Ki Tavo 5773 Volume XX Number 49

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Ki Tavo begins with the ceremony of bringing firstfruits to the Temple. The Mishnah (Bikkurim 3) gives a detailed account of what happened:

"Those that were near to Jerusalem brought fresh figs and grapes, and those that were far away brought dried figs and raisins. Before them went the ox, its horns overlaid with gold, and with a wreath of olive leaves on its head.

"The flute was played before them until they came near Jerusalem. When they were near to Jerusalem, they sent messengers before them and bedecked their first fruits. The rulers and the prefects and the treasurers of the Temple went forth to meet them. According to the honour due to them that came in, they used to go forth. All the craftsmen in Jerusalem used to rise up the for them and greet them, saying, 'Brothers, men of such-and-such a place, you are welcome.'

"The flute was played before them until they reached the Temple Mount. When they reached the Temple Mount, even King Agrippa would take his basket on his shoulder and enter in as far as the Temple Court..."

It was a magnificent ceremony. In historical context, however, its most significant aspect was the declaration each individual had to make: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders." (Deut. 26: 5-10)

This passage is well-known. It became the text expounded as part of the Haggadah on seder night on Pesach. Its familiarity, though, should not blind us to its revolutionary character. Listening to these words, we are in the presence of one of the greatest revolutions in the history of thought.

The ancients saw the gods in nature, never more so than in thinking about the harvest and all that accompanied it. Nature does not change. Natural time is cyclical -- the seasons of the year, the revolution of the planets, the cycle of birth, death and new life. When the ancients thought about the past, it was not the historical but a mythical / metaphysical / cosmological past -- the primeval time-before-time when the world was formed out of the struggle between the elements.

That is precisely what did not happen in ancient Israel. It might have been otherwise. Had Judaism been a different kind of religion, the people bringing firstfruits might have recited a song of praise to G-d as the author of creation and sustainer of life. We find several such songs in the Book of Psalms: "Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; / make music to our G-d on the harp. / He covers the sky with clouds; / he supplies the earth with rain / and makes grass grow on the hills, / and bread that sustains his heart." (Ps. 147: 7-8)

The significance of the firstfruits declaration is that it is not about nature but about history: a thumbnail sketch of the sequence of events from the days of the patriarchs to the exodus and then conquest of the land. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi gave the best analysis of the intellectual transformation this involved: "It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view... Suddenly, as it were, the crucial encounter between man and the divine shifted away from the realm of nature and the cosmos to the plane of history, conceived now in terms of divine challenge and human response... Rituals and festivals in ancient Israel are themselves no longer primarily repetitions of mythic archetypes meant to annihilate historical time. Where they evoke the past, it is not the primeval but the historical past, in which the great and critical moments of Israel's history were fulfilled... Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people." (Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, p.8-9)

This history was not academic, the province of scholars or a literary elite. It belonged to everyone. The declaration was recited by everyone. Knowing the story of one's people was an essential part of citizenship in the community of faith. Not only that, but it was also said in the first person: "My father... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt... He brought us to this place". It is this internalization of history that led the rabbis to say: "In each generation, every person should see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt" (Mishnah Pesachim 10: 5). This is history transformed into memory.

To be a Jew is to be part of a story that extends across forty centuries and almost every land on the face of the earth. As Isaiah Berlin put it: "All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews are steeped in history. They have longer memories, they are aware of

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a longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived... Whatever other factors may have entered into the unique amalgam which, if not always Jews themselves, at any rate the rest of the world instantly recognizes as the Jewish people, historical consciousness -- sense of continuity with the past -- is among the most powerful." (Against the Current, p. 252)

Despite Judaism's emphasis on the individual, it has a distinctive sense of what an individual is. We are not alone. There is no sense in Judaism of the atomic individual -- the self in and for itself -- we encounter in Western philosophy from Hobbes onwards. Instead, our identity is bound up horizontally with other individuals: our parents, spouse, children, neighbours, members of the community, fellow citizens, fellow Jews. We are also joined vertically to those who came before us, whose story we make our own. To be a Jew is to be a link in the chain of the generations, a character in a drama that began long before we were born and will continue long after our death.

Memory is essential to identity -- so Judaism insists. We did not come from nowhere; nor does our story end with us. We are leaves on an ancient tree, chapters in a long and still-being-written story, a letter in the scroll of the book of the people of the Book.

There is something momentous about this historical sense. It reflects the fact -- itself one of the great themes of the Bible -- that it takes time for human beings to learn, to grow, to rise beyond our often dysfunctional and destructive instincts, to reach moral and spiritual maturity and create a society of dignity and generosity. That is why the covenant is extended over time and why -- according to the sages -- the only adequate guarantors of the covenant at Mount Sinai were the children yet to be born.

That is as near as we get to immortality on earth: to know that we are the guardians of the hopes of our ancestors, and the trustees of the covenant for the sake of the future. That is what happened in Temple times when people brought their firstfruits to Jerusalem and, instead of celebrating nature, celebrated the history of their people from the days when "My father was a wandering Aramean" to the present. As Moses said in some of his last words to posterity: "Remember the days of old; / consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you." (Deut. 32: 7)

To be a Jew is to know that the history of our people lives on in us. *© 2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"If you don't obey the Lord your G-d and all His commandments and statutes, then these curses shall come upon you." (Deuteronomy 28: 15)

I had never been to this particular shul before, this renovated hospital turned into a synagogue about two miles from where I grew up in Brooklyn. Nor had I ever prayed with Hassidim. But the Klausenberger Rebbe was particularly well-known as a saintly Hassidic rebbe who had re-settled those of his Hassidim who had survived the Holocaust in and around the Beth Moses Hospital, in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. And so, one summer morning in 1952 on the Shabbat of Ki Tavo I set out from my home on Hart Street to the world of black gabardines and round fur hats, eager for the opportunity to be in the presence of a truly holy man and to experience a Hassidic prayer service.

Now the Torah reading of Ki Tavo is punctuated by 53 verses which catalog the punishments in store for Israel when they forsake G-d's teaching: "If you don't obey the Lord your G-d and all His commandments and statutes, then these curses shall come upon you... G-d will smite you with consumption and with a fever and with an inflammation and with an extreme burning and with the sword... G-d will turn your rain into dust, and it will come from the skies to destroy you... And your corpses shall be meat for all the birds of the sky and for beasts of the earth. G-d will smite you with madness and blindness and a confusion of the heart. G-d will bring a nation from afar against you, from the end of the earth, swooping down like an eagle, a nation whose language you don't understand. A haughty arrogant nation which has no respect for the old nor mercy for the young." (Deuteronomy 28:15- 50).

It's easy to understand why Jewish custom mandates that these verses be read in a low voice. The tochacha ("warning") is not something we're very eager to hear, but if we have to hear it as part of the Torah cycle, then the hushed words, without the usual dramatic chant, are shocking.

I arrived at the huge study hall even before the morning service had begun - and although I was the only pre-bar mitzvah boy in the congregation not wearing a black gabardine, I felt swept up by the intensity of the people praying, swaying and shouting as though they suspected that the Almighty might not bend His ear, as it were, to a quieter service of the heart.

Then came the Torah reading. In accordance with the custom, the Torah reader began to chant the Warnings in a whisper. And unexpectedly, almost inaudibly but unmistakably, the Yiddish word "hecher"

("louder") came from the direction of the lectern upon which the rebbe was leaning at the eastern wall of the synagogue.

The Torah reader stopped reading for a few moments; the congregants looked up from their Bibles in questioning and even mildly shocked silence. Could they have heard their rebbe correctly? Was he ordering the Torah reader to go against time-honored custom and chant the tochacha out loud? The Torah reader continued to read in a whisper, apparently concluding that he had not heard what he thought he heard. And then the rebbe banged on his lectern, turned to face the stunned congregation and cried out in Yiddish, with a pained expression on his face and fire blazing in his eyes: "I said louder! Read these verses out loud! We have nothing to fear, we've already experienced the curses. Let the Master of the Universe hear them. Let Him know that the curses have already befallen us, and let Him know that it's time for Him to send the blessings!" The rebbe turned back to the wall, and the Torah reader continued slowly chanting the cantillation out loud. I was trembling, with tears cruising down my cheeks, my body bathed in sweat. I had heard that the rebbe lost his wife and 11 children in the Holocaust - but refused to sit shiva for them because he could not spare a moment from the task of trying to save Jewish lives by enabling them to leave Europe. He himself refused a visa for America, until the majority of his Hassidim had been saved. His words seared into my heart.

I could hardly concentrate on the conclusion of the Torah reading. "It's time for Him to send the blessings!" After the Additional Service ended, the rebbe rose to speak. His words were again short and to the point, but this time his eyes were warm with love leaving an indelible expression on my mind and soul. "My beloved brothers and sisters," he said, "Pack up your belongings. We must make one more move - hopefully the last one. G-d promises that the blessings which must follow the curses will now come. They will come - but not from America. The blessings will only come from Israel. It is time for us to go home."

And so Kiryat Sanz - Klausenberg was established in Netanya where the rebbe built a Torah Center as well as the Laniado Medical Center. And an impressionable 12-year-old boy received his first - and most profound - lesson in modern Zionism.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha describes the two very different situations in Jewish life that have been present throughout our long history as a people. One situation is when we inhabited and controlled our own land - the Land of Israel. That is clearly indicated in the opening words of the parsha - ki tavo - when you will come into your land. The second much more difficult situation is outlined again in the parsha in the bitter, lengthy and detailed description of the lot of the Jewish people in exile, scattered amongst hostile nations and violent hatreds.

Over the many millennia of the Jewish story, we have been in exile far longer than we were at home in the Land of Israel. It is significant that the recounting of the troubles and persecutions of the exile of Israel from its land occupies greater space (and perhaps even greater notice) in the parsha than does the section relating to our living in the Land of Israel.

The Land of Israel carried with it special commandments and rituals as described in the parsha such as various types of 'maaser' - tithing - and 'bikurim' - the first fruits of the agricultural year. The description of the exile posed problems of demographic extinction and continued tension, fear and a constant state of uncertainty. In the words of the parsha itself, the conditions of the exile were capable of driving people into insanity and fostered hopelessness.

Yet the strange, almost unfathomable result was that the Jewish people survived, created and at times even thrived under the conditions of the exile, while our record as a national entity living in our own country was much spottier. Jews are a special people but our behavior is oftentimes strange and counterproductive. We don't seem to deal too well with success and stability.

By the grace of G-d we are once again back in our lands. After seeing the words of the parsha, in all of its terror fulfilled, literally, seventy years ago, we have nevertheless restored our national sovereignty, built a wonderful country and an intriguing society, and are engaged in facing great challenges as to our future development here in the Land of Israel.

We would indeed be wise to remember why we failed in the past in our nation building and why, paradoxically, we succeeded in achieving major successes while in exile and under very negative circumstances. Straying from the path of Torah and tradition has always brought us to harm. Adopting foreign cultures and fads that are temporarily popular and extolled is not the way to fulfillment of our national interest and purpose.

Our historical experiences both in the Land of Israel and in the exile have taught us this clear lesson. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to repeat these errors once more. Coming into our land carries with it the challenges of living in holiness and having a special relationship with our Creator. Our efforts should be concentrated in strengthening and broadening that relationship. It may be wise for us to discard the bath water of the exile now that we have returned home. But we must preserve at all costs the baby - the Torah and its values - that has brought us home to the land that the Lord has promised to us.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As the Jews prepare to enter Israel after 40 years of desert migration, Moshe (Moses) reminds them of the miracles they have seen. He then proclaims "But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear until this day." (Deuteronomy 29:3) What is the meaning of "until this day?" Can it be that prior to that moment, the Jews did not believe?

Rashi quotes the classic Midrash that on that day, Moshe gave the actual scroll of the Torah to the Levites. The rest of the Jewish people felt excluded and protested. Impressed by their love of the Torah, Moshe proclaims that it was on that day that the Jews showed how deeply they believe.

Other thoughts come to mind related to the upcoming High Holidays.

Perhaps only after living through the miracles of the Egyptian exodus and the desert wanderings, could the Jewish people finally look back and recognize the magnitude of what they had experienced. It often occurs that one can only appreciate a miraculous moment long after it happens. So too, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur teach us all to look back over the year and with the distance of time, recognize what G-d has done for us.

A contrary thought can be suggested. Rather than emphasizing miracles as the key to faith, it is the everyday that leads to true belief. In fact, the test of people is not how they believe when experiencing a supernatural moment, but how they commit themselves when living a normal everyday existence. Only now, after 40 years, when miracles were no longer as overt, would the Jews really show their faith in G-d. One can similarly argue that it is easy to make a commitment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when one is experiencing the awesome power of the spirit of the holiday. The test is one's preparedness to follow through; remaining committed even after the dust has settled.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his Meshekh Hohmah offers an alternative idea. He suggests that throughout Moshe's life, the Jews may have blurred his role, sensing that Moshe was more than an emissary of G-d - believing perhaps that he was G-d Himself. This is a common mistake made in many other religions-the turning of the lead prophet into a G-d. Only on the day that Moshe died, would the Jews unequivocally declare their absolute belief that no human can be G-d. This, in fact, is a central message of the Days of Awe. Hence, the morning service on Rosh Hashanah begins with the coronation of G-d alone as we emphatically cry out "Ha-Melekh-The King." Yom Kippur brings this thought to a crescendo as we conclude the service with the refrain, "Hashem hu Ha-Elokim - The Lord is The G-d."

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, much like this week's portion, are a renewal of that final day in the desert, when we reflect on the miracles in our lives, find the Divine in the everyday and assert the rulership of G-d alone.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Today I have told Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the land that G-d has sworn to our forefathers would be given to us" (D'varim 26:3). These are the first words spoken by one who brings his "bikurim" (first fruits) to the Temple in Jerusalem (Rambam, Laws of Bikurim 3:10). Or are they? In his commentary on the Mishna (Bikurim 1:1) the Rambam explains the "reading" as starting from "An Arami (referring to Lavan) tried to destroy my father (Yaakov)" (D'varim 26:5). Tosfos Chadishim (Bikurim 3:6) points out that Rabbeinu Ovadia from Bartenura follows the explanation given in Rambam's commentary regarding where the reading starts, despite an explicit Mishna (3:6) saying that it starts from the earlier verse (see also Mishna Rishona on Bikurim 1:1). Which is actually considered the beginning of the Bikurim statement, saying that he has come to the Promised Land or recapping the nation's history?

Additionally, as Rav Moshe Feinstein z"l points out (Darash Moshe 2), the language of that earlier verse seems inaccurate. Why is the farmer saying that he has come to the Land of Israel, when he has already been there for years? This procedure was followed throughout the entire Temple era, even after the Children of Israel had been in the Land of Israel for centuries. Yet each person who brings Bikurim makes it seem as if he just got there! How can we say something that is misleading (even if no one is being misled)?

Another aspect that deserves a closer look (as pointed out by Rav Mordechai Gifter z"l in Pirkay Torah) is that throughout the entire statement, G-d is referred to in the third person (e.g. "He brought us out of Egypt," "He brought us to this place" and "He gave us this land"), until the very last statement, where it switches to the second person ("I have brought the first fruits of the ground which you, G-d, gave to me"). Why is most of

the statement of gratitude said in the third person, and only the last line said directly to the One to whom thanks is being given? (Rav Gifter suggests that as we internalize all the things G-d has done for us, and truly appreciate the gifts He has given us (including the produce), we feel closer to Him, including having the sensation that we are standing in His presence.)

One of the purposes of bringing the first fruits to the Temple is to demonstrate our recognition that, despite all the work that was put in, and that the land has been "owned" by the family for generations, it all came from G-d. Not just the fruits themselves, but the land as well. In order to accomplish this, the farmer must recall the history of the land, and how it didn't always belong to his family. Just as every Pesach we must consider it as if we were slaves in Egypt (even though it happened over 3,000 years ago), the farmer must consider it as if the land has just been given to him. [Rav Yitzchok Sorotzkin (Rinas Yitzchok II) takes it a step further, as we couldn't have gotten to the Promised Land without first leaving Egypt; if we must consider it as if we ourselves have left Egypt, then, by extension, we must consider it as if we ourselves have come to the land.] Just as on Pesach we tell over the story of the Exodus through the Haggada, the farmer has a "haggada" ("higadeti hayom") to tell. Through the process of the Bikurim, the farmer will (hopefully) gain a full appreciation of all that G-d has done for him (and the nation as a whole).

This process starts when the farmer leaves his hometown area, with a whole entourage (Bikurim 3:2-3). When they approached Yerushalayim, they were welcomed by the local leaders, who joined them until they reached the Temple (3:3-4). At this point, the farmer tells the Kohain (see D'varim 26:3) that he has come to the land that G-d had promised to his ancestors. After the Kohain takes the basket of fruit and "places it before G-d's altar" (26:4), the farmer "answers" the rest of his statement of thanks (26:5). What was the farmer "answering"? Rashi says it means raising his voice, indicating that a new stage of the process is starting. Ibn Ezra's first suggestion is that the Kohain asks what it is that the farmer brought; if so, then the "answer" should just be "my first fruit," not a recap of our national history. Perhaps the Kohain questioned how the farmer could think he just entered the land if the nation has already been here for years/decades/centuries. In response (or, according to Rashi, to begin the next stage of the process), the farmer recites a brief history of the nation, recalling what G-d has done for his ancestors, leading up to His giving the Land of Israel to the Children of Israel, indicating that he considers it as if G-d has just given him the land.

The Chinuch says that in order to fully comprehend and feel the impact of the statement, it must be read aloud, as actually saying the words has a far greater effect than just thinking them. But, as Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi points out, the words are being said not to G-d, but to himself. They are a vehicle through which the farmer can fully recognize that the harvest and the land are gifts from G-d. By recalling the history, he gains a perspective of his place in that history, that it was only because of G-d's promise to his ancestors, and His taking the nation out of Egypt and bringing them to the land, that enabled him to have any first fruits in the first place. Since the farmer is not talking directly to G-d yet, but reviewing why he considers it as if he just came to the Promised Land, G-d is referred to in the third person.

After internalizing this, the farmer then directs his words to G-d Himself, thanking him for all the good He bestowed upon him. (This is similar to our saying "P'sukay d'Zimrah" at the beginning of our morning prayers, to awaken within us an appreciation of Who we are praying to. These "verses of praise" are said about G-d, prior to our addressing G-d directly.)

The process (in Yerushalayim) starts with the farmer saying he has entered the land that G-d had promised to his forefathers, but the "reading" that is designed to bring the farmer to a full appreciation of what G-d has done for him starts with the retelling of the history. Therefore, when the Mishna, and Rambam, refer to the "process" of bringing the Bikurim, the earlier verse is referenced, but when Rambam, and Bartenura, discuss the "reading," they are only referring to the part of the process that starts with the historical overview.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "G-d will raise you up for Himself as a holy nation, as He swore to you, if you will keep the commandments of G-d, your Lord, and walk in His ways."

What does it mean "to walk in His ways"?

From this phrase in the Torah we learn our obligation to emulate the Almighty. The Sefer HaChinuch elaborates, "Just as G-d is merciful and compassionate, so too must we be merciful and compassionate."

The Torah does not merely forbid actions that stem from cruelty and hatred. Negative feelings towards others are in themselves wrong. Our attributes should be like those that the Torah ascribes to the Almighty.

Rabbi Shmuel Salant, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, was constantly besieged by people for rulings or personal advice. His family suggested that he set hours to receive the public so that he could get some rest. Rabbi Salant refused, "I can't agree to that in view of the fact that we are obligated to emulate the attributes of G-d. He does not limit Himself to having special hours when He can be reached, as we attest to in the Grace after meals, 'You constantly sustain us, every day, at all times, and at all hours.' "

If a person does someone else a favor solely with the intention of fulfilling the commandment of "Love your neighbor," this is not sufficient to fulfill the obligation of emulating G-d. Emulating G-d requires that it should become part of our very nature to help others. (Alei Shur, pp. 84-85) ***Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2013 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com***

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"If you listen carefully to G-d, your G-d, and observe and to do all His commandments which I command you today..." (Devarim 28:1)

We navigate in life by paying attention to signs. If we are traveling by car we look for road signs, or familiar countryside. If we travel through time then also we look for signs, those things or events that remind us what time of year it is.

For me, personally, Parashas Ki Savo is such a sign. When we reach this ominous parshah that contains 96 potential curses that can befall the Jewish people for straying from Torah, I begin to feel uneasy. Ready or not, and usually not, Rosh Hashanah is about to begin, and judgment, once again, is at hand.

They both deal with the same issue, Rosh Hashanah and Parashas Ki Savo. The latter tells us straight out what we're supposed to be, and the former judges our progress. The latter warns of the consequences for taking our task lightly, and the former decides to what extent we have done so and therefore deserve any of those consequences.

At the heart of the matter is something the Arizal calls an Adam Shalaim -- a Complete Person (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 18). No matter who we are, where we live, when we live, how we live, we all live to become one thing: an Adam Shalaim. It is both our ticket to the World-to-Come, and our present world, because there is no greater sense of accomplishment than becoming the complete you.

In Sha'ar HaGilgulim, the Arizal outlines the only way to achieve this goal. However, after learning it, it is clear that it requires some interpretation if it is to have a wider application, so that it can include not just a segment of the Jewish population, but all of it.

He writes (or at least Rav Chaim Vital did in his name): "Know that a man who only performs mitzvos merits the Nefesh called Asiyah, but not more. He is similar to a woman whose husband has gone overseas and has left her without clothing, food, or drink. He is like the Divine Presence that sits in exile and darkness while Its house lays in ruin. That is what a Nefesh of a person is like without a Ruach, which is its 'husband': it lacks light and a mind for understanding. If this person further makes an effort to be involved in Torah, constantly learning, thinking about, and teaching Oral Law, and always for its own sake, then he will merit the Ruach which is from Yetzirah.

"Then he will be like a woman whose husband has arrived, and who continuously lives with her in her house, clothing, feeding, giving her drink. She returns to her [appropriate] level. Such is the person within whom the Ruach comes and dwells within his Nefesh. Then his Nefesh will be filled with the spirit of wisdom, and his Nefesh will ascend from Asiyah to Yetzirah. If a person further tries to become involved in the Hidden Wisdom, the secrets of Torah, then he will merit to receive a Neshamah, which is from Beriyah. The Neshamah will shine within the Ruach and increase his level, adding wisdom to his wisdom, and he will them be called an Adam Shalaim -- a complete person.

"Regarding such a person it says: 'G-d made man in His image.'" (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 18)

Now, obviously everyone does not get a chance to learn Torah in life, at least not to the extent that we're talking about here. Does that mean that they will never get past the level of soul called Nefesh? And, even if someone merits to learn Mishnah and even Talmud, how many people get the opportunity, or use it, to learn Kabbalah? Are only the true Kabbalists, of which there aren't too many today, capable of receiving the level of soul called Neshamah?

Ideally, the system is the system, meaning that the best way to receive these levels of souls is as the Arizal has taught above. However, there is also room to say that each level of Torah learning represents an approach to life as well, and an attitude towards Avodas Hashem -- the service of G-d.

The whole point of Torah Sh'b'al Peh -- the Oral Law -- is that our speech should be used primarily for the sake of furthering our relationship with G-d. This is not just a function of the knowledge we learn from the Sea of the Oral Law, but also because speech represents our capacity to be G-dly. When G-d breathed a soul into man, it was speech that primarily resulted.

As the Zohar says, you can tell where a person is spiritually holding by what comes out of his or her mouth. In a very real sense, speech is the measure of the mixture of body and soul: the more the soul controls the person, the more spiritual his or her words will be. This is something that is possible to control for anyone who seeks a closer relationship with G-d.

As for Kabbalah, obviously the principle way to delve into it is by directly learning the holy works of the great Kabbalists. The point of doing so, however, is for the sake of deepening one's understanding of the world, our role within it, and how to better be a partner in the perfection of Creation. There is incredible depth, detail, and beauty in such works, but the main point of learning them is to better understand the world G-d made, and why He made it.

Not everyone merits to have access to such knowledge, and not everyone who gains access to it understands what they learn or what it means. But the desire to know what is behind Creation comes from

within all of us, and its starting point is taking some time to meditate on just how intricate Creation actually is. Today, more than ever, that is easy to do.

Once a person approaches life this way, then Heavenly help kicks in as well. This means a person can merit to know things that he otherwise might not have known based upon his existing means of education. The Rambam, or Maimonides, who many people say did not learn Kabbalah per se, said many Kabbalistic things. The conclusions he arrived at, with Heavenly help no doubt, were because of his intense desire to be close to G-d and to better understand His Creation.

As for our generation, we live in a unique time, educationally-speaking. The opportunity to learn Torah is unprecedented in recent times, which is why the Internet has become such a vehicle for evil. To maintain free-will, as the power of good increases, the power of evil must also become stronger, at least until Moshiach finally comes. When one outbalances the other, then free-will becomes limited, either in the direction of good or evil, depending upon which one has the upper hand at the time.

It also says in Sha'ar HaGilgulim that right before Moshiach comes, Sod, Kabbalah, will be easier to learn once again, as it was in the time of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai. One hundred years ago, without Ruach HaKodesh, some form of supernatural insight, it may have been difficult to understand how or why.

Today, both are easier to appreciate. A person needs a deep understanding of Torah to make sense of the events and spiritual opportunities today. And, with the help of modern technology, it is becoming easier to access the ancient wisdom that is so crucial for a correct modern understanding. For all we know, this is Heaven's way of allowing the final generations of history to finish off their personal rectifications before time runs out.

But, the starting point is knowing that you have to want to be an Adam Shalaim.

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

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

Summarized by Matan Glidai
Translated by Yoseif Bloch

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 5b) notes that only at the end of the Jewish people's forty-year sojourn in the desert does Moshe see fit to mention their ingratitude towards G-d, as we see throughout the Book of Devarim. Based on this, the Gemara asserts that "No one can know his teacher's mind before forty years' time." What is the significance of this observation? Does it really take four decades to learn a lesson?

To understand this, we need to employ the famous Talmudic analogy (Chagiga 15a) of tokh and kelippa: a core or kernel (tokh) of meaning, value and truth is often surrounded by a shell or husk (kelippa), which can take many forms. Chasidic thought differentiates between a kelippa of desire, which one may penetrate to reveal the truth, and a kelippa of falsehood, which has no tokh at its core. In such a case, the shell is truly empty.

Indeed, this is the challenge of our time, when we confront a new culture of falsehood. A generation ago, behind the Iron Curtain, there was a culture of obvious lies: everyone knew better than to lend credence to anything or rely on anyone. People believed solely in that which could benefit them pragmatically, not in what they were allowed to see. Now it is the mantra of the West which rules, that image is everything, that only kelippa counts. Within this culture of hidden lies, falsehood is attractively packaged and marketed. Whether it is commercial advertisement or political propaganda, modern media present us with enchanting and beautiful externals, the connection between them and the internal value of the product or person being negligible. There are even those who attempt to sell the tokh of Judaism in the same way, by exhibiting all of its ostensibly desirable and appealing elements, instead of delving into its content and depth.

The Yerushalmi (Chagiga 2:2) exposes the seriousness of this misconception. It tells us about two righteous men, one of whom died and then appeared to his friend to describe the afterlife. Among other things, he relates to him the fate of a woman by the curious name of Miriam Onion-Leaves, in whose ear the hinge of the gate of Gehinnom revolves. What did she do to earn this punishment? The Yerushalmi attributes it to her supposed piety in fasting, which she took pains to publicize, or, according to another opinion, to exaggerate. Nevertheless, the departed relates, Miriam is scheduled to be relieved of this onus by none other than Shimon ben Shetach, the Nasi (President of the Sanhedrin), who will replace her upon his passing. What was his sin? Before becoming nasi, he promised to use his position to eradicate the scourge of sorcery, but he failed to do so upon attaining his office. Upon hearing this, the friend immediately goes to Shimon ben Shetach, who undertakes to fulfill his campaign promise, while marveling that he had never even expressed it verbally to the public, but merely had resolved in his own heart to do so! What are we to glean from this passage?

This perplexing tale begins with Miriam Onion-Leaves, and it is her name that gives us the clue to unraveling this enigma. There is a striking difference between the onion and other vegetables: other vegetables have a kelippa and a tokh, but the onion has only the former; after each peel comes another peel. The onion is thus the symbol of things which have only an exterior, but no core. The Yerushalmi condemns that

which has no inner truth, that which merely consists of a nice package. Miriam Onion-Leaves pretends that her fasting is about a desire to better herself, but the core is a desire for public acclamation; Shimon ben Shetach fools himself into believing that he wants the position of nasi in order to eliminate paganism, but he soon forgets his resolve. It is the message from the next world that reminds the Nasi of the consequences of breaking a promise, even one made in his own mind.

Judaism demands that, just as one should not write a check unless he has funds to cover it in the bank, one must also have "coverage" for all his assertions, promises and even intentions. The Torah despises facades and hypocrisy. We must inspect our actions, making sure that they validate our words and thoughts. Indeed, this explains another detail, namely, that Miriam was punished through her ear. This alludes to the fact that she related to things as they sound, not as they truly are.

With this in mind, we can return to the Gemara in Avoda Zara cited above. The template of Moshe in the desert shows us that it is insufficient to memorize and declaim the rabbi's words verbatim, being satisfied with the way they appear at first glance, on a kelippa level. Instead, we must understand them well and plumb their depths, exposing the tokh. This requires a great deal of time, but it is the only way to ensure that at our core, we are people of truth. *(This sicha was delivered at se'uda shelishit of Shabbat Parashat Ki Tavo 5756 [1996].)*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

The Today Show

Today. It's a powerful word. It is used by doctors to define the exact moment their patients are to stop over-indulging, smoking, and drinking. It is used by accounts receivable to exact when they want their bills paid. Most importantly, it used by the Torah in describing what it wants from our attitudes.

This week the Torah portion tells us, Deuteronomy: 26:16: "Today Hashem commands you to perform these decrees and statutes." There is obviously a deeper connotation. The commandments were not given on the day that Moshe is reading this week's portion. They were given forty years prior. Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma: "Every day the Torah should appear to us as if it were given today." Thus, forty years later Moshe commands his people that today Hashem commanded us to observe the Torah.

With that beautiful interpretation of "today," in mind, I would like to shed a new perspective on a verse at the very end of this week's portion.

Moshe calls the nation together and reminds them of the miraculous events that transpired during the exodus from Egypt. He discusses (Deuteronomy 29:1-3), "the great wonders, signs, and miracles that your eyes beheld." Then he adds something shocking. "But Hashem did not give you a heart to understand or eyes to see until today."

What can the word "today" mean in this context? Did the Jewish nation not have the heart to appreciate the value of splitting the Red Sea forty years back? Did they not revel in the miracle of Manna from its first earthly descent decades previously? How can Moshe say that they did not have eyes to understand until today?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz* once gave an ethical discourse on inspiration and outcome. He told the story of three friends who were discussing the diligence of Talmudic sages of yesteryear. Upon hearing of the of one particular Gaon's remarkable achievements derived through tremendous constancy and unrelenting Torah study, one of the boys ran straight from the table to the Bais Medrash (Study Hall) where he began a marathon of Talmudic learning. For one year the young man refused to speak anything but Torah. He eventually became one of the leaders of his generation.

After the eloquent story, one of Rabbi Shmuelevitz's students asked him, "I think the story was amazing. But the boy who ran from the table forgot to bentsch (say grace after meals)!" Rav Chaim smiled at the pointed question. Then he nodded. "You are right. He did not bentsch. But had he stopped to recite the grace after meals along with its required preparations, he would never have returned to the Bais Medrash with the same enthusiasm."

Perhaps Moshe is telling his nation the secret of eternal inspiration. One may experience miraculous events. He may even have the vision of a lifetime. However he "will not have the heart to understand or the eyes to see" until that vision is today. Unless the inspiration lives with him daily, as it did upon the moment of impact. Whether tragedy or blessing, too often an impact becomes as dull as the movement of time itself. The promises, pledges, and commitments begin to travel slowly, hand-in-hand down a memory lane paved with long-forgotten inspiration.

This week Moshe tells us that even after experiencing a most memorable wonder, we still may, "not have the heart to discern nor the eyes to see." Until we add one major ingredient. Today.