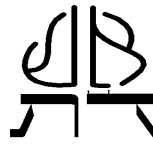


# Toras



# Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**MACHON ZOMET**

### Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In this week's Torah portion, we read about Teshuva, the process which will bring Bnei Yisrael to recognize their sins and to repent: "And it will be, when all these things happen to you, the blessing and the curse which I have placed before you, then you will turn your heart, among all the nations where your G-d has sent you. And you will return to your G-d and listen to His voice, including everything that I have commanded you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul." [Devarim 30:1-2]. In response to the double repentance of Bnei Yisrael, as described in these verses, there will be a double return by G-d. "And G-d will return your captives and have pity on you, and He will return and gather you from among all the nations where He has distributed you." [30:3]. Repentance will lead to a return to the land, "And your G-d will bring you to the land which your ancestors inherited, and you will inherit it. And He will do good for you and increase you, more than your ancestors." [30:5]. But this is not yet the end of the process. There is yet another stage. "And G-d will [circumcise] your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you will live" [30:6]. Why is this the proper sequence of events? Why is the last stage, the "circumcision" of the nation which leads to love of G-d, delayed until after the entrance into the land?

A study of the passages of the Torah shows that the mitzva of love of G-d always appears in connection with Eretz Yisrael. Actually, the requirement to love G-d appears only in Devarim, during Moshe's farewell sermon, before the entrance into the land. Earlier than this in the Torah, the only requirement that is mentioned is fear of G-d. As an example, we note that the most prominent expressions of the mitzva of loving G-d, the first two paragraphs of the "Shema," appear within the framework of Moshe's words to Bnei Yisrael, and they are clearly linked to the land. The first paragraph of "Shema" is in Devarim 6:4-9, and it is preceded by the verse, "Listen, Yisrael, and observe the commands, so that you will benefit and you will multiply greatly, as G-d, the G-d of your fathers promised to you, a land flowing with milk and honey." [6:3]. And it is followed by the verse, "And it will happen, when your

G-d brings you to the land He vowed to give to your ancestors, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaacov..." [6:10]. As is well known, the second paragraph, "Vehaya," makes the continued dwelling in the land conditional on observing the mitzvot of loving G-d and serving Him.

At the same time, it is only in the book of Devarim that we are told how G-d loves the nation of Yisrael. It is only in Devarim that we are taught about the special love of G-d for the forefathers. For example, "It was only your fathers that G-d cherished, in order to love them" [10:15]. Thus, from a straightforward reading of the verses, it is clear that only in "a land for which your G-d yearns, the eyes of your G-d always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year" [11:12] is it possible to achieve what is written in the verse that immediately follows, "to love your G-d" [11:13]. And the opposite phenomenon is also possible there, with G-d loving His nation.

Therefore, in the process of Teshuva, repentance, which starts in exile, it is impossible to achieve the full measure of love of G-d, except by returning to G-d "with all your heart and with all your soul" [30:2].

The process can be completed only after the return to Eretz Yisrael, and only then will man be able to "love your G-d with all your heart and all your soul" [30:6].

#### Yisrael as a Symbol

by Rabbi Gideon Perl, Rabbi and Judge in the Rabbinical Court, Alon Shevut

It is written in Midrash Tanchuma: "You are standing today... [Devarim 29:9] -- The Almighty said: I have never before struck a nation and returned to do it a second time, but you, the children of Yaacov, were not destroyed, as is written, 'I have used up my arrows against them' [32:23]. My arrows come to an end but the people do not... The same is true of Yisrael. As long as they suffer, the suffering ends but they remain standing in place and are not destroyed. If you ask: Why are the Gentiles punished by being destroyed but we remain? The answer is that when they suffer they kick out and do not mention the name of the Almighty... But, when Yisrael begin to suffer, they surrender and pray... Therefore, the Almighty said to them, when these curses are brought upon you, they give you strength. As is written, 'In order to torture you, and to test you...' [Devarim 8:16]. Moshe also said to Yisrael, while you

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suffer, you remain standing. That is why it is written, 'You are all standing today'."

Thus, the eternal secret of our survival as a nation is rooted in our acceptance of suffering and in our prayer. In spite of the many troubles we are currently experiencing, as individuals and as a nation, we "remain stable" -- we continue to exist. The purpose of these events is "to test us," also in the sense of making a symbol out of us. We are thus raised to greater heights, as a specially marked nation, "am segulah." This indeed seems to be the way that Divine guidance appears to us in modern times, days of both the hidden presence of G-d and the "revealed" time of the end of our exile.

The Midrash derives another practical lesson. "For you to observe the covenant of your G-d' [Devarim 29:11] -- Why did G-d make a covenant with them at this time? It is because they cancelled the covenant made at Sinai when they said, 'This is your god, Yisrael' [Shemot 32:4]. He therefore made a new covenant at Chorev... Perhaps you will wonder why all this was worthwhile (punishing them and forgiving them time after time)... It is not because I have a need for you, rather what else can I do, since I made a vow to your forefathers never to replace their offspring for all of eternity... The same thing happened when they wanted to ignore the yoke of the oath in the days of Yechezkel. What is written there? 'Men from among the sages of Yisrael came to seek G-d' [20:1]. They said to him, If the son of a Kohen buys a slave, can he eat Teruma? He replied, yes, he can. And they said, if the Kohen sells the slave to a Yisrael, does is he not removed from the possession of the Kohen? He replied, yes, he is. So they said to him: We are also no longer in His possession, we can become like all the other nations! But Yechezkel replied to Yisrael, 'What you have imagined will never be...' [20:32]. And he continued, 'I

swear, says G-d, that I will rule over you... with a mighty hand' [20:33]."

In our times too, "people come" who fight for the concept that "we will be like all the other nations" and who try to root out any link to Judaism in the Jewish state. But we will continue to rely on the prophecy of Yechezkel, this "will never be..."

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**M**oshe's final official act of his long career of Jewish leadership is to once again reiterate the everlasting covenant between God and Israel. To make it explicitly clear to Israel that this covenant is eternal and non-cancelable, Moshe states that it binds "those who are with us here standing today and those who are not here standing with us today." All Jews, wherever they may live and whenever their time on earth will occur are bound by the covenant. The covenant pursues us and at the same time inspires us throughout the ages. It is the constitution of the Jewish people and it never fails to enforce its terms upon us and to remind us of its existence and durability. The entire story of the Jewish people of the past century is foretold in the covenant. Ramban stated that it is amazing that someone - Moshe - could stand and accurately forecast and describe events that would befall Israel two thousand years later. What greater wonder shall we have living as we do an additional eight hundred years after Ramban! There is no way to understand or appreciate the Jewish story throughout the ages - the good and the better - without reference to the words and conditions expressed in the covenant. Truly, having to deal with the covenant and its attendant consequences and results is unavoidable.

The covenant states that there will come a time when Israel, reeling from tragedy and Holocaust, will say, "all of these troubles have befallen me because there was not God in my midst." This ambiguous statement, according to Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, lends itself to two interpretations. There will be Jews who will react to the horror and pain of Israel by saying that "God is not in our midst" - that we are not pious enough in belief and scrupulous enough in behavior and deeds. But there will be other Jews whose faith will have been crushed by events and tragedy who will state "that God is not in our midst" for there is no God that can come and help us. Thus both redoubled efforts at piety and blasphemy and scorn are the two reactions to the terms of the covenant as it acted itself out in human events. How painful it is in today's Jewish world to witness these two diametrically opposed responses to the covenant marching along side by side. A portion of the Jewish people is determined to strengthen the bonds of the covenant and to live an ever more rigorous Jewish life style while another portion of Israel distances itself from observance of the covenant - even from

remembering that such a covenant yet in fact still exists and remains operative.

We are not allowed the luxury of forgetting or ignoring the covenant. Daily, it rises up and smites us in our faces. It gives us no rest, no free passes in life. Only by recognizing its existence and living by its tenets and values can we achieve personal and national achievement and satisfaction. That is Moshe's lasting legacy to us as Jews. Remember the covenant and live by it! © 2004 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

**R**osh Hashanah ushers in a special period of Ten Days of Repentance, culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Forgiveness. But if we truly believe that our Lord is the G-d of compassion and love, a G-d who "extends graciousness freely and forgives excessively" (as we recite in the daily Amidah three times a day), then why limit Divine forgiveness to these ten days? Why not call every day a day of forgiveness and emphasize all 365 days a year as days of repentance? You can actually touch the tension in the air towards the end of Yom Kippur as we cry out to the Almighty during the last minutes of the waning sun as if it is our last chance. Forgiveness should last beyond Yom Kippur!

Moreover, why begin the New Year with the Ten Days of Repentance? If anything, the Ten Days of Repentance should come out on the last days of the month of Elul, the last ten days of the old year so that we can begin the new year afresh, cleansed and purified? Why start the New Year with our old sins?

I believe that the ten day period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is a metaphor for all of life. The New Year at the very least causes us to open a new calendar and cast away the old calendar, to change the dates of our letters and our checks from 5764 to 5765. It reminds us that time is passing, that life is fleeting and that we may not live to see another year because all of us are mortal and finite. We generally live our lives as if we will live forever, as if everything will always remain the same. A new year reminds us that this is not the case and that we must take cognizance of how short life really is.

I remember well the last time I visited my maternal grandmother, a very special woman with whom I studied Bible and Talmud and who is certainly my greatest religious influence. She was then 90 years old and suffering from cancer of the stomach. When I entered her room, she looked up at me and said, "my beloved child, that is precisely how life is: an opening of the door and a closing of the door. It passes by as the blink of the eye, even if you live to be 90. Just make certain that before the door closes you have significantly

touched enough people and you have made the world a little bit better than it was before you came into it".

I do not believe that the finitude of human existence is necessarily a bad thing. Much the opposite: if we are aware of our limited span of life, then we may very well be inspired to make the most of every day and every hour. Rav Shmuel Salant, the famed Rav of Jerusalem a little more than a century ago, had a sun dial clock placed on a high point in Jerusalem with the twelve numbers being Hebrew letters spelling out the verse "Our days pass like a shadow." He wanted people to pass the clock, note the setting sun, and resolve to utilize every available minute before sunset - and then it would be too late. The words in the verse are not really pessimistic after all, there is a verse in Psalms, "I shall be protected in the shadow of your Divine wing" (Psalms 52:2) I have a clock in my office with the same words as Rav Shmuel Salant's sun dial clock with the additional verse from Psalms. The words even become optimistic if they help us learn to utilize every minute to its fullest.

On my elementary school graduation day, we graduates (I was only 12 years old) heard from Rav Alexander Linchner a mesmerizing analogy in the name of the Hafetz Haim. Life is like a postal card. You begin to write, and you leave a great deal of space between the letters, words and lines. After all, it seems to you that the postal card is very large and that you don't have all that much to say. But then, as you come to the end of the card, you realize that it was smaller than you thought and that you must really write at least one more thing. And so you squeeze the words together, squish the lines, in a mad last minute dash to get everything in. Most of the time, you don't succeed in saying it all. Sometimes you leave out the most important thing. Often there isn't even room left to sign your name.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph was brought to New York from Vilna during the first part of the 20th century to serve as Chief Rabbi of New York. It turned out to be a tragic appointment, he was given a bitterly difficult time by the butchers and at a comparatively young age suffered a stroke. His sermons, especially on Shabbat Shuva (the Sabbath of Repentance before Yom Kippur) were legendary for their erudition and passion. He would speak for more than 2 hours without a note. He was released from the hospital a few days before Shabbat Shuva, and the Norfolk Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side was filled to the rafters with hundreds of Jews anxious to hear his sermons. He rose to the pulpit a bit shakily with a sheaf of papers - obviously the sermon he had uncharacteristically prepared in writing in advance. He began to speak: "My masters, ladies and gentlemen, My masters, ladies and gentlemen.." And then he began to weep. When he composed himself he spoke again: "I prepared this sermon so carefully first in the hospital and after I got out, but now I have no recollection of what I prepared. I can't even read my own writing. My masters, this is

what a human being is. This can happen to any of you. Repent before it is too late." It is said that this was the most powerful Shabbat Shuva sermon that he had given.

The New Year begins the Ten Days of Repentance as a message for us that we must take to heart human frailty and utilize every day and every hour. This is the lesson that our calendar wishes to teach: life is not for ever, so get the most in to whatever time you have. Rav Levy Yitzchak of Berdichev would often say that he learned the important lesson of his life from the shoemaker who lived in the apartment above his. He noticed that the expensive gas light was still on in the shoemaker's workroom way past midnight. When he inquired if everything was all right the shoemaker responded, "thank G-d, yes but as long as the light is still burning, it is possible to keep repairing." Rav Levy Yitzchak would sigh and say, "would that we all understood that as long as the light of our life is still burning there is yet time for us to repair ourselves and repair the world."

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tova. © 2004 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he portion Nitzavim, is replete with urgings to return to God. A term which jumps from the text, is one describing God's hope that we, the Jewish people, would hearken to His voice "li-shmoah be-kolo." (Deuteronomy 30:20) The word kol, voice, resonates with deep meaning.

The key to understanding a Biblical word is to assess its meaning the first time it appears in the Torah. Kol first presents itself in the Garden of Eden's story, where the Torah states that Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord. (Genesis 3:8) Kol is, therefore, not a surface voice, rather it is the voice of God. An important reminder to all of us that even as we busily prepare ourselves for the observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that we not forget that the ultimate goal of these days is to reconnect with God, to feel His presence, to hear His voice.

Kol also prominently appears in the Revelation story. Once again, the Torah states that the Jews heard the voice of God. (Exodus 19:19) This time, however, the voice of God was a call to commit to Torah practice as revealed at Sinai. Kol here speaks to the voice of God as expressed through observing God's laws, an idea worth remembering on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur.

And, of course, Kol is found again in the prophetic descriptions of the Messianic era. (Isaiah 40:3) In the liturgy we echo this prophecy with the words, Kol me-vaser, the voice that announces the coming of the Messiah. Thus, Kol, especially during this time of year, speaks to the challenge of not only

hearing the voice of God and His commandments, but of harnessing the energy of these messages into repairing the world-the Messianic period-the time when God's voice will be heard by all.

These three different messages of kol are echoed in the mitzvah of shofar. Shofar is the call that reenacts the moment of creation. Shofar is the call that brings us back to Sinai when the Torah was given. And shofar is the call that will ring out when the Messiah comes.

It ought be noted that the blessing preceding the shofar ritual does not state "to blow the shofar (li-tkoah)" it rather reads, "to listen (li-shmoah)" to the shofar. Yet, it goes one step further. The blessing teaches us to go beyond, to listen to the inner voice of God, His law and the yearning for redemption. It does this by declaring that we "listen to the voice, the kol, of the shofar." If only. © 2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**“A**nd not with you alone am I setting up this covenant and this curse. For [it is] with those that are standing here with us today before Hashem your G-d, and with those who are not here with us today." (Devarim 29:14) After describing the extent of the blessings that await us for following G-d's commandments, and the curses that will befall us if we don't, Moshe informs the nation that this covenant will be binding not just on the current generation, but on all future generations as well. Although this "contract" was made more than 3,000 years ago, it still in effect today.

A number of the commentators ask how that generation can obligate subsequent generations to fulfill the "deal" that they made (see Abarbanel for his full description of this question- and his approach, and Malbim for his multi-faceted answer). While we wouldn't complain if the blessings were bestowed upon us for listening, suffering the horrific tragedies described in last week's Parsha (G-d forbid) might seem unfair if we weren't a party to the original "deal." Can a parent sign a contract that is enforceable on the child? Why are the (sometimes gruesome) details of the covenant made in the desert more than 32 centuries ago still applicable now?

Last week, I discussed some of the purposes of the curses (<http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5764/kiTavo.pdf>). Rather than being punishments for not listening, they are often "messages" sent by G-d to let us know that we are not fulfilling our potential. These messages are designed to help us correct any problems, and come closer to G-d. For those who do not recognize that G-d is communicating with them (a symptom of not being attached to Him), the resulting punishment is abandonment (see Meiri, Sotah 2a). Being disconnected from G-d allows anything to happen, even

if no specific action was done to deserve that particular consequence; being subject to "mikre" (happenstance) is the penalty of not becoming close to G-d. The numerous possible tragedies that can occur (and their extent) is designed as a motivator to bring people back to G-d, thus meriting His divine protection.

This formula (attachment=divine protection, detachment=vulnerability to any/every danger) applies to every human being. Even without any covenant, it is how G-d runs the world. If so, what purpose does the covenant serve? For one thing, without it we may not be sent any "message" to help us figure out that (and what) we are/were doing wrong. We may be protected from unjust harm when connected to G-d, but would we be given clues as to how to become even closer? Or how to correct problems that don't cause detachment but nevertheless are the result of flaws? By sending us these messages, we have the opportunity to improve ourselves, become better people, and reach even greater spiritual heights.

Another difference that having a covenant makes is putting things on a national scale. Righteous individuals might have been protected from danger anyway, but when the nation as a whole merits the Divine Presence, we are all protected (even those that alone, as individuals, would not have been). When Uchun took the spoils of Yericho (Yehoshua 7:1), G-d got angry. In the subsequent military encounter, 36 soldiers died because of Uchun's sin. The Ralbag (and the Malbim) explain that although these soldiers couldn't be held accountable for another person's transgression, that transgression caused the Divine Presence to leave the nation, allowing these 36 to be killed. Their actions were the same before and after Uchun sinned, but they had been protected because they were part of the nation. Once the nation lost this protection, they became vulnerable.

One of the things Yirimyahu laments (Eichah 1:5) is that our "young ones were taken captive." Rabbi Ya'akov of Lisa, in his commentary Palgay Mayim, explains that children are sinless (i.e. are not old enough to be accountable for their actions), so their becoming prisoners cannot have been a punishment for anything they did. Rather, because G-d's presence had left the nation, they were left unprotected, and therefore susceptible to being captured. Again, when the nation is deserving, even individuals that would otherwise have not merited divine protection are. This aspect is also only due to the covenant.

But there's a flip side to this. If we create an unjust society, with a corrupt government and a corrupt court system, G-d will let us know that He is dissatisfied. The nation as a whole will be punished, even when other nations would not have been punished for similar levels of corruption. Individuals that would not have been protected anyway will be in an even more hostile environment (due to G-d's punishing the society as a

whole) than had there been no covenant, and they will therefore (probably) suffer more because of it.

However, the purpose is to get us to build a better society, and if we do, all of its members will benefit from it. The covenant (and its consequences) promotes appointing unbiased judges and worthy leaders, and a culture based on truth, justice and spiritual growth.

Our question of how one generation can obligate subsequent generations to follow the covenant is predicated on the notion that there are adverse consequences of having one. And, the truth is, during those times (such as the Abarbanel lived through when he wrote his commentary on Devarim) when the nation suffers for not being up to par, it seems that we do suffer more because there is one. However, if not for the covenant, there would be no "nation" left to be "suffering more," as we would have been wiped out long ago. As the Torah testifies, "I will not become so disgusted or revolted by them to destroy them- thereby breaking my covenant with them- for I am Hashem their G-d." (Vayikra 26:44) Nor are we worth being a "nation" if we don't even strive to keep that covenant.

In the end then, we are only still around because of the covenant; all of the other consequences of the covenant are positive. We would have suffered from tragedies anyway if detached from G-d, but now are given a way to more easily become attached (the commandments), and cues to improve ourselves (the messages). We can benefit from a national divine protection even when undeserving as an individual. And we are pushed in the direction of creating a fair and just society.

The Talmud (Gittin 11b) says that when it is beneficial for another, one can effect a transaction for that other even without their knowledge. Based on this, the Malbim (in his second aspect of why the covenant is valid for all future generations) says that since the purpose of the Torah is to help the individual become a better, more spiritual person, our great-great-grandfathers were able to obligate us to keep it. As we have seen, the assumed downside of the covenant (suffering from tragedies) exists even if there was no covenant; leaving only the positive effects of helping make sure that we- as individuals and as a nation- keep striving to become better. © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

## Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT"A

"**A**nd Moshe walked out, and he spoke these words to the Jewish people: I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I cannot go out and come in any more, [for] God has said to me, 'You shall not go over this Jordan [River].'" (Devarim 31:1-2)

What is the Torah teaching us by saying that Moshe walked? Ibn Ezra (s.v. va-yelekh) explains that Moshe walked over to each tribe, to reassure the people, instilling confidence in their continued success after his passing. The Ramban (s.v. va-yelekh) explains that at the conclusion of the covenantal ceremony (chapter 30), the people returned to their tents, and the Torah now tells us that he walked over to them, moving from the Levite encampment over to the Israelite encampment, to honor the people, as if asking their permission to take leave of them.

The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayelekh 1) states that the opening word, "va-yelekh, and he walked," is a term that implies rebuke. But what rebuke is accomplished by Moshe's walking here? Rashi (verse 2, s.v. lo ukhal) explains that Moshe's message at the beginning of the parasha is that he can no longer continue, because he is not permitted to cross over into the land of Israel. According to this interpretation, it would seem that the message lies in the Moshe's acceptance of God's judgment, and the rebuke lies in the implicit difficulty of accepting Divine judgment.

The Ramban (verse 2, s.v. va-yomer) cites Rashi's explanation and rejects it, but he does not offer an alternative on this particular point. Perhaps one could suggest, based on the explanation of the Ramban cited above on verse 1, that Moshe's very walking over to them provides the rebuke. The devotion and caring that Moshe Rabbeinu exhibits to the people may itself be the lasting impression he wants to leave.

Sometimes just one sentence or even one action by a person can make all the difference. There was a student in the Yeshiva a number of years ago who told me, before leaving the Yeshiva, what made the greatest impression on him of all the things I did. He told me that one time he did something wrong for which he expected me to reprimand him. For the rest of the year, every time he came to shake my hand for Shabbat Shalom, and every time he saw me, he was afraid I would scold him for his action. This impacted on his relationship with me for the entire year. Here is an example of where even silence can have a great impact.

One student told me that a single sentence he heard from a professor of his had a great influence on him. The professor said that what's important is not what you do, but who you are. Just one sentence, out of all the lectures he heard, had that impact.

Every year I speak about lessons that can be learned from the Gemara's discussion of Elazar ben Dordaya (Avoda Zara 17a), and I will do so again this year. But for now I just want to point out that it was just one sentence that the harlot said to him, "Ben Dordaya's repentance will not be accepted," that served as the impetus for the process of repentance that followed.

I have read many books. I do not remember everything in all of them. There are some books from

which I remember just one thing. There is a book written by Rabbi Chaim Vital, great student of the Ari z"l, from which I remember just one thing. I quoted that one thing to someone once, and that person asked me if I remember the entire book. I told him that I read it once, but I do not remember a single thing from the entire book, other than the idea I had just quoted.

I once attended a Sheva Berakhot about fifty years ago, where an old Yemenite rabbi got up to speak. All he did was quote a single rabbinic dictum, verbatim, without adding a single word, and then he sat down. I was so jealous of him. Rabbis and teachers expend so much energy in preparing what they will say, just in order for there to be that one line which people will remember. I do not expect you to remember two things from what I said. If you remember two things, that is too much.

The same goes for musar books, ethical treatises. You do not need to remember every line in the book. But make sure that you take at least one thing from it.

May we merit to take the lessons from our experiences, books and sermons, and merit a ketiva va-chatima tova, for us and the entire Jewish people. *[This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat, Parashat Nitzavim- Vayelekh, 5762 (2002).]*

#### RABBI LABEL LAM

## Dvar Torah

“It is not in heaven (Devarim 30:11)

The Torah is not found amongst those who think they have reached the heavens. (The Kotzker Rebbe)

They make him take an oath to be righteous and not to be wicked. Even if the whole world says you are righteous you should be in your eyes like one who is wicked. (Talmud Nida)

Don't consider yourself wicked! (Pirke Avos Chap. 2)

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you should choose life (Devarim 30:19)

With Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur bearing down upon us it's hard to know how to see ourselves. There even seems to be some mixed signals coming from the sagely sources. Am I good or am I bad? Let's try a few approaches!

A friend of mine tried to call me up Erev Rosh Hashana and apparently misdialed. A woman with a heavy Russian accent answered the phone. Not recognizing the voice, he asked, "Is this the Lam residence?" She answered sternly, "I am afraid you are a mistake?" Of course she misspoke but he called me moments later and told me he felt a little devastated. He hadn't realized he was a mistake. There's a world of practical difference between understanding "I made a mistake" and feeling "I am a mistake".

A few weeks ago my older boys were lightly teasing and testing their youngest sister at the table. One quizzed her strongly asking, "Are you good or bad? She shot back without hesitation, "Both!" They pressed her again, "Good or bad? Which one?" She wouldn't be intimidated a bit. She answered with a single word again, "Both!" How profound was that exchange!

I once asked the famous psychiatrist and author Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski if he could give me a working definition of "positive self-esteem". Without hesitation he said, "Knowing your good points and your bad points simultaneously." At first it sounded remarkably simple but later gained appreciation for its depth.

I realized that seeing only good points makes us haughty while seeing only bad points leaves us vulnerable to depression. Seeing them alternately puts us on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Being aware of both simultaneously creates a healthy balance. We can neither become too high on ourselves considering our faults nor too low when we know our goodness.

Having that healthy balance allows us to face our failures and faults without fear of feeling like a mistake. Then we can enjoy the benefits of criticism that help make the good better and the bad a little less so. Wondering aloud, "Are we good or bad?" I guess the smart answer is "both". As the "days of awe" draw near, though, some may begin to feel an urge to be even better. © 2004 by Rabbi L. Lam and Torah.org.

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

### **Heartspeak**

**T**eshuva. It is the word of the hour, and there is no better time for the Torah to talk about it than the week before Rosh Hashanah. It means repentance. It means not only taking heart but even changing heart! And this week the Torah tells us that the requirements are not as difficult as one would perceive. "It is not in heaven or across the sea. Rather it is very near to you—in your mouth and in your heart—to perform" (Deuteronomy 30:12-15).

The Ibn Ezra comments on the three aspects of commitment that the Torah alludes to—the mouth, the heart and the performance. In practical terms, there are commandments of the heart, there are those that entail speech, and there are those that require action.

But on a simple level, the Torah seems to discuss a process that involves commitment before action. It takes the heart and the mouth to make the commitment before the action is performed. Thus the Torah tells us, "it is very near to you—in your mouth and in your heart—to perform." The sequence of events, however, seems reversed. The Torah puts the mouth before the heart. Shouldn't the Torah have written, "It is very near to you—in your heart and in your mouth—to perform"? Doesn't one have to have wholehearted feeling before making verbal pledges? Why would the

Torah tell us that it is close to your mouth and your heart?

In the years before the establishment of the State of Israel, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the Tzadik of Jerusalem, would visit the inmates of the British-controlled Jerusalem prison on every Shabbos. Though most of the Jewish prisoners were not observant, they would quickly don kippot before the revered Rabbi would greet them. Then they would join in the Shabbos morning prayer service that Reb Aryeh organized and they would read along with the rabbi, as if they were observant Jews.

The entire scene agitated one particularly nasty fellow named Yaakov. He would try in every way to irritate the gentle Rabbi. Each Shabbos, he would purposely light up a cigarette in Reb Aryeh's face in order to disturb him. Reb Aryeh was never fazed. One Shabbos, Yaakov stormed into the makeshift synagogue and snapped at the aged Rabbi.

"Why do you waste your time with these liars and fakes? They are no more observant than I am. They only put the kippah on their heads when you come here. Furthermore, they only pray and open their lips to G-d when you are here. Otherwise they have no feeling in their hearts!"

Reb Aryeh turned to Yaakov and rebuked him with a firm but gentle voice. "Why do you slander these souls. They come to pray every single week. I do not look at their heads but rather in their hearts. And when I hear the prayers coming from their lips, I know that their hearts are following as well."

It was not long before Yaakov became a steady member of the prayer group.

The Torah may be hinting at a powerful message. It may be telling us that even though our hearts have not arrived as yet, it is still important to use our lips to communicate the commitments and pray the prayers of the Jewish People. The Torah is not far away. It is close and easy for your mouth. The books are available. The siddur is understandable and translated. It is very near to your lips. All you have to do is talk the talk—sincerely. Soon enough, you will walk the walk with the same sincerity as well. © 1998 by Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and Torah.org.

#### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

### **RavFrاند**

**T**his week's parsha contains the mitzvah of 'Hakhel'. Once every seven years, following the end of the Shmita year, the King gathered all of Israel (who were already in Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Succos) and read to them portions from the book of Devorim.

The Sefer HaChinuch writes, concerning any person who neglects this mitzvah (for example a Jew who fails to attend or a King who fails to read the Torah)

"...their punishment is very great, for this command is a fundamental pillar of the religion..."

One would probably not have assumed that Hakhel is such an important mitzvah. Hakhel is a positive command (mitzvas aseh) that is only performed once every seven years. We might have assumed that Lulav or Matzah or Tefillin or Krias Shma are more important mitzvos. Yet, regarding those mitzvos, the Sefer HaChinuch does not write "and their punishment is very great..."

What significance does the Chinuch see in this mitzvah? Rav Hutner, zt"l, in a lengthy introduction to a reprint of a sefer of the Ram"o (Darkei Moshe HaAruch) gives us an insight into what the mitzvah of Hakhel is really all about and why it is so important. Rav Hutner bases his thesis on two separate inferences from the Rambam.

The Rambam [Hilchos Chagiga 3:3] lists the sequence of the chapters in Devorim that were read at Hakhel: Read "From the beginning of the book of Devorim until the end of the parsha of 'Shma' [Hear Oh Israel]. Then read 'V-haya im Shamo'a' [And it will be if you will listen], followed by 'aser t-aser' [You shall surely tithe]. Then, continue in sequence until the end of the 'Blessings and Curses' until the words 'besides the Covenant which He entered into with them at Chorev' and then stop (u'posek).

Rav Hutner asks, why does the Rambam need to write the word "u'posek"? If the Rambam writes that we must read from here to there, specifying the last words, then obviously, that is where we stop. Why does the Rambam make a point of telling us "and that is where he stops"? [Rav Hutner's answer to this question will be explained together with his explanation of the second inference from the Rambam.]

Rav Hutner's second inference from the Rambam is as follows: The Rambam in Hilchos Chagiga [3:7] refers to Hakhel as "Yom Hakhel" [The Day of Hakhel]. This is a strange expression that is not mentioned in the Talmud. What is the Rambam trying to tell us?

Rav Hutner says that the essence of the ceremony of Hakhel is supposed to be the reenactment of ma'mad Har Sinai [the standing at Mt. Sinai]. It is the reenactment of the Kabalas HaTorah [receiving the Torah]. The Accepting of the Torah is THE seminal event in Jewish History. We are to reenact Kabalas HaTorah every seven years in order to impress upon the people the importance of what Torah means to the Jewish People. We want the people to feel as though they have experienced another Kabalas HaTorah.

A few weeks ago, Baltimoreans celebrated the reenactment of the Battle of Baltimore, a seminal event in American history—the composition of the Star Spangled Banner. For Baltimoreans, and for all Americans, that was a very important event. How does one commemorate that event? How does one make it live? How does one make future generations feel how

important it was "that the flag was still there"? The answer is by reenacting it.

L'Havdil, we have something that is unbelievably important to us. That something is Kabalas HaTorah. We want everyone to relive that 'Standing At Har Sinai'. How do we do that? We gather everyone together and read the Torah.

That is why the Rambam says the word "u'posek" (the first inference). The words immediately prior to "u'posek" are "besides the Covenant He entered into with them at Horeb [Mt. Sinai]". We want those words to remain ringing in the people's ears! We want to conjure up lasting memories of Chorev, of Har Sinai. Therefore, the King must dramatically stop his reading right there. To read one more word beyond 'Chorev' would have diluted the impact, destroying the whole point of Hakhel.

That is also why the Rambam refers to Hakhel as 'Yom Hakhel' (the second inference). Rav Hutner points out that if we take away the vowels of 'Yom Hakhel' it is precisely the same letters as 'Yom HaKahal' [the Day of the Congregation] which the Torah repeatedly uses [Devorim 9:10, 10:4, 18:16] to refer to the ma'mad Har Sinai.

This is Hakhel—the living and the reenactment of Kabalas HaTorah. Why? Because as Rav Sadyah Gaon tells us, "Our Nation is not a Nation except through Torah". For some, the idea that 'We Are A Nation Because of Torah' is a great novelty (chiddush gadol). There have been thousands and millions of Jews who have not always believed that. There have been Jews who have believed that we are a Nation by virtue of a land—that without a land we are not a Nation. Says Rav Sadyah Gaon, "No; We are a Nation only through Torah."

There are some people who believe that we are a nation through our language. There were some people that believed that the key to the Jewish people was Yiddish—Yiddish plays and Yiddish songs and Yiddish events. They are no longer around. The only people who still, in fact, read or speak Yiddish are the people that they thought would never make it.

There are a people who have thought that we are a Nation through our culture. No! Our Nation is not a nation except through Torah. That is what makes us a people. That is what binds us together. The Standing Together at Sinai; Accepting Torah; Learning Torah. The Torah, the mitzvos, nothing else. Not culture, not language, not history, nothing—except Torah. This is what Hakhel tries to accomplish. © 2004 by Rabbi Y. Frand and Torah.org.

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