiser than I... © 2015

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RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

Moshe's long oration to the people of Israel enters its final phase in the parsha of Haazinu. Moshe speaks to his generation about to embark on the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel – and he speaks to all the generations of the Jewish people, thousands of years later.

The song of Haazinu represents the full pattern and destiny of Jewish history. And as the two opinions of Midrash and Talmud quoted by Rashi make abundantly clear, the message involved is not localized to the Jewish people alone, but it has universal consequences as well.

Anyone familiar with the flow of general human history will immediately recognize that the Jews are disproportionate in their effect upon that history. The world's story is dependent largely on the story of the Jews. Oppressors of Jews continually arise but they are eventually defeated, but only after having caused tremendous damage to the Jews, to their own nations and to the world at large.

The Jews survive, as is promised in the prophecy and song of Haazinu, but in the process of rebuilding Jewish life, new enemies reappear. No one learns anything from history and events, not the Jews nor their enemies - and thus the pattern suggested in the parsha continues almost eternally. And in essence that is the substance of the Torah's warnings against worshipping strange gods. These strange gods have already proven themselves false earlier in history. Yet, they are still worshipped albeit in a "new" nomenclature and garb.

The main question in Jewish history, the one that faces us today, beleaguered and isolated as we feel we are, is how to break this cycle. In the song of Haazinu, Moshe suggests that only a full-hearted return to the values and traditions of the covenant between God and Israel can end this vicious cycle of hate and destruction.

The rebellion of Jews against God's covenant brings with it the rebellion against decency and common sense that reflects itself in the continuance of persecution from the rest of the world. Moshe makes that abundantly clear in his words in the parsha. The truth of the matter is that even though this song of Haazinu is the one that Moshe commands the Jewish people to commit to memory and to regard as the eternal witness of Jewish history, the Jews have never quite believed Moshe's admonition.

And we in our time stumble through the fog of current events groping for an innovative way out of our problems. Moshe calls the people of Israel "children who have lost my trust." This is because of the terrible tendency to repeat past errors and to constantly search for the Jewish penchant to adopt the latest cultural and societal fads. Trust is built on wisdom and tenacity. The

song of Haazinu provides us with an ample supply of both of these necessary traits that alone will guarantee our future survival and success. © 2011 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Moshe came, and spoke all the words of this song in the ears of the nation; he and Hoshea bin Nun." (Devarim 32:44) In Parshas Vayeilech, Hashem told Moshe that "this song," Haazinu, had to be transmitted to the Jewish People in a very thorough way. Moshe had to do three things: He had to write it down, then he had to teach it to them, so they understood what was in it, and finally, he had to recite it in their ears, meaning they had to be able to read it properly.

This week, though, we find a seemingly extra step. Whereas before (Dev. 31:30) it says that Moshe recited the words of Haazinu in the ears of the people, here the Torah stresses that Moshe spoke "all the words" of the song to the people. What is added in this mention?

Perhaps, Moshe realized that in his transmission of the song of Haazinu, there was an inherent flaw. Viewing the Torah as a song might enable them to know it well, even by heart. It might enable them to recite it properly with the correct pronunciation and meaning. But they might not realize that it was much more than a pretty piece of poetry.

The Torah is not simply something beautiful and moving; something to be appreciated and enjoyed. Rather, the words of the Torah are concrete and imperative. They are meant to be taken seriously, studied, and upheld. Moshe now taught them that the words and topics in the song are their marching orders for life, and one cannot choose to listen only to the ones he enjoys or which sound good to him. Therefore, he came back and pointed out that the song had "devarim," strong words and concepts, and made sure everyone heard that part.

More than this, his disciple Hoshea, the next leader, who was appointed at this time to replace Moshe, did the same thing. This was to underscore to the future generations of Jews that the words of Haazinu, requiring us to fulfill the whole Torah, were not just Moshe's approach to Judaism. His way was not just his own view of how to live, which would open the door for other leaders to change Jewish practice with their opinions. Rather, Hoshea repeated the message of Moshe that Torah is timeless and unchanging, and it is our responsibility, as well as opportunity, to follow it. If we don't, the results will be devastating.

Over the course of the year, people may have been lax in their observance of the mitzvos. They may

have treated them as "suggested practices," or nice things to do. As we approach Yom Kippur, we are urged to return to Hashem, and back to the time when Moshe and Yehoshua taught us the framework of life, and how crucial it is to our existence.

They took great pains to ensure we not only knew all that the Torah contained and expected from us, but that we understood it was the non-negotiable basis of our being and eternal survival. Now we have a chance to turn things around, hear the song, and truly pay attention to its lyrics.

A young woman from Canada abandoned her Jewish roots and traditions, married a non-Jew, and moved to Switzerland. Eventually, her marriage soured and the couple split. This was at the beginning of Elul. Immediately after Yom Kippur, the woman died. The rabbis in Switzerland refused to bury her in the Jewish cemetery, as she had lived for so long as a non-Jew in all respects. Distraught, her father called Rebbetzin Elyashiv, asking for her husband's advice.

R' Elyashiv asked what she did on that final Yom Kippur. The father made inquiries in the community and found out that she had attended a shul for half an hour.

R' Elyashiv then ruled that she could be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The fact that she was in shul on Yom Kippur proved her neshama was yet connected to the Jewish nation, and identified with the yearning for teshuva which Yom Kippur represents. © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Blessings of the Land

Moshe called upon the Heavens and the Earth to be witnesses to the covenant between Hashem and the B'nei Yisrael. This began the song that marks the majority of Parashat Ha'azinu, a song which the B'nei Yisrael were told to memorize and remember through all their generations. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Sages compared the opening words of our parasha, "Incline your ear, O heaven, I would speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth," to the words of Yeshayahu, "Hear O heaven and incline your ear O earth." Moshe was closer to the heavens, so he commanded the heavens to incline its ear, whereas Yeshayahu was not of that level and commanded the earth to incline its ear and the heavens to hear.

Moshe used the song of Ha'azinu to explain Hashem's plan for the sons of Ya'akov, the B'nei Yisrael: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of man, He set the borders of the peoples according to the numbers of the Children of Israel. For Hashem's portion is His people; Ya'akov is the measure of His inheritance. He discovered him in a desert land, in desolation, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He granted him discernment, He preserved him like the pupil of His eye. He was like an eagle arousing its nest, hovering over its

young, spreading its wings and taking them, carrying them on its pinions. Hashem alone guided them, and no other power was with them. He would make him ride on the heights of the Land, and have him eat the ripe fruits of the fields; He would suckle him with honey from a stone, and oil from a flinty rock; Butter of cattle and milk of sheep with fat of lambs, rams born in Bashan and he-goats, with wheat as fat as kidneys; and you would drink blood of grapes like delicious wine."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term, "Elyon, Most High," is a reference to the early understanding by the nations of the world, claiming that Hashem was only the god that appeared to be the strongest but not the One and Only Being. Only Israel understood that their Supreme Being was singular. It was Hashem Who divided the lands of the world and dispersed them among the different nations. HaRav Hirsch states that, "The difference between lands and the unique characteristics of each one of them influenced the physical and intellectual traits, language, occupation, manners, and character of the inhabitants of these lands." This caused the people of the world to become diverse and separated. This also demonstrated that the land helped to create the characteristics of its inhabitants. The Land of Israel was created with the ability to not only affect its inhabitants but also to react to whether its inhabitants fulfilled the Laws of Hashem. The Torah indicates that the Land of Israel controlled the rain and the famine that could be used to bless or curse the crops of its inhabitants.

One of the more unusual statements comes at the end of the first sentence when it says, "He set the borders of the peoples according to the numbers of the Children of Israel." In the beginning, the B'nei Yisrael were not counted until most of the nations had already been given their land. When Avraham was promised the Land, he was promised it as an individual and later as a family, but not yet as a nation. The B'nei Yisrael were not considered a nation until they had become slaves in Egypt and then freed by Hashem. Before that time, they were not known as an "Am, Nation." The Torah states: "He discovered him in a desert land," which is described as a land "where a person will get no support from the forces of nature and no help from his fellow man." The desert was a necessary location because Hashem wished that man not base his internal values only by how it can be converted into external possessions or pleasure. In the desert, man was not distracted by possessions, power, or personal advancement. The B'nei Yisrael grew in the desert to seek Hashem's Will. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that, in Egypt, Par'oh was the first to call the B'nei Yisrael "Am," but they were not called "Am Hashem, a nation of Hashem" until their mutual experience in the desert.

When the Torah says, "Hashem alone guided them, and no other power was with them," it means that Hashem alone took the B'nei Yisrael out of Egypt and led

them through the desert, according to the Rashbam. Ibn Ezra explains that not even the B'nei Yisrael participated in guiding themselves through the desert; it was Hashem's effort completely. Then, "Hashem alone guided them, and no other power was with them. He would make him ride on the heights of the Land, and have him eat the ripe fruits of the fields." The Rashbam explains that Israel is considered to be the highest land in the area. This is referring to the area around Jerusalem. In fact, what appears to be mountains on both sides of the Kinneret and the Dead Sea are really at sea level, as both the Kinneret and the Dead Sea are way below sea level. The Rashbam adds to this understanding that the delicious gifts of the land came from the dates and olives that grow on the heights of the land.

The Torah continues with the blessings of the land, the "butter of cattle and milk of sheep with fat of lambs, rams born in Bashan and he-goats, with wheat as fat as kidneys; and you would drink blood of grapes like delicious wine." We have been blessed to see these gifts firsthand. Yet for the years of exile, the land lay fallow as those gifts were not meant for anyone other than the rightful inheritors of the land. The words here are an indication of the exaggerated blessings that would be the reward of the righteous: corn so thick that it resembled the lobes of the kidneys, the rich, newly-fermented wine, and the produce from a land that was extraordinarily fertile.

All of this paragraph precedes the destruction that would come when the people would become accustomed to the wonderful gifts of Hashem and quickly forget the covenant that granted them these gifts. They would cease to acknowledge that Hashem's gifts were predicated on their part of the covenant. This is a common thread throughout the Book of Judges: the people are blessed, they become complacent and stray from the covenant, then the people strove to do teshuvah, and Hashem blessed them once again with rain and good crops.

We have returned to Israel, and we must understand that we are again eligible to receive the gifts that Hashem has promised in His land. But these blessings can only come if we remember our portion of the covenant and honor Hashem's Torah. May we strive to accomplish that observance. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

The famous early 20th century German-born American financier Otto Kahn, it is told, was once walking in New York with his friend, the humorist Marshall P. Wilder. They must have made a strange pair, the poised, dapper Mr. Kahn and the bent-over Mr. Wilder, who suffered from a spinal deformity.

As they passed a shul on Fifth Avenue, Kahn, whose ancestry was Jewish but who had received no

Jewish upbringing from his parents, turned to Wilder and said, "You know, I used to be a Jew."

"Really?" said Wilder, straining his neck to look up at his companion. "And I used to be a hunchback."

The story is in my head because Yom Kippur will soon be ushered in with Kol Nidrei.

Kol Nidrei's solemnity and power are known well to every Jew who has ever attended shul on the eve of the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. It is a cold soul that doesn't send a shudder through a body when Kol Nidrei is intoned in its ancient, evocative melody. And yet the words of the prayer -- "declaration" would be more accurate -- do not overtly speak to the gravity of the day, the last of Days of Repentance.

They speak instead to the annulment of nedarim, vows, specifically (according to prevailing Ashkenazi custom) to undermining vows we may inadvertently make in the coming year.

Nedarim, the Torah teaches, have deep power; they truly bind those who utter them. And so, we rightly take pains to avoid not only solemn vows but any declarative statements of intent that could be construed as vows. So, the fact that Yom Kippur would be introduced by a nod to the gravity of neder-making isn't entirely surprising. But the poignant mournfulness of the moment is harder to understand.

It has been speculated that the somber mood of Kol Nidrei may be a legacy of distant places and times, in which Jews were coerced by social or economic pressures, or worse, to declare affiliations with another religion. The text, in that theory, took on the cast of an anguished renunciation of any such declarations born of duress.

Most of us today face no such pressures. To be sure, missionaries of various types seek to exploit the ignorance of some Jews about their religious heritage. But few if any Jews today feel any compulsion to shed their Jewish identities to live and work in peace.

Still, there are other ways to be unfaithful to one's essence. Coercion comes in many colors.

We are all compelled, or at least strongly influenced, by any of a number of factors extrinsic to who we really are. We make pacts -- unspoken, perhaps, but not unimportant -- with an assortment of coercers: self-centeredness, jealousy, anger, desire, laziness...

Such weaknesses, though, are with us but not of us. The Amora Rav Alexandri, the Gemara teaches (Berachos, 17a), would recite a short prayer in which, addressing God, he said: "Master of the universe, it is revealed and known to You that our will is to do Your will, and what is it that prevents us? The 'leaven in the loaf' [i.e. the inclination toward evil]..." What he was saying is that, stripped of the rust and debris we so easily attract, sanded down to our essences, we want to do, and be, only good.

Might Kol Nidrei carry that message no less? Could its declared disassociation from vows reflect a

renunciation of the "vows," the unfortunate connections, we too often take upon ourselves? If so, it would be no wonder that the recitation moves us so.

Or that it introduces Yom Kippur.

When the Beis Hamikdash, the central Holy Temple, in Jerusalem stood, Yom Kippur saw the ritual of the "two goats." The Cohen Gadol, or High Priest, would place a random-picked lot on the head of each of two goats; one read "to God" and the other "to Azazel" - according to Rashi, the name of a mountain with a steep cliff in a barren desert.

As the Torah prescribes, the first goat was sacrificed, with all the care to details, on the Temple's altar; the second was taken through the desert to the cliff and unceremoniously cast off.

The Torah refers to "sins and iniquities" being "put upon the head" of the Azazel goat before its dispatch, and "sent away." The deepest meanings of the ritual, like those of all rituals in the end, are beyond human ken. But, on a simple level, we might spy a symbolism here, a reflection of the fact that our sins are, in the end, foreign to our essences, extrinsic entities, things to be "sent away," banished by our sincere repentance.

In 1934, when Otto Kahn died, Time Magazine reported that the magnate, who had been deeply dismayed at the ascension of Hitler, had, despite his secularist life, declared: "I was born a Jew, I am a Jew, and I shall die a Jew."

Mr. Kahn may never have attended any synagogue for Kol Nidrei. But perhaps a seed planted by a hunchbacked humorist, and nourished with the bitter waters of Nazism, helped him connect to something of the declaration's deeper meaning. ©2026 Rabbi A. Shafran & torah.org

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Haziv Lach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

No, this title is not the beginning of a liturgical poem recited on Shabbat Shuvah (the Shabbat before Yom Kippur). In fact, *Haziv Lach* is an acronym that tells us where to start each *aliyah* of Parshat Ha'azinu.

The *Kohen aliyah* starts from the letter *Heh* of the word "*ha'azinu*" and is 6 verses. The *Levi aliyah* starts from the *Zayin* of "*zechor*" and is six verses. The third *aliyah* starts with the *Yud* of "*yarkivehu*" and is five verses. The next *aliyah* starts with the *Vav* of "*va-yar*" and is ten verses. The fifth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Lamed* of the word "*lu*" and is 11 verses. The sixth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Kaf* of "*ki esa*" and is four verses, which takes us to the end of the poem. The seventh and final *aliyah* is nine verses and ends the *parsha*.

This division is codified in *Shulchan Aruch* 428:5. (There is an alternate division of Ha'azinu, which still follows the acronym of *Haziv Lach*.) Thus, we cannot

readily add *aliyot* or divide the *parsha* differently. The most we can do is split the final *aliyah*.

The Rambam states that the reason to divide the *parsha* according to *Haziv Lakh* is to rebuke the people so that they will repent (*Hilchot Tefillah* 13:5). It's not clear what he means, since all of Ha'azinu is about rebuke. Some explain that what the Rambam has in mind is the rule that we follow the rest of the year, namely to avoid beginning or ending an *aliyah* with words of rebuke. The custom of *Haziv Lakh* does exactly what we usually avoid! The Rambam is justifying the custom by saying that it may bring about repentance on Shabbat Shuvah, which is focused on repenting. Alternatively, perhaps it is thinking about the acronym of *Haziv Lach* that can help bring about repentance. For the phrase itself means "Glory (*ziv*) is yours (*lakh*)," a reminder that we have great potential to repent.

If this second reason is correct, perhaps it is necessary to follow the division only on Shabbat Shuvah itself (when we read the entire *parsha* and the entire acronym is spelled out), but not at the shorter Torah readings beforehand (on Monday, Thursday, and the previous Shabbat Mincha). This is a subject of disagreement among the *poskim*. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Last week I received an incredible kindness from a close friend – someone I have known for over thirty years. This gift means so much to me, and I am beginning this week's column by encouraging all of my readers to give others this very same gift. What was the gift?

A couple of years ago I did something that inadvertently hurt someone and it was so painful to him that he cut off all contact with me and let me know that any further communication from me would be unwelcome. I was devastated. For months afterward I had this sick, sinking feeling in my stomach whenever I thought of him and the events that had transpired. Over time the sharpness of the pain lessened somewhat and eventually it settled into a dull ache.

Last week, out of the blue, he called me. I was shocked to see his name on my phone as he had made his wishes very clear to me – both on the phone and in writing. We spoke and he told me that his wife had been urging him to get past this issue and she insisted that he call me to clear the air. We had a meaningful conversation, and it got a little emotional – in a good way. In the end he offered forgiveness and a willingness to move forward and restore our brotherhood. I felt as if a great weight had been removed from my chest.

This kindness on his part restored an emotional equilibrium for me. It also served as great lesson as to the power of forgiveness and how we can change the lives of others with this simple act (please note that I

didn't say "easy" act). I am therefore encouraging everyone reading this column to consider who in your life you can grant this gift to and what steps you could take to make it happen.

In many ways it will be tremendously beneficial to your life as well – I guarantee it. There is also no more appropriate time of year to do this as Yom Kippur is all about forgiveness.

Yom Kippur begins next Sunday evening, September 20th. This upcoming Shabbat, the one that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called "Shabbat Shuva – Shabbat of Returning." The concept of "returning" may seem a little odd; to where are we "returning"?

As mentioned last week, Rosh Hashanah begins the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah – commonly translated as the Ten Day of Repentance. In actuality, the word teshuvah means "return," but it is often mistranslated as "repentance." These Ten Days of Returning begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, often referred to as the holiest day of the year.

This is a very unique concept and an absolute kindness and gift from the Almighty. Teshuvah actually offers mankind the one thing no one really believes is possible to achieve: The ability to change the past.

Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher and codifier of Jewish law, rules that it is a mitzvah – a positive commandment – to repent. In other words, the Almighty Himself is asking us to return to Him. As we shall soon see, there is a very powerful message here, one that we must try to internalize. Indeed, the very success of accomplishing the essence of Yom Kippur can only be achieved by understanding this concept.

Yom Kippur is the anniversary of the day Moses brought the second set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai (he had shattered the first set after seeing the nation of Israel sinning with the Golden Calf). This second set of tablets signified that the Almighty forgave the Jewish people for the transgression of the Golden Calf. This day was thus decreed to be a day of forgiveness for our mistakes.

However, this refers to transgressions against the Almighty. Transgressions against our fellow man require us to correct our mistakes and seek forgiveness. If one took from another person, it is not enough to experience regret and ask the Almighty for forgiveness; first, one must return what was taken and ask for forgiveness from the person, after which one can then ask the Almighty for forgiveness. God does not forgive a person for sins committed against another person unless the injured party offers forgiveness first.

The actual process of teshuvah is made up of four parts. 1) Regret: We must recognize what we have done wrong and regret it. 2) Cessation: We must stop doing the transgression. 3) Confession and Restitution: We must verbally confess and ask the Almighty to forgive

us. We must correct whatever damage we can, including asking forgiveness from those whom we have hurt – and making restitution, if due. 4) Resolution: We must accept upon ourselves not to do it again in the future.

A key component of the liturgy of The Ten Days of Repentance (Returning) and Yom Kippur is known as the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy. The ancient source of this prayer is rather astonishing: The Almighty Himself taught it to Moses for him to teach it to the Jewish people as a way to seek forgiveness.

And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, “Hashem, Hashem, omnipotent, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin [...]” (Exodus 34:6-8).

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) states, “There is a covenant (between God and His creations) that a prayer that contains the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy will never go completely unanswered.”

Even more remarkably, the very same passage in the Talmud describes the scene that unfolded between God and Moses: “Rabbi Yochanan said ‘had it not been an explicit verse in the Torah it would be impossible to even utter’ – the verse is coming to teach us that the Almighty wrapped Himself in a tallit (prayer shawl) like a shliach tzibbur (a cantor who leads the congregation in prayer) and demonstrated to Moses the order of the prayer. Hashem then told Moses; ‘Any time that the Jewish people sin they should recite this prayer and I will forgive them.’”

Obviously, the Talmud is telling us that it is very difficult to conceive of the Almighty dressing up and giving a demonstration of how to seek forgiveness from Him. Yet that is exactly what happened. So we are left wondering what exactly was the point of God dressing up and acting it out for Moses? Why would Moses be in need of a visual demonstration? What message was God conveying to Moses?

Generally, asking forgiveness from someone is very difficult. It requires an admission of wrongdoing or, at the very least, communicating that the intention wasn’t to harm. But the most daunting part, and usually the reason that people procrastinate asking for forgiveness, is because of the uncertainty of how the injured party is going to react.

Will the injured person yell and scream at me? Or worse, will they try to use my admission of guilt as a way to take advantage of me in some way? The anxiety of these potential consequences usually prevents one from making the effort to mend fences.

Now consider a different scenario: How would you feel if someone would come to you and let you know that the person you injured feels badly because this incident has created a rift in the relationship and that this person really just wants to talk and make up with you? Suddenly it becomes a lot easier to make that phone call.

It is for this very reason that the Almighty took

the extraordinary steps in demonstrating the path to forgiveness. The purpose of the “show and tell” demonstration was so that Moses would understand and convey to the Jewish people, that Hashem Himself is leading the path to His forgiveness. In other words, God – who is the injured party – is willing to lead the congregation in prayer because more than anything He wants His children, the Jewish people, to return to Him.

God is communicating to Moses that there should be no barriers to asking for forgiveness because the Almighty Himself wants to fix the relationship. It is for this reason that a proper prayer of forgiveness will always be answered. God is, in essence, telling us that He is always waiting for us to come home to Him and asking us to return.

As a final point on the subject of Yom Kippur, after making a tremendous effort to seek forgiveness from those whom we have injured, make restitution, and seek forgiveness from God, we must then ask ourselves the following question: “What can I do in the future to improve my relationship with the Almighty and my observance of His commandments? What affirmative steps can I take to build a better connection with the Almighty? How can I become a better person, spouse, parent, or child? What can I do to help my community and mankind?”

Obviously, the answers to these questions are always going to be a work in progress. But that is the true beauty of our lives; the ability to become more and strive for ever greater heights.

Lastly, please mull over my request at the beginning of this column and carefully consider to whom in your life you can grant the gift of forgiveness. By the way, it is entirely possible that the person most deserving of your forgiveness can be found in the mirror.

Wishing my readers all over the world a most meaningful fast and Yom Kippur experience, and a Gmar Chatima Tova – May you be sealed in the Book of Life!
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