

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd I beseeched G-d at that time” (Devarim 3:23). At what time? “After I conquered the land of Sichone and Oge I thought perhaps the vow had been negated” (Rashi). Although G-d had said that Moshe could not enter the Promised Land, after Moshe was able to defeat kings and take over land that would be part of the Land of Israel, he thought that this might have indicated that G-d had somehow changed His mind. Therefore, he asked G-d if he could cross the Jordan River and see Yerushalayim, including the Holy Temple (see Rashi on 3:25), as well. The answer was that he couldn't, with the common understanding being that there was difference between the land east of the Jordan River and the land west of it. Moshe was allowed to enter the land east of the river, and was therefore able to lead the Children of Israel to victory on that part of the land, but could not cross the river into the “main” part of the Land of Israel.

But what was Moshe really asking for? Was he asking whether his hypothesis was correct (and as a result he would be able to cross the river), or was he asking G-d to let him cross even though he had been previously told that he couldn't. The word “va'eschannan,” (“and I beseeched”) indicates that it was a prayer, asking G-d to please let him see more, and not just an informational query. On the other hand, if Moshe had to ask G-d to change His mind (because before the prayer he wasn't able to cross), then obviously entering the land on the eastern side of the Jordan had no bearing on his being able to enter the land on the western side. In other words, if the “vow” had to be undone to let Moshe conquer Sichone and Oge, then there was no longer any vow for the rest of the land either; and if the “vow” did not apply to the land of Sichone and Oge, then there would be no reason to think that his being able to enter it meant that he could now cross the Jordan.

This question is asked (in one form or another) by numerous commentators. The answer given most frequently (see Sifsay Chachamim, Nachalas Yaakov and Maskil Le'Dovid) differentiates between G-d's “vow” not to let Moshe enter the Promised Land and His “decree” forbidding him from entering it. The “vow” aspect had to be nullified before Moshe could conquer the land to the east of the river; Moshe was asking G-d

to also nullify the decree so that he could cross the river too. This would infer that Moshe was correct in his assumption that the “vow” aspect had been removed, but G-d refused to budge regarding the decree. Rather than the difference between the two sides of the river meaning that the vow had never been nullified (which is the common understanding), the difference meant that only the vow was nullified, but not the decree. However, Rashi's wording implies that Moshe had been mistaken in thinking that the vow had been removed, and the parable given in a similar Rashi (Bamidbar 27:12) is almost explicit that the vow was still in place. Additionally, this answer assumes that there is a difference between the area covered by the vow and that covered by the decree; why would G-d swear not to allow him to enter either side of the river if the decree was only not to let him get to the western side. It could be suggested that Moshe thought there was a difference between the vow and the decree, but in reality there wasn't (and both still applied); nevertheless we would still need to explain why Moshe thought one applied to both sides of the river while the other applied only to the western side.

One possibility could be to differentiate between Moshe the leader and Moshe the person. One decree may have been issued (based on mistakes Moshe made in his leadership role) that prevented him from leading the nation into the Promised Land, while a second, separate, decree was made because of personal mistakes he made. (This theme has been presented by several commentators, but this is not the appropriate forum to discuss it more fully; I am only mentioning it regarding its applicability to this issue.) By leading the nation as they conquered Sichone and Oge (and assigning it to Reuvain, Gad and half of Menashe), Moshe may have thought that the decree against his leading the nation had been nullified, and all he had left to “undo” was the decree against him entering it personally. This possibility assumes that one decree would apply to both sides of the river while the other only applied to the western side, a more palatable possibility taking the additional “holiness” of the western side into account and that being where Moshe the individual was forbidden from entering. Nevertheless, the reasons Rashi (Bamidbar 27:12) brings as to why Moshe thought the vow and decree may have been removed both relate to Moshe being the leader; using the term “decree” for the first and “vow” for the second therefore becomes irrelevant.

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The language of some of the commentators, which attributes the "vow" being nullified to the concept of there being no way to only partially nullify a vow, indicates that the difference is that a decree can be partially nullified. Therefore, even though part of the decree may have been nullified to allow Moshe to conquer the land east of the Jordan, since the part of the decree that applied to the west was still in place, Moshe asked that it be nullified too. The Toldos Adam (Sifray, Pinchas 4) takes it one step further, differentiating between a vow nullified because the person who made it didn't know something that, had he known it, he wouldn't have made the vow in the first place (a "pesach"), and a vow nullified because the person regrets having made it, i.e. has a change of heart ("charata"). If the vow is nullified because of misinformation, once part of the vow is nullified, all of it is gone. However, if the vow is nullified because of regret, only the part relevant to the regret is nullified. The former obviously does not apply to an all-knowing G-d, but since we find that G-d does act as if He changes His mind (as it were), the "vow" He made must be of the type that can be only partially nullified. Moshe had to beseech G-d in order to get the rest of it nullified too.

The Maharal refines this differentiation between Moshe the leader and Moshe the person by categorizing Moshe not being allowed to enter as a punishment; even if the "vow" to not lead the nation had been nullified in order for him to be able to conquer Sichone and Oge (or, more precisely according to the way the Maharal explains it, in order to give some Tribes their portion in that land), whichever aspects of the punishment were still possible would still apply. Moshe therefore asked G-d to forgive him and remove the (remaining) punishment, but was told he was mistaken regarding the vow being nullified. If the daughters of Tzelaftchad were given land to the east of the Jordan, this would fit very well, as when Moshe thought he would personally give their inheritance to them, that part of the "decree" being waived wouldn't necessarily mean that he could cross the river and do the same for everyone else. However, if their inheritance were on the western side, Moshe thinking that this meant the decree was nullified (and not just the vow) would apply to both sides.

Other approaches are suggested as well (see Kli Yakar, Be'er Basadeh and Taz), and I would like to add one more. The question is predicated on the assumption that the order was (1) conquering Sichone and Oge, (2) Moshe thinking that the vow was nullified, (3) Moshe beseeching G-d to let him cross the river, and then (4) G-d saying "no." Where did G-d say no? In Parashas Pinechas, when He told Moshe that he would die on top of the mountain on the eastern side of the Jordan, seeing the western side from atop the mountain without ever going there (Bamidbar 27:12-14). Because this was told to Moshe way before he actually would die, Rashi tells us that G-d was telling Moshe that he was mistaken in thinking that the decree/vow had been nullified, as he was still going to die on the eastern side. I would suggest that Moshe didn't beseech G-d until after he was told he was mistaken. The order would then be (1) Moshe conquered Sichone and Oge, (2) Moshe thought that perhaps the vow was nullified, (3) G-d told Moshe he was mistaken, as the vow was still in place, (4) Moshe beseeches G-d to nullify the vow, and then (5) G-d tells Moshe to stop asking (Devarim 3:26). In Bamidbar, where the first "no" is described, Rashi has to tell us why it was said there, but there is no need to tell us about Moshe's subsequent prayer. In Devarim, where the prayer and G-d's second "no" is described, Rashi is addressing us why this occurred "at that time," so tells us that the process was started when Moshe thought that conquering Sichone and Oge meant that the vow had been nullified. Repeating that first "no" does not address the issue of the timing, so there is no need for Rashi to mention it in Devarim. If Moshe didn't beseech G-d until after he was told that the vow was still in place, there's no longer an issue as to why he did. After all, G-d had taught him that prayer worked (see Rashi on Devarim 3:24)! © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The ability to somehow subsume one's own personal disappointments and even tragedies into the general picture of positive Jewish life and mission is vividly illustrated in Moshe's response to G-d's refusal to allow him to enter into the Land of Israel. Moshe does not accept the decree in a stoic, 'what is the use' manner but he instead uses it to impress upon the Jewish people the special good fortune that they possess in being able to enter and inhabit the Land of Israel.

Perhaps only someone who has been denied a special favor, gift or talent can truly appreciate the uniqueness of someone who possesses that favor, gift or talent. (For instance, I appreciate and love to hear great chazanim and baalei tefila though I cannot carry a tune. But I digress.)

Jews who currently have the ability to visit and even more importantly to dwell in our ancient homeland

are pretty much blasé' about the whole matter. We have become so comfortable and accustomed to this gift granted to us that we are even willing to forego it and some Jews even have the temerity to vilify it and claim that gift and opportunity was and is a "mistake!"

Moshe certainly would not have thought so. He breaks down the heavenly gates of prayer, so to speak, in order to gain entry into the Land of Israel. He is willing to forego his lofty office and enter the land just as plain Mr. Moshe but all to no avail.

But instead of bewailing his fate bitterly he uses the experience to encourage his people and steel them for the task and mission that life in the Land of Israel always and automatically entails.

The Jewish soul's desire to live in the Land of Israel, a desire not diminished by thousands of years of exile and separation, is an extension of the attitude and spirit of Moshe himself. All defeats in Jewish life, no matter how expensive and devastating they may be, are still in the long run only temporary setbacks.

That is the reality of the message of this Shabat Nachamu - that comfort, consolation and triumph eventually await us. Perhaps it is this knowledge of G-d's commitment to our survival and success that allows Moshe to move past his own personal disappointments and defeats. Moshe sees the future and spans the generations and is aware of the eternity of Israel and its never ending attachment to the Land of Israel.

And he knows that the eventual destiny of the people of Israel is inextricably bound up with the Land of Israel. And therefore in the midst of his tears over his own unfulfilled hopes and wishes he states words of encouragement and steadfast blessing to his beloved people.

It is part of the character greatness of Moshe that the people he serves always take precedence over his own personal pursuits and desires. As such, he is the model of what a Jewish religious leader should be. Even though there has never been another Moshe, his example still instructs and guides us. © 2009 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“When it shall be difficult for you, all of these things [d'varim, also may be translated "words"] will find you at the end of the days, and you shall return to the Lord your G-d and hearken to His voice" (Deut.4:30)

This past Thursday we all fasted to the bittersweet melody of the Scroll of Lamentations (Eicha) - angst-music whose haunting cadences rise from the depths of Jewish despair. But when mid-day arrived, we

got up from off the ground, our lagging spirits suddenly lifted as we put on our t'fillin adornments and recited the blessing of "comfort" (nahem) within the Amidah, a process that changes the mood of mourning while confirming the prophetic words of Zachariah, "Thus says the Lord G-d of hosts: the fast of the... fifth month [Tisha B'Av]... shall be for the house of Judah rejoicing, gladness and festival..." (Zachariah 8:19).

But how is it possible that the great tragic day of the Ninth of Av, a date when both Temples were destroyed, can become an occasion for joyous reprieve, even if only in the afternoon hours? What can we possibly be happy about?

I believe the answer is to be found in this week's Biblical reading wherein Moses provides a quintessential outline of Jewish history: settlement of Israel, corruption and idolatry, destruction and exile, assimilation [the Vilna Gaon interprets the references to worshipping wood and stone (4:28) as references to the 'wooden' crucifix, and the Kaaba, the Black Stone in Mecca] - but then eventual return to G-d and His land, because "...the Lord your G-d is a compassionate G-d who will not forget the covenant with your forbears which He has sworn to them" (Deut 4:25-31,38).

Indeed, we read these verses on the day of Tisha B'Av itself, the day in which we mark the loss of our national sovereignty. But at the same time we remember that although both sacred temples and even our sacred cities were destroyed, our nation was not! Unlike other peoples whose loss of homeland signaled a concomitant loss of national identity (look high and low in the U.N. to see if you can find traces of the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Babylonians...) we, the people of Israel, remained the people of the Covenant, our Torah mandating our mission and the promise of our eventual return to the land. The fact is that our survival as a separate ethnic and cultural entity for nearly 2000 years of exile is itself one of the greatest miracles in the scope of history.

I'd like to suggest that the seed for our ultimate rejoicing on the Ninth of Av is planted in the declaration, "...when it shall be difficult for you, these things [words] will find you... and you shall return..." (4:30). I have chosen to translate the phrase 'kol hadevarim' as "these words," emphasizing the idea that "these words" of the Torah shall find you in the depths of your suffering, in the midst of your exile and assimilation, and you shall return.

The source for this translation goes back to 1965, when Lincoln Square Synagogue, my first congregation, was housed in a small apartment on the West Side of Manhattan (150 West End Ave. 1D). One day I noticed a middle-aged gentleman who would enter the synagogue-apartment towards the end of the Torah reading, remain standing near the door, and quickly leave after the sermon. But on the Shabbat of Va'Ethanah he arrived towards the beginning of the reading - and as the aforementioned words were read,

he fled in tears. I ran out after him, and he later told me that his name was Wolf Reichard who grew up in a family of pious Satmar hassidim but completely gave up on religion when he graduated from the hell-hole called Auschwitz. Then, for some reason, when our small apartment-synagogue opened its door, he found himself attracted to the services, and despite his own private history of suffering he recognized a need emerging from his truest self. Upon hearing the Torah reader chant, "When it shall be difficult for you, all of these words will find you... and you shall return..." he knew he could no longer erase his past or escape from his future destiny: the words were an arrow into his heart and from then on he came to shul not only every Sabbath (from the beginning of services) but also every morning, and in celebration of his return, he generously provided our weekly Sabbath Kiddush.

In 1970, five years later, the truth of this translation was confirmed when the Lubavitcher Rebbe of blessed memory, asked me to open underground Yeshivot in the former Soviet Union. On my first day in Moscow I met a young man in front of my hotel, Leonid Lunya Rigerman. (Lunya, who would play a pivotal role in the historic struggle for Soviet Jewry, would become a special friend.) When he spotted me wearing a kippa, he asked if I was a religious Jew, and when I responded that I try to be, he invited me to his 30th birthday party. That's where I received first-hand reports of the Leningrad trials (communist "show" trials against a group of refuseniks who were accused of attempting to hijack a plane to Israel) and the extent of the virulent anti-Semitism in Russia. All of this described in perfect New York English, because it turned out that Lunya was born to Communist parents who in 1930 had made "aliyah" from Allerton Avenue in the Bronx to the Soviet Union. By the time we met he was already a committed Jew - a refusenik, keeping whatever mitzvot he could at great personal sacrifice.

He told me his story, how his transformation began because of words. A physicist, he worked in a special laboratory whose employees had the privilege of library study two hours each day. Suffering painful headaches, unable to concentrate, he decided he needed a bit of a break from his laboratory experiments, and found himself wandering over to the English shelf, which - in deference to American visitors - contained a Holy Bible. He began to read and when he got to the Joseph story, he became fascinated, especially the section which describes how Joseph went out in search of his brothers. That's when he realized the Torah was speaking to him; he too was searching for his brothers and that they were not to be found in the physics lab.

He hurried over to Archipova Street where the Synagogue was located (needless to say, his communist parents never made him a bar mitzvah), joining a line which turned out to be waiting for matzah (that night was Seder night and the man in front of him explained that matzah was 'our freedom bread'). He put

the matzah in his pocket, said nothing to his family, ate his 'freedom bread' before going to sleep, and the next morning reported for work. But his job at the physics lab was terminated. A hidden camera outside the synagogue had photographed his presence. Thus ended the life of Lunya the Communist and began the history of Lunya the Jew. The words of the Torah had found him, too! © 2009 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion presents a grim forecast of the Jews' fortune. G-d says that following their entry into the land of Israel, the Jews would sin, resulting in their exile. The Torah then states: "And there you shall serve G-ds, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." (Deuteronomy 4:28) This sentence may be descriptive of further sins the Jewish people would commit once driven out of Israel. Yet, one could also look at it another way; not as a description of sin, but as part of the initial punishment Am Yisrael would bear.

Abarbanel describes the punishment as follows. Once exiled the Jews would worship idols. Although they would be aware of the false nature of these idols, they would be forced to serve them in order to protect themselves and save their lives. To paraphrase Abarbanel, this is not mentioned as a sin but a punishment. Despite their recognition in their hearts of their true G-d, they would have no choice but to pray to idols and lie about their true belief, a tortuous punishment indeed.

Biur agrees that the sentence is descriptive of punishment, yet sees the punishment differently than Abarbanel. Biur suggests that in exile we would find ourselves in a foreign culture imbued with a value system contrary to Torah. To restate Biur, there is no greater punishment than the soul drowning in the abomination of sin from which one cannot escape. There is no worse soulful pain and punishment than recognizing the evil of one's actions but not being able to withdraw-having become so accustomed to committing this sin (hergel aveirah).

Nehama Leibowitz points out that these two commentators reflect the challenges of their respective generations. Abarbanel lived in Spain in the latter part of the 15th century during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. It was then that the Catholic Church demanded that Jews worship their man-G-d, otherwise they would be killed. Hence, he sees the punishment here as descriptive of what his generation was experiencing. At the risk of being killed, Jews had no choice but to outwardly leave their faith.

Biur of Devarim was Hertz Hamburg who lived in the 18th century in Western Europe. The challenge of his generation was the enlightenment which

ensnared the Jewish people and caused rampant assimilation. The threat was not physical but spiritual. For Biur, our Torah speaks of Jews who leave the faith, not because their lives are threatened, but because they have been swept up in the temper of the times.

In truth, Abarbanel and Biur speak of the physical and spiritual tasks that we face throughout history. What both of these challenges have in common is the promise which immediately follows in the text that somehow against all odds we would extricate ourselves from that exile and return to G-d in fulfillment of G-d's covenant with the Jewish people. As the Torah states, "and from there you will seek the Lord your G-d." (Deuteronomy 4:29)

The season of Tisha B'Av not only commemorates our being forced into exile, but it forces us to focus on the low points and tragedies we have experienced as a people in the Diaspora. With this seasonal backdrop, the challenges brought forth in this parsha become frighteningly clear. And so, the Torah gives us a most appropriate reading for Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of comfort—a portion that describes reality, yet emerges with the promise of seeking out G-d and returning to a path of connection and holiness. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most profound disagreements in Judaism is that between Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi on the meaning of the first of the Ten Commandments. For Maimonides (1135-1204), the first command is to believe in G-d, creator of heaven and earth: "The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realise that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If however it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist... To acknowledge this truth is a positive command, as it is said: 'I am the Lord your G-d' (Ex. 20:2, Deut 5:7)." (Yesodei ha-Torah, 1:1-5)

Judah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1145) disagreed. The greatest of medieval Hebrew poets, Halevi also wrote one of Judaism's philosophical masterpieces, The Kuzari. It is framed as a dialogue between a rabbi and the King of the Khazars. Historically, the Khazars were a Turkish people who, between the seventh and eleventh centuries, ruled a considerable area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, including southern Russia, northern Caucasus, eastern Ukraine, Western Kazakhstan, and northwestern Uzbekistan.

Many Jewish traders and refugees lived there, and in 838 the Khazar King Bulan converted to

Judaism, after supposedly holding a debate between representatives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. The Arabic writer Dimashqi writes that the Khazars, having encountered the Jewish faith, "found it better than their own and accepted it". Khazaria thus became, spiritually as well as geographically, an independent third force between the Muslim Caliphate and the Christian Byzantine Empire. After their conversion, the Khazar people used Jewish personal names, spoke and wrote in Hebrew, were circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the Torah and Talmud, and observed the Jewish festivals.

The Kuzari is Judah Halevi's philosophy of Judaism, cast in the form of the imagined conversation between the King and a rabbi that led to the King's conversion. In it, Halevi draws a portrait that is diametrically opposed to what would later become Maimonides' account. Judaism, for Halevi, is not Aristotelian but counter-Aristotelian. The G-d of the prophets, says Halevi, is not the G-d of the philosophers. The key difference is that whereas the philosophers found G-d in metaphysics, the prophets found G-d in history.

This is how Halevi's rabbi states his faith: "I believe in the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land, after having brought them through the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way..." (Kuzari I:11)

He goes on to emphasise that G-d's opening words in the revelation at Mount Sinai were not, "I am the Lord your G-d, creator of heaven and earth" but "I am the Lord your G-d "I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Kuzari I: 25).

Halevi lived before Maimonides. Nachmanides (R. Mosheh ben Nachman, 1194-1270) lived after, but he too disagreed with Maimonides' interpretation of the opening verse of the Ten Commandments. His objection is based on a passage in the Mekhilta: "'You shall have no other G-ds besides me.' Why is this said? Because it says, 'I am the Lord your G-d.' To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province. His servants said to him, 'Issue decrees for the people.' He, however, told them, 'No. When they accept my sovereignty, I will issue decrees. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, how will they carry out my decrees?'"

According to Nachmanides the verse, "I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is not a command, but a preliminary to the commands. It explains why the Israelites should be bound by the will of G-d. He had rescued them, liberated them, and brought them to safety. The first verse of the Decalogue is not a law but a statement of fact, a reason why the Israelites should accept G-d's sovereignty.

Thanks to a series of archeological discoveries in the twentieth century, we now know that Nahmanides was right. The biblical covenant has the same literary structure as ancient near eastern political treaties, of which the oldest known are the "Stele of the Vultures" (before 2500 BCE), recording the victory of Eannatum, king of Lagash, over the people of Umma, both in southern Mesopotamia, and the treaty of Naram-Sin, king of Kish and Akkad, with the people of Elam (c. 2280 BCE). Other, later treaties have also been discovered, involving Hittites, Arameans and Assyrians. One details a pact between the Hittite king Hattusilis III and the Pharaoh Rameses II, regarded by some scholars as the Pharaoh of the exodus. These treaties usually follow a six-part pattern, of which the first three elements were [1] the preamble, identifying the initiator of the treaty, [2] a historical review, summarizing the past relationship between the parties, and [3] the stipulations, namely the terms and conditions of the covenant. The first verse of the Ten Commandments is a highly abridged form of [1] and [2]. "I am the Lord your G-d" is the preamble. "Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is the historical review. The verses that follow are the stipulations, or as we would call them, the commands. Nachmanides and the Midrash are therefore correct in seeing the verse as an introduction, not a command.

What is at stake in this difference of opinion between Maimonides on the one hand, Judah Halevi and Nachmanides on the other? At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of the nature of G-d and His relationship to the universe. G-d is creator of the universe and the maker of the human person "in His image". This aspect of G-d is universal. It is accessible to anyone, Jew or gentile. Aristotle arrived at it through logic and metaphysics. For him, G-d was the "prime mover" who set the universe into motion. Today, many people reach the same conclusion through science: the universe is too finely tuned for the emergence of life to have come into being through chance (this is sometimes called the anthropic principle). Some arrive at it not through logic or science but through a simple sense of awe and wonder ("Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical" said Wittgenstein). This aspect of G-d is called by the Torah, Elokim.

There is, however, a quite different aspect of G-d which predominates throughout most of Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. This is G-d as He is involved in the fate of one family, one nation: the children of Israel. He intervenes in their history. He makes a highly specific covenant with them at Sinai- not at all like the general one He made with Noah and all humanity after the Flood. The Noahide covenant is simple and basic. The sages said it involved a mere seven commands. The Sinai covenant, by contrast, is highly articulated, covering almost every conceivable aspect of life. This aspect of G-d is signaled by the use of the four-letter name for which we traditionally substitute (since the

word itself is holy and could only be pronounced by the High Priest) the word Hashem (on the two aspects and names, see Kuzari IV:1-3; and Ramban to Exodus 3:13).

Maimonides, the philosopher, emphasized the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of G-d. Judah Halevi and Nachmanides, the one a poet, the other a mystic, were more sensitive to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of G-d in the historical drama of the covenant. Both are true and valid, but in this case, Halevi and Nachmanides are closer to the meaning of the biblical text. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

"Be comforted, be comforted, my nation, your G-d says" [Yeshayahu 40:1]. This consolation, which has accompanied us throughout our long period of exile, is especially relevant for the unique time and place where we stand today. "For its time is over, its sin has been forgiven, it has received twice its punishment for all its sins" [40:2]. As long as the sins of the nation have not reached the full measure, there can be no consolation. How can the nation be comforted when they know that the light of day has not yet shined down on them? Only now, when we dwell on our land, can we be sure that the full consolation has arrived.

What is consolation? It is what the prophet describes: "Its time is over, its sin has been forgiven." Our hearts ask: How can we state that G-d has punished us with all that we deserve and that we will not receive any more punishment for our sins, while we see with our own eyes how our situation constantly deteriorates? How can we perceive the light of redemption when our heart feels how desperate and complex our situation is, when we are surrounded on all sides by difficulties that never occurred in all the generations of our ancestors? The answer of the prophet remains: "For its time is over, its sin has been forgiven."

We have been taught that the son of King David will come only in a generation which is completely righteous or a generation which is totally guilty. This needs further clarification. It is easy to see why the redemption will come to a generation that is completely innocent and righteous, but why should the Mashiach come to a generation that is guilty? The masters of mysticism have explained: this refers to a situation where the people are completely innocent and totally guilty at the same time-good on the inside but bad on the outside. Estrangement, hesitation, and weakness continue to exist, as we can plainly see. But within, in

the secret souls of Yisrael-including each and every individual-everything is good and properly mended, innocent and desirable.

There are children's diseases which do not become visible on the surface until they are almost completely cured. A child may appear to be very healthy for a very long time, while the disease develops within him without our knowledge. Suddenly, he wakes up one day covered by a rash. The parents rush to a doctor, who says that while the child is sick he is on the way to being cured. How can this be? Once the disease has become visible on the surface, it has started to leave the body inside.

With respect to the first sinners, Bnei Yisrael during the destruction of the First Temple, both the sins and the length of time of the exile was explicitly revealed. For the next group, at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, neither the type of sin nor the time of exile was revealed. There has been no previous generation whose sin has been revealed as openly as ours, and no previous generation has experienced such an overt revelation of the end of exile such as in ours-"Be comforted, my nation."

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah introduces a special series of haftorah readings related to our final redemption.

In this opening one the prophet Yeshaya delivers the Jewish people warm words of comfort from Hashem. After over one thousand years of exile the time will finally arrive for the Jewish nation to return to Hashem and His Promised Land. But, as Chazal explain (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, 445) the painful scars of exile, persecution, and rejection will remain fresh in their minds and it will be difficult to approach Hashem and rebuild a relationship. In addition, they will remember vividly all their acts of defiance and will be embarrassed to return to Hashem. Hashem therefore turns to His nation and expresses to them warm words of comfort and console.

Hashem instructs the prophet Yeshaya, "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call her because her long term has been served and her sin has been forgiven." (40:2) After all of this time, the Jewish people will find it difficult to accept that Hashem is truly interested in them. Although, the time for redemption has arrived they have not thoroughly cleansed themselves from all of their wrongdoings. They question how they could entertain establishing a perfect relationship with Hashem without having even perfected their ways. Hashem responds, "Her sins have been forgiven because she suffered an abundant and full measure for them." (ibid.) The Malbim (ad loc.) explains this to mean that the harsh severity of their sufferings will compensate for their incomplete steps of repentance. The Jewish people deserve their redemption after

enduring and outliving the most horrifying and tragic experiences with steadfast faith in Hashem. During their painful exile they consistently demonstrated unwavering commitment to Hashem and an inseparable attachment to Him.

Our Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya 443, Beraishis 162) share with us an additional dimension about Yeshaya's words of comfort. They quote a passage in Shir Hashirim referring to the era of the final redemption and the profound statement the Jewish people will make then. They plead to Hashem, "If only, You could be like a brother to me." (Shir Hashirim 8:1) Chazal see this brotherly relationship as a reference to the indescribable compassion that Yosef Hatzadik showed his brothers. After the atrocious behavior the tribes displayed towards Yosef they could never forgive themselves for those misguided actions. They therefore delivered a message to Yosef beseeching Him to forgive them without harboring any ill feelings towards them. In response to their plea, the Torah states "And Yosef comforted them and spoke to their hearts." (Breishis 50:21) Chazal explain that mere words of comfort and assurance were not sufficient to allay their fears. Yosef therefore saw it appropriate to appeal to their hearts and redirect their thinking. He convinced his brothers how meaningful they were to him and how their safety and prominence served as key factors in his attaining and maintaining his position of glory.

The Jewish people express their wish that Hashem act in this same manner with them. They find it impossible to forgive themselves for all the wrong they have done to Hashem. However, as Yosef appealed to his brothers' hearts and redirected their thinking, Hashem can certainly do the same. They plead with Hashem to remove any trace of ill feelings for all their years of unfairness to Him. Chazal conclude that as Yosef allayed his brothers' fears Hashem will do the same for His people. Therefore, when instructing Yeshaya to comfort the Jewish people, Hashem states, "Comfort them and speak to their hearts." Yeshaya, as Yosef, is charged with a mission of conveying to the Jewish people how significant each and every one of them is to Hashem.

Yeshaya faithfully says to the Jews, "Hashem will lead you like a shepherd tends his flock, gathers them in his arm, carries them in his bosom and gently leads young ones." (40: 11) Yeshaya informs them that Hashem does care about every Jewish soul as a shepherd cares for each of his sheep. Although the Jewish people had previously strayed and suffered so much for their wrongdoing Hashem still cares about them in indescribable measures. Yeshaya beckons the Jews not to be hesitant or embarrassed to return. Hashem cares so much for each one of them that He will personally escort them back to Him.

Yeshaya continues, " Who measured the depths of the water by his fists, the span of the heavens by his hand, the width of the land by the measure of

three fingers or the weight of mountains and hills on a scale? Behold the nations are but a remaining drop in a bucket, the rust of a scale." (40:

12,15) Although in our eyes, the entire world and its inhabitants are of enormous proportions, in the eyes of Hashem they are but tiny miniscule dots. They all serve a general purpose but the concern and focus of Hashem is not specifically upon them. Yeshaya concludes, "Lift your eyes heavenward and see who created these, He who brings out the myriads by number and to each He calls by name. (40: 26) The prophet is referring to the millions of stars found in the heaven. Each of them serves a specific purpose and is identified by name at all times. Each star is significant and every one occupies a prominent position in the master plan of Hashem.

In view of all the above we can suggest the following interpretation to the final words of the haftorah. Dovid Hamelech in Sefer Tehillim (Psalm 147) makes a similar reference to the stars in the heavens. He says, "Hashem is the builder of Yerushalayim; He will gather in the dispersed of Israel. He counts the stars by number, to all He calls by name. (147: 2,4) The Ibn Ezra interprets Dovid Hamelech's profound verses in the following manner. The Jewish people have been scattered all over the world which should be indicative of their insignificance. To this Dovid Hamelech responds and reminds us that the stars are also scattered over the vast span of the horizon. However, Hashem knows every one of them and identifies him by name and purpose. In this same vein Hashem knows every Jewish person and identifies with him by his individual name and purpose. Following this thought we can appreciate Yeshaya's words in this same manner. At the time of redemption Hashem will display His appreciation for each and every Jewish soul and personally escort him back to Eretz Yisroel. Every Jewish person counts because he occupies an important role in the scheme of the glory of Hashem. To Hashem every Jewish soul is greatly significant because his personal role adds a unique and distinct dimension to the majesty of Hashem. May we merit soon the realization of these comforting words with the coming of Mashiach and the ingathering of the exiles. © 2009 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vaetchanan begins with Moshe pleading to be able to enter Israel. The Gemara (tractate) brings a question posed by Rav Simlai, who wonders why Moshe needed to go into Israel so much that he had to beg for it. He answers that there are many Mitzvot (commandments) that can only be performed in Israel, and Moshe needed to perform them. The Chassam Sofer, however, questions the

wording of Rav Simlai. Who said Moshe needed to go into Israel? Couldn't it be that he simply WANTED to?

The Chassam Sofer answers that Moshe saw an opportunity to do more Mitzvot, and although they weren't in front of him (he had to go into Israel to perform them), he still felt the need to perform them, and did what he could to be able to complete them. In contrast, when was the last time we begged anyone to be able to do a Mitzvah? In fact, do we perform all the Mitzvot that we CAN? How many times have we even deliberately walked away from a chance to help someone? We should strive to be like Moshe, and work to appreciate, take advantage of, and especially LEARN about all the opportunities we are given, to do something good both for G-d, for each other, and ultimately for ourselves! © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And you shall guard your soul very much" (Deut. 4:15).

What do we learn from this verse?

The Torah is commanding us to guard our health. The Chofetz Chaim noted that the Torah uses the term nefesh, which refers to the soul, and does not write "guard your body." This comes to teach us that whenever we are involved in matters pertaining to the welfare of our body-such as business matters or eating, one must be very careful not to do anything that will be harmful to his soul. Before doing anything for your body's need, give careful thought not to do anything against the will of the Almighty.

A person is sent to this world by the Almighty to do His will; this should be one's motivation in all that he does. Even when you are engaged in the needs of your body, realize that this is part of your mission in this world- it is the will of the Almighty that you guard your health.

One must guard one's physical and emotional health. It is important to keep in mind that different people have very different needs such as the amount of sleep one requires. Be aware of your true needs and act accordingly. *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*



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