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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In Deuteronomy 24, we encounter for the first time the explicit statement of a law of far-reaching significance: "Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children who put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime. (Deut. 24:16)"

We have strong historical evidence as to what this law was excluding, namely vicarious punishment, the idea that someone else may be punished for my crime: For example, in the Middle Assyrian Laws, the rape of unbetrothed virgin who lives in her father's house is punished by the ravishing of the rapist's wife, who also remains thereafter with the father of the victim. Hammurabi decrees that if a man struck a pregnant woman, thereby causing her to miscarry and die, it is the assailant's daughter who is put to death. If a builder erected a house which collapsed, killing the owner's son, then the builder's son, not the builder, is put to death. (Nahum Sarna, Exploring Exodus, p. 176)

We also have inner-biblical evidence of how the Mosaic law was applied. Joash, one of the righteous kings of Judah, attempted to stamp out corruption among the priests, and was assassinated by two of his officials. He was succeeded by his son Amaziah, about whom we read the following: "After the kingdom was firmly in his grasp, he [Amaziah] executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. Yet he did not put the sons of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the Lord commanded: 'Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins.'" (2 Kings:14:5-6)

The obvious question, however, is: how is this principle compatible with the idea, enunciated four times in the Mosaic books, that children may suffer for the sins of their parents?" The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious G-d, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Ex. 34:; see also 20:5; Numbers 14:18; Deut. 5:8)

The short answer is simple: It is the difference between human justice and divine justice. We are not G-d. We can neither look into the hearts of wrongdoers nor assess the full consequences of their deeds. It is not given to us to execute perfect justice, matching the evil a person suffers to the evil he causes. We would not even know where to begin. How do you punish a dictator responsible for the deaths of millions of people? How do you weigh the full extent of a devastating injury caused by drunken driving, where not only the victim but his entire family are affected for the rest of their lives? How do we assess the degree of culpability of, say, those Germans who knew what was happening during the Holocaust but did or said nothing? Moral guilt is a far more difficult concept to apply than legal guilt.

Human justice must work within the parameters of human understanding and regulation. Hence the straightforward rule: no vicarious punishment. Only the wrongdoer is to suffer, and only after his guilt has been established by fair and impartial judicial procedures. That is the foundational principle set out, for the first time in Deuteronomy 24:16.

However, the issue did not end there. In two later prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we find an explicit renunciation of the idea that children might suffer for the sins of their parents, even when applied to Divine justice. Here is Jeremiah, speaking in the name of G-d:

"In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes-his own teeth will be set on edge." (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

And this, Ezekiel: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son-both alike belong to me. The soul that sins is the one who will die.'" (Ezekiel 18:1-3)

The Talmud (Makkot 24a) raises the obvious question. If Ezekiel is correct, what then happens to the idea of children being punished to the third and fourth generation? Its answer is astonishing: "Said R. Jose

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ben Hanina: Our master Moses pronounced four [adverse] sentences on Israel, but four prophets came and revoked them... Moses said, 'He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.' Ezekiel came and declared: 'The soul that sins is the one who will die.'"

Moses decreed: Ezekiel came and annulled the decree! Clearly the matter cannot be that simple. After all, it was not Moses who decreed this, but G-d Himself. What do the sages mean?

They mean, I think, this: the concept of perfect justice is beyond human understanding, for the reasons already given. We can never fully know the degree of guilt. Nor can we know the full extent of responsibility. The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (4:5), says that a witness in capital cases was solemnly warned that if, by false testimony, a person was wrongly sentenced to death, he, the witness, "is held responsible for his [the accused's] blood and the blood of his [potential] descendants until the end of time." Nor, when we speak of Providence, is it always possible to distinguish punishment from natural consequence. A drug-addicted mother gives birth to a drug-addicted child. A violent father is assaulted by his violent son. Is this retribution or genetics or environmental influence? When it comes to Divine, as opposed to human justice, we can never reach beyond the most rudimentary understanding, if that.

Two things are clear from G-d's words to Moses. First, He is a G-d of compassion but also of justice -- since without justice, there is anarchy, but without compassion, there is neither humanity nor hope. Second, in the tension between these two values, G-d's compassion vastly exceeds His justice. The former is forever ("to thousands [of generations]"). The latter is confined to the lifetime of the sinner: the "third and fourth generation" (grandchildren and great-grandchildren) are the limits of posterity one can expect to see in a human lifetime.

What Jeremiah and Ezekiel are talking about is something else. They were speaking about the fate of the nation. Both lived and worked at the time of the Babylonian exile. They were fighting a mood of despair among the people. "What can we do? We are being punished for the sins of our forefathers." Not so, said the prophets. Each generation holds its destiny in its own hands. Repent, and you will be forgiven, whatever the sins of the past -- yours or those who came before you.

Justice is a complex phenomenon, Divine justice infinitely more so. One thing, however, is clear. When it comes to human justice, Moses, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all agree: children may not be punished for the sins of their parents. Vicarious punishment is simply unjust. *© 2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Do not withhold the wages due to your hired hand... that very day shall you give him his payment." (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

An interpretation which I heard for this particular verse on the third Shabbat in the month of Elul 1970 in the synagogue of Riga, Latvia, in the then-USSR changed my life forever. I had been sent on a mission by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, to establish four underground yeshivot - one in Moscow, one in Leningrad, one in Riga and one in Vilna. These yeshivot were to be established in a communist Soviet Union which had forbidden every aspect of Jewish life. A transgressor, whose sin may have only been owning a Hebrew primer, would be exiled to Siberia and never heard from again.

I had succeeded in Moscow and Leningrad. When I left my hotel in Riga that Shabbat morning, I noticed that I was being followed by four very tall and burly individuals who barely gave me breathing space. They literally surrounded me in the sanctuary where I was seated in splendid isolation on the extreme corner of the right side. The other 28 congregants, each individual clearly over the age of 65, were all sitting together on the extreme left side of a large space which could easily seat 600. The cantor and choir chanted the service as if they were performing before thousands. I was given the honor of returning the Torah to the ark.

The gabbai, a short man with a white, wispy beard, whispered to me in Yiddish, "We are thirsty for Torah. We have a Kiddush after the service downstairs. We expect you to teach us. Please come down after the praying - but without your friends."

The interminable service ended at exactly 12 noon, the four goons miraculously disappeared (they probably went for lunch) and I went down into a pitch-black room where 15 people were seated around the table. The table was set with many bottles of clear white liquid (which I thought was water) and slices of honey cake. A chair of honor was set for me with a large Kiddush cup. The gabbai repeated, "We are thirsty for Torah" as he poured me a full glass of liquid which he told me was vodka. I chanted the Kiddush, gave a lesson from the Torah, they sang a tune, they did a dance, and then poured me another vodka. Another lesson, a tune, a dance and again more vodka - nine times!

By the ninth time, no matter how hard I racked my brain, I didn't have any more words of Torah to give on the portion of Ki Tetze. In the group of 15 - many of whom were young and, I learned later, studying for conversion to Judaism, I recognized the Torah reader from the synagogue. I later learned that his name was Yisrael Friedman and he was a staunch Chabadnik. I asked him to give the Torah lesson in my stead. He agreed, and it was his lesson that changed my life. Here are his words:

"Elisha ben Avuya was a great rabbi of the Mishna who became a heretic. The Talmud (B.T. Kiddushin 39) explains why. He saw the great tragedy of a son who climbed a tree to bring down a pigeon for his father after sending away a mother bird; in doing this he performed two commandments which promise the reward of long life, nevertheless the youth fell from the tree and died. 'There is no judge and no judgment,' cried out Rav Elisha and he became a heretic. His grandson, Rabbi Yaacov, claimed that had his grandfather only understood a major axiom of Jewish thought he would never have left the Jewish fold. 'There is no reward for the commandments in this world.'"

Friedman looked out at the basement assemblage with blazing eyes and then looked up, heavenwards. "But G-d, that's not fair! How can You expect Your Jewish servants to pay the day laborer on that very day when you withhold our reward for the commandments till after our lifetime, in the world to come?! It's not fair!"

Friedman answered his own question. "The Talmud in the seventh chapter of Bava Metzia differentiates between a day laborer and a contractor. Yes, a day laborer must be paid at the end of the day, but a contractor is to be paid only at the end of the project. We, vis-a-vis G-d are not day laborers, we are contractors. Each of us, given his/her unique gift and the time and place in which he/she lives, must do his share in helping to complete the world in the Kingship of G-d. Whether we have performed the right function or not, whether we have done most of them or little of them or perhaps were in the wrong ballpark altogether, can only be determined at the end of our lifetimes. For us contractors there is no reward for commandments in this world."

Despite the nine vodkas, or perhaps because of them, I was moved to tears by his words. After witnessing firsthand the persecution of Soviet Jewry upon the heels of the Holocaust atrocities, I was overwhelmed by thinking of G-d's great gift of a newborn State of Israel. I felt deeply in my heart that I could not possibly have been born in a free country in these most momentous times in order to fulfill a function in New York. And so, in the basement of Riga I made an oath: I will bring my family to the State of Israel and hopefully there realize my function. And when I get to Israel I will make Kiddush on vodka every Shabbat afternoon.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Jewish homiletical tradition has dealt with the "enemy," who is being warred against in the opening verse of the parsha, as being the evil instinct of the "warrior" itself. In the immortal words of the famous cartoon character Pogo, "we have met the enemy and they are us!" This is in consonance with the words of the Talmud that the opening topic of the parsha – marriage to the attractive woman, a non-Jewish captive – has specific reference to one's own struggle with the basic desires and evil instincts that bedevil us all.

The true struggle in life is therefore not really against others who may not wish us well as much as it is against our own conflict-torn nature. Temptations, both physical and monetary, and power-driven ambitions abound in our everyday existence. Falsehoods, lame excuses, or the feeling that "everyone does it" and that one will never get caught up and publicly exposed in the scam or scandal are the weapons of the enemy that lurk within us, preying on our built-in weaknesses.

Unless one truly realizes how vulnerable each and every one of us is regarding our internal enemy, there is little hope of creating effective defensive strategies to combat it. The haughty arrogance of unwarranted self-righteousness is one of the most serious moral and personal defects that a person may possess.

This is the message that the Talmud delivers to us when it states that one who sins and yet remains confident that one will later be able to repent and cancel the sin, is never able to truly repent of that sin. One should not underestimate the enemy that lies within us.

The month of Elul traditionally was set aside as a particular time when that internal enemy was to be identified and confronted. In our busy and crowded world, our schedules allow precious little time to think about our true selves - our goals and the purpose of our existence. Our enemy confounds and confuses us with all of the myriad details, pettinesses and distractions that our super busy world inflicts upon us.

Rabbi Yisrael of Salant was once asked if one has only ten minutes a day to study Torah, should one study Talmud or Mussar (the ethical teachings of Judaism.) He answered that one should study Mussar for then he would come to realize that he has much more time than just ten minutes in the day to study Torah. By that Rabbi Yisrael outlined his method of confronting the inner enemy that convinces us that we are unable to improve, that we are too weak or habit-stricken or that we are simply too busy and preoccupied with other issues to think about ourselves.

Ignoring the enemy is the surest way of being defeated by it. I think that tradition placed such an

emphasis on the month of Elul, for it is the self-confrontation that this month indicates to us that is the strongest weapon in our spiritual arsenal. In preparation for the days of awe and judgment that are soon upon us, let us use this time wisely and efficiently.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

"All is fair in love and war." Not so in Judaism. In fact, the test of moral standards is not how one acts when things are peaceful, clear and smooth. Such instances do not by and large require moral strength. Rather the test of moral integrity truly presents itself when facing difficult situations.

One example of such an instance is during war. It's precisely then when soldiers can take advantage of the weak and the captured using the excuse that "all is not fair." It is precisely then that the Torah demands that we conduct ourselves with the greatest moral fortitude.

Note the law of a woman captured during war. (Deuteronomy 21:10-14) The Torah tells us that such a woman is to shave her hair, let her nails grow and weep for her father and mother a full month. Only after that process, the Torah says, "she shall be a wife to you."

A classic difference emerges between Nachmanides and Maimonides. Nachmanides believes that after the thirty-day period, the captured woman can be forced to convert and marry her captor. Still, for Nachmanides, during the thirty days, the soldier must observe firsthand how the captured woman is in deep mourning. Clearly Nachmanides sees this law as the Torah doing all that it can in order to evoke feelings of sympathy towards the captured woman in the hope that ultimately her plight would be heard and she would be freed.

Maimonides takes it much further. The thirty days of mourning were introduced as a time period in which the soldier tries to convince the captured woman to convert and marry. After the thirty days, however, the woman has the right to leave her captor. Under no circumstances can she be forced to convert or marry.

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld argues that Maimonides' position is not only morally correct but it fits into the context of our portion. Note that the portion concludes with the mandate to destroy the nation of Amalek. (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) Amalek's sin was attacking the weakest. Here, one sees the great contrast. Amalek set out to abuse the most vulnerable. Maimonides tells us that Jewish law prohibits taking advantage of the weak. Indeed, the test of morality is how one treats the most vulnerable.

War is horrific. Given its horror, our portion reminds us of our responsibility even in those circumstances to conduct ourselves morally. This is a mandate that the IDF is superbly fulfilling today. As one we should all declare - Kol Hakavod le-Tzahal.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"When you build a new house, you shall make a protective structure for your roof, so that you shall not put blood in your house when the one who falls from it falls. Do not plant different species [together]" (D'varim 22:8-9). Rashi (22:8) tells us that the series of commandments within which these are taught were taught together because of the concept of "mitzvah goreres mitzvah," doing one mitzvah will lead to (the opportunity) to do another mitzvah. If one fulfills the mitzvah of "shiluach ha-kan" (sending away a mother bird before taking her offspring), which was taught immediately before these verses, he will have the opportunity to build a guardrail around the roof of a new house (i.e. he will become a homeowner). This in turn will lead to becoming a landowner, which presents the opportunity of planting crops without creating any forbidden mixtures.

Nevertheless, the way the verses are broken up into paragraphs indicates that the commandments to build a guardrail and not to plant forbidden mixtures have an even closer connection than that. After all, they are contained in the same paragraph (constituting the entire paragraph), while other mitzvos taught in bunches each have their own paragraph (even if there is a reason why these paragraphs are adjacent to each other). For example, the mitzvah of "shiluach ha-kan" (22:6-7) is contained in its own paragraph. So is the mitzvah of putting fringes on four-cornered garments (22:12), despite its following immediately after the prohibition of wearing wool and linen together (22:11) in order to teach us that these two are the preferred materials for the garment (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 9:1) and for the fringes themselves (ibid 9:2-3), as well as teaching us that fulfilling a positive commandment (wearing "tzitzis") overrides a concurrent prohibition (wearing wool and linen together). The mitzvah of planting forbidden mixtures together is not even in the same paragraph as the two other forbidden mixtures that follow it (22:10-11). Why would the Torah group the prohibition against planting forbidden mixtures with the requirement to put a fence around a roof rather than with the other forbidden mixtures? What additional connection is there between this forbidden mixture and taking safety precautions?

The Chinuch (Mitzvah #546) explains the necessity of avoiding dangerous situations even though the Creator is in complete control: "Although G-d, blessed is He, supervises human details and knows

everything that they do, and all that happens to them, whether good or bad, is through His decree and command based on their merit or guilt... nevertheless a person must protect himself from normal occurrences because G-d created His world and built it on the foundations of the pillars (i.e. laws) of nature, and decreed that fire burns and water extinguishes the flame. Similarly, [the laws of] nature demand that if a large rock falls on a person's head that it crushes [it], or if someone falls from a high roof to the ground that he dies. And He, blessed is He, graciously provided the human body by blowing into it a living soul with the ability to think and protect the body from whatever might happen [to it]... And since G-d made the human body subject to [the laws of] nature -- as His wisdom required, being that it (the human body) is of a physical nature -- He commanded him (the human) to protect [himself] from [these] occurrences. For nature, which he (the human) is given over to, will do to him whatever its laws demand if he does not protect himself from it." In other words, if the homeowner does not build a guardrail, G-d will not (necessarily) intervene to miraculously save someone from falling off the roof. Or, as Abarbanel puts it (quoting Akeidas Yitzchok), "the guardrail will help someone who would have [otherwise] fallen, [i.e.] without there being any specific divine intention [for him to fall]." This is also what the Talmud seems to mean when it says (Bava Basra 144b) "everything [that happens to a person] is in the hands of heaven except for cold and heat" (i.e. getting sick); as Tosfos explains (d"h Hakol), "the effects (of the cold) are not the results of a decree, meaning that they could have been prevented" (i.e. by wearing a coat).

That being the case, one might think that, since we must take matters into our own hands in order to prevent the laws of nature from inflicting damage, perhaps these laws aren't so perfect after all, or, at the very least, can be adjusted when there is reason to. If I can (and should) affect nature (to the extent of interfering with what would otherwise happen, i.e. building a guardrail to stop the law of gravity from pulling someone to the ground, or wearing a coat so as not to catch a cold), maybe I should try and improve upon nature as well. But the Chinuch tells us otherwise:

"For G-d, blessed is He, created His world with wisdom, understanding and knowledge, and made and formed all things that were formed according to what each needed, appropriate to be set up that way forever; blessed is He that knows. And this is what is meant when the verse about creation says, 'And G-d saw all that He made and behold it was very good' (B'raishis 1:31)... And since G-d knows that all that He made was set up perfectly for its intended purpose in this world, He commanded every species to produce fruits/offspring according to its own species, as it says in the [Torah's narrative of the] order of creation, and species should not combine with each other, so that they do not lose any bit of their perfection."

Where does the Chinuch say this? In Mitzvah #244, explaining why there are forbidden mixtures. As he continues, "We are therefore prevented from mating different species of animals, and also warned against combining different plants and [different] trees." (See also Mitzvah #62, where he explains that the problem with sorcerers is that they try to abuse G-d's creation by changing things from their intended uses, including combining things in a forbidden manner.) Ramban (Vayikra 19:19) writes a similar explanation for the prohibition against these mixtures: "For G-d created for all living creatures, [whether] plant life [or] animal life, the [different] species in the world, giving them the ability to reproduce so that they can exist forever, for as long as He, may He be blessed, wants the world to continue. And He commanded (i.e. set up their nature) that they should bring out their own species (produce offspring just like them), not to change forever, as it says (B'raishis 1:12, 21 and 24/25) 'according to their species.'...And one who grafts together two species changes and goes against the act of creation, as if thinking that G-d didn't finish His job completely." Preventing adverse natural consequences while operating within the laws of nature is appropriate (and necessary); changing nature in order to "improve" it is not.

It is therefore possible that the Torah put these two mitzvos together, in the same paragraph, precisely because one teaches us that we should do what we can within the laws of nature to prevent its unfavorable effects, while the other teaches us that we should not try to change nature itself. This contrast becomes more obvious when these two otherwise dissimilar mitzvos are paired together, separated from other mitzvos, including from those taught right before and right after them, by giving them their own paragraph.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah commands us to physically assist others in their time of need: "You shall not see the donkey or the ox of your brother stumble on the way and hide yourself from them. Rather, you shall lift them up with him." (Deut. 22:4) Why does the Torah specify the words "with him"?

The Sages clarify in the Talmud that if a person who needs help tells you, "I'm going to rest right now. You have a mitzvah to help me, so help me all by yourself," then you are not obligated to help him for the Torah states "with him." You need not allow someone to take advantage of you just because you want to do kindness and he is lazy.

It is important to understand the Torah's definition of what constitutes being taken advantage of. If a person always refuses to lend you his things, but then one day he comes to request that you lend him

something, what is your obligation? Here the Torah position is very clear that you are obligated to help him and to refuse is a violation of the commandment, "Do not take revenge" (Leviticus 19:18). What is the difference between this and the above?

The principle is that whenever a person sincerely needs your help you should help him -- even if he does not reciprocate by helping you in return. This is true even if he will never help you. As a matter of fact, the highest level of kindness, chesed shel emes (true kindness), is to do a kindness when you know you will receive nothing in return. (Preparing a person for burial and burying him is the usual example; there is no way the individual can return the kindness.)

Therefore, if a person has a valid reason that he is unable to work with you, then you should help him in any event -- and focus on the pleasure of helping without any resentment! ***Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2013 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com***

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Benevolent Association

In this week's portion, the Torah commands us with quite a tall order. Because of flagrant ingratitude, in which Ammonites and Moabites forgot the kindness ofour father Avraham toward their forebear Lot, we are commanded not to allow them to join in marriage into our nation. The directive does not preclude Ammonites and Moabites from converting or marrying other Jewish converts. It also does not prohibit Ammonite women converts from marrying into the fold. It does prohibit the direct descendants of Avraham, who epitomized kindness and gratitude, from marrying Lot's male descendants who were so cruel to the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us in the exact way their ungraciousness manifested itself. "Because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water on the road when you were leaving Egypt, and because he hired against you Bilaam son of Beor, of Pethor, Aram Naharaim, to curse you" (Deuteronomy 23:5). But in an atypical deviation from the initial narrative, the Torah inserts the following verse: But Hashem, your G-d, refused to listen to Balaam, and Hashem, your G-d, reversed the curse to a blessing for you, because Hashem, your G-d, loved you" (Ibid v.6).

The Torah then continues to conclude the directive: "You shall not seek their peace or welfare, all your days, forever" (ibid v. 7).

Why does Hashem interject the story of His compassionate intervention into the prohibition? The Torah previously detailed the story of the talking donkey, the interceding angel and Balak's subsequent failure to curse the Jews. Why interject G-d's love in halting Bilaam's plans when the Torah is presenting a reason not to marry Moabites? It has no bearing on the prohibition.

A classic story of a new immigrant's encounter with the American judicial system involved an old Jew who was called to testify. "Mr. Goldstein," asked the judge, "how old are you?"

"Keyn ayin horah, eighty three."

"Just answer the question, Mr. Goldberg. I repeat. How old are you?"

Goldberg did not flinch. "Keyn ayin horah, eighty-three."

"Mr. Goldberg," repeated the judge, "I do not want any prefixes or suffixes. Just answer the question."

But Goldberg did not change his response.

Suddenly Goldberg's lawyer jumped up. "Your honor," he interjected. "Please allow me to ask the question. The Judge approved and the lawyer turned to Goldberg.

"Mr. Goldberg. How old are you, Keyn ayin Horah?"

Goldberg smiled. "Eighty three."

In what has become a tradition of the Jewish vernacular, perhaps originating with the above verses, no potential calamity is ever mentioned without mentioning or interjecting a preventative utterance of caution.

"I could have slipped and chas v'sholom (mercy and peace) hurt my leg."

"They say he is, rachmana nitzlan, (Heaven save us) not well."

"My grandfather tzo langa yohrin (to longevity) is eighty-three years old," of course, suffixed with the ubiquitous "kayn ayin horah!"

An ever present cognizance of Hashem's hand in our lives has become integrated into traditional Jewish speech patterns. Thank G-d, please G-d, and G-d willing pepper the vernacular of every Jew who understands that all his careful plans can change in the millisecond of a heavenly whim. And so, beginning with Biblical times, there are no reference to occurrences of daily life found in a vacuum. They are always surrounded with our sincere wishes for Hashem's perpetual protection and continuous blessing. *© 2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org*

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

This week's portion opens with a discussion of the laws pertaining to the Jewish soldier whose passions are aroused in battle, impelling him to take a non-Jewish woman from the conquered country as his wife. The Torah prescribes a detailed conversion process concluding with the provision that the captive woman must be granted a month-long bereavement period during which she can mourn for her parents and prepare for her conversion to Judaism.

This Torah portion is always read at the beginning of the month of Elul, the last month of the

year during which we prepare for the onset of the new year. The commentaries find an allusion in the Torah reading to the month of Elul; just as the captive woman before conversion utilizes the month to close the books on her past life and idolatrous practices, we, too, in the month of Elul begin the process of introspection. We reflect on the lost opportunities and wayward leanings we succumbed to in the past year, making amends and preparing for a new year of spiritual renewal.

During the month of Elul, in the Yeshiva world, much emphasis is placed on the study of mussar and ethical works. Intense preparations are made for the Day of Judgment and the Days of Awe that follow it. I recall my Elul experiences in Yeshiva as being intense and challenging. The atmosphere was weighted with undercurrents of pressure and solemnity, and the seriousness of this month was felt by all the students.

As I grew older, I realized that much of the pent-up pressure that was applied in the month of Elul in a sense missed its mark. Indeed, Elul is devoted to preparing for the Days of Awe but the period of preparation can-and should be-experienced as an end in itself.

We generally approach Elul as a pathway to an important spiritual destination. If we do things right, we will be able to successfully transition into the new year in an ennobled, more spiritually integrated state. Yet rather than approach Elul as a medium in which we gruelingly take ourselves to task for our shortcomings and strive to improve to merit a favorable judgment on Rosh Hashana, the month of Elul should be experienced as a wondrous period in its own right.

It is a time when we are granted rich opportunities to realign our relationship with Hashem, recognizing that as the Hebrew letters of Elul suggest, "ani l'dodi, v'dodi li, I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me,"

Sure, much of the focus in Elul needs to be devoted to addressing our foibles and past misdemeanors, but rather than self-flagellate over our lapses, the end purpose is better served when we emphasize not the reformation but the actual process of rekindling our relationship of intimacy with our Creator.

My revered Rebbe, the Slonimer Rebbe shlita, recently met with a great leader of the Lithuanian yeshiva world. The discussion evolved around the different emphasis in avodas Hashem, serving the Creator, in the Chassidic world vis-?-vis the Lithuanian approach.

The great Rosh Yeshiva mentioned the opening words of the Mesilas Yesharim where he famously states that this world is but an anti-chamber to the World to Come, which we are expected to use as a means of preparation to attain our destination in the World of Truth.

The Slonimer Rebbe responded by noting that among Chassidim the primary emphasis is not the World to Come, but this temporary and transient world in which we reside here and now. We were placed here to enjoy and celebrate our relationship with the Divine right now. What Hashem graces us with in the World to Come is not really the objective we should be focusing on.

The preparation itself-the means of getting from point A to point B while fulfilling the will of Hashem every step of the way, is an end goal unto itself. Traversing this world and navigating its challenges and reversals with a positive spirit, while embracing and accepting Hashem's will, is what really counts.

This theme was further brought home to by one of my children with whom I was recently studying. We were discussing a verse at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha that describes how Abraham, heeding Hashem's command to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house, picked up and left Choran for the land of Israel. The Torah makes a point of telling us further on that "They left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan". (Breishis 12:6)

My son asked why the Torah needs to make the point that "they left to go to the land of Canaan." Isn't is self-evident that if they came to this land, they certainly departed with the intention of getting there?

It occurred to me that the Torah is telling us that Avraham embraced the process of the journey itself, as a prime opportunity to carry out Hashem's will, with the same excitement and love that he experienced upon reaching the land of Canaan.

Applying this to our own life journey, it's undoubtedly important to focus on our ultimate destination in the Afterworld. Yet whether or not we will merit eternal bliss there is not as relevant as whether we live TODAY in spiritual bliss. We would do well to remember this message in the month of Elul. Rather than focusing exclusively on emerging from the Divine judgment triumphantly, let's also enjoy the purifying process that brings us to that point.

Enjoying that process means celebrating the special closeness to Hashem that is Elul's unique gift, and making the most of the month's rich opportunities for spiritual regeneration and realignment with our Divine Source.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (25:21-22), "If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink--for you will be 'choteh' coals on his head, and Hashem will reward you." R' Yehoshua ibn Shuiv z"l (Spain; 14th century) initially rejects the popular translation of the word, "choteh," i.e., "scooping." He writes: G-d forbid that King Shlomo would suggest that one perform kindness for his enemy for the purpose of taking revenge on him. Rather, the word means, "removing." One who performs acts of kindness for his enemy "removes" burning coals--i.e.,

anger--from the enemy's heart and promotes peace. Alternatively, if the word does mean, "scooping," the intention would be that one may perform acts of kindness for his enemy so that his enemy will be ashamed to continue hating him.

We read in our parashah (22:1), "You shall not see the ox of your brother or his sheep or goat cast off, and hide yourself from them; you shall surely return them to your brother." In Parashat Mishpatim (Shmot 23:4), this same mitzvah is worded differently: "If you encounter the ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering, you shall return it to him repeatedly." The commandment in our verse, writes R' ibn Shuiv, is of general applicability, while the commandment in Mishpatim, i.e., to return the lost animal of one's enemy, is an act "lifnim m'shurat ha'din" / beyond the letter of the law, applicable to a person who wants to conquer his yetzer hara. R' ibn Shuiv adds that the "enemy" spoken of here is a person that a righteous Jew hates because of the other's sinful deeds. Otherwise, it is forbidden to hate another Jew. Even so, Hashem does not completely despise even a wicked person, and there is therefore a mitzvah to assist him, for one should not try to be "more religious" than G-d Himself. (Derashot R"Y ibn Shuiv)

"They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is wayward and rebellious; he doesn't listen to our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' All the men of his city shall pelt him with stones and he shall die; and you shall remove the evil from your midst; and all Yisrael shall hear and they shall fear." (21:18-21)

Rashi z"l writes: "The ben sorer u'moreh / wayward and rebellious son is put to death on account of his future. The Torah foresees that, in the end, he will squander his father's property and, seeking in vain the pleasures to which he has become accustomed, he will stand at the crossroads and hold-up people. Says the Torah, 'Let him die innocent, and let him not die guilty'."

In contrast, Rashi (to Bereishit 21:17) writes that, when Yishmael, son of Avraham Avinu, was dying of thirst, the angels argued that he should be left to die because his descendants would cause the Jewish People at the time of the destruction of the First Temple to die of thirst. Hashem responded, "Right now, is he innocent or guilty?" "Innocent," the angels answered. "If so," said Hashem, "he will be judged based on his actions now and not based on the future."

Why the different treatment? R' Eliyahu Mizrachi z"l (1455-1526; Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire) explains: At the point at which the angels were arguing for Yishmael's demise, he had not yet begun down the path that would lead his descendants to kill Jews. Thus, he was entirely innocent of that crime. In contrast, the ben sorer u'moreh has already begun his life of crime. Thus, he is no longer innocent and can be judged based on the inevitable path he has started down.

R' Mizrachi adds: If the Torah foresees for him a future as a murderous robber, why is he punished with stoning? That is far more severe than the punishment for murder, which is death by the sword.

He answers: The Torah foresees that the ben sorer u'moreh not only will be a robber and a murderer, but that he will commit those acts on Shabbat. For violating Shabbat, the punishment is stoning. (Mizrachi Al Ha'Torah)

Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter z"l (1847-1905; the Gerrer Rebbe) suggests that the cases of the ben sorer u'moreh and of Yishmael aren't comparable because the angels clearly were not arguing that Yishmael should be left to die. After all, they foresaw that his descendants would kill Jews, though Yishmael had not yet fathered children at that time. Obviously, he was going to live. Rather, the angels were merely arguing that Yishmael did not deserve to be saved in a miraculous fashion. (Sefat Emet to Rosh Hashanah 16b)

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sanhedrin 8:7) offers a slightly different explanation for the ben sorer u'moreh's fate: "G-d foresaw that this youth is destined to consume his parents' assets, to sit at the crossroads and steal from people, to murder people, and, in the end, to forget his Torah learning. Therefore, it is better for the youth to die innocent rather than to die guilty."

Is forgetting one's Torah learning worse than committing murder, as the progression above implies? R' Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler z"l (1892-1953; head of the Gateshead Kollel and mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh yeshiva) explains that no matter what sins a person has committed, as long as he remembers his Torah learning, there is hope he will repent. However, once he has lost what he learned, all is lost.

R' Dessler continues: Rabbeinu Yonah z"l (Spain; died 1263) writes in Sha'arei Teshuvah of the great value of Torah study, so much so that life without it is worthless. If so, asks R' Dessler, how is it possible that people who do not study Torah are nevertheless alive? He answers: Such people are allowed to live to serve as tools of the satan / the evil inclination, who says, "Look! There are so many people who do not study Torah, and they are alive and well."

But what difference does it make? Life is life! R' Dessler concludes: We recite during the High Holiday period, "Remember us for life, the King Who desires life, and inscribe us in the book of life, for Your sake, the living Elokim." We want life for G-d's sake, i.e., for the sake of revealing G-d's Name. We do not want life if it means being tools of the satan. (Michtav M'Eliyahu I p.105)