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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

At the end of his life, having given the Israelites at G-d's behest 612 commands, Moses is instructed to give them the last; command 613: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be my witness within the people of Israel." (Deut. 31:19)

According to the plain sense of the verse, G-d is speaking to Moses and Joshua and is referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; Hear, O earth, the words of My mouth." Oral tradition, however, gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write -- or at least take some part in writing -- a Sefer Torah, a scroll of the law:

"Said Rabbah: even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: 'Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel.'" (Sanhedrin 21b).

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be construed as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Secondly, the passage goes on to say (31:24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud (Nedarim 38a) offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "that this song may be My witness within the people" -- implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32.

There is something poetic about this being the last of the commands. It is as if G-d were saying to the Israelites: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from Moses. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be periodically renewed.

So it is to this day, that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill -- as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion almost devoid of sacred objects (icons, relics), the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to endowing a physical entity with sanctity -- and this is an understatement. The Torah is less like an object than a person. In its presence we stand as if it were a king. On Simchat Torah we dance with it as if it were a bride. If one is, G-d forbid, damaged or destroyed we bury it as if it were a human; we mourn as if we had lost a relative. Judaism is the story of a love affair between a people and a book, the Book of Books.

What though -- if we take the command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter -- is the significance of the word "song" [shirah]: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song"? The word shirah appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key-word. Why? On this, two nineteenth century scholars offered striking explanations.

Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose (the word shirah in Hebrew means both a song and a poem). To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but it has, argues Netziv, two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not. (Kidmat Davar, preface to Ha'amek Davar, 3).

In this brilliant insight, Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach's 'Odysseus' Scar'. Auerbach contrasts the narrative style of Genesis with that of Homer. Homer uses dazzlingly detailed descriptions so that each scene is set out pictorially as if bathed in sunlight. By contrast, biblical narrative is spare and understated. In the example Auerbach cites -- the story of the binding of Isaac -- we do not know what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through: "The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal... remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'."

A completely different aspect is alluded to by R. Yechiel Michal Epstein, author of the halakhic code Arukh ha-Shulchan (Choshen Mishpat, introduction). Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the sages said: "These and

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those are the words of the living G-d." This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called "a song" -- because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively -- as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the "sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns / And the round ocean and the living air." Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

Music is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we davven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward heaven. Nor do we read the Torah; instead we chant the weekly portion, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studied; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival or one of the High Holy Days. There are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from the Mosaic books, the prophetic literature, or the Ketuvim, 'the writings.' Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic tonality.

The 613th command -- to make the Torah new in every generation -- symbolizes the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is G-d's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though, when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds. The Torah is G-d's song, and we collectively are its singers. *© 2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

These two Biblical portions of Nitzavim-Vayelech always precede Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year of G-d's universal majesty (Malkhuyot) - and this by Rabbinic mandate: "Ezra decreed for Israel that the chastisements of the Priestly Book of Leviticus (Behukotai) be publicly read before Shavuot, and that the chastisements of the Book of Deuteronomy be publicly read before Rosh Hashanah" (BT Megillah 31b).

There are two places in the Bible where the text warns the Israelites of the horrific causes of exile, persecution and suffering they will be forced to endure if they do not properly observe the Divine commands: in the portion of Behukotai in the Book of Leviticus and in the portion of Ki Tavo - which we read last week - in the Book of Deuteronomy. Nachmanides (the Ramban) teaches that the first instance of "curses" refers to the destruction of the first Temple and the second to the destruction of the Second Temple. Furthermore, it certainly seems logical that we read one portion of chastisements before we celebrate the Festival of the Giving of the Torah (Shavuot) - in order to emphasize the importance of maintaining the Torah, in order to highlight the existential stake every Israelite has in seeing to it that the entire nation remain true to the teachings of the Torah.

But why read chastisements before the Festival of Rosh Hashanah, when we declare the universal majesty of the Almighty G-d? Rosh Hashanah is the time when we pray to "perfect the world in the kingship of the Almighty," when we commit ourselves to "turn all the wicked of the earth" to the ideals of ethical monotheism, when we anxiously await the period when "every creature will know that You created him, every formed being will understand that You formed him." What has this universal message to do with the frightening warnings to the Israelites of the dire consequences in store for them if they neglect the Divine commands? And even more to the point, we read the curses of Ki Tavo last week; this week we read Nitzavim-Yayelech, and this Sabbath is the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah!

There is yet one more fundamental issue we must ponder before we can begin to gain clarity. The chastisements of Ki Tavo conclude with the Biblical

words, "These are the words of the covenant (brit), which the Lord commanded Moses to establish with the Israelites in the land of Moab in addition to the covenant which He established with them in Horeb" (Deuteronomy 28:69). We have already seen the establishment of two covenants, the first one with the paterfamilias Abraham at the very dawn of Jewish history (the Covenant between the Pieces, Genesis 15:9-21), and the second with the Jewish nation at Sinai (Exodus 24:1-9); the covenant with Abraham established the nation-state of Israel and the covenant at Sinai established the religion of Israel. What is the significance of this third covenant at Moab, before Israel's entry into the Holy Land? Why do we require an additional covenant - and what does it teach us?

The Talmud (Tractate Sotah), in a fascinating play on the Hebrew phrase Arvot Moab (literally, the Plains of Moab), maintains that this was the covenant of "co-signership," of mutual responsibility and the inter-dependence of every Jew with every other Jew (arevut Moab, an arev being a co-signer or counter-signer to a legal obligation). But was this not the case as soon as we became a nation-state (at least in potential) at the time of Abraham? Do not family members share mutual responsibility, with each serving as guarantor for the other?

I believe that a careful reading of the Biblical text will provide the answer. The introduction to the chastisements - covenant of Ki Tavo emphasizes the fact that the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan River and take their place as a functioning nation-state amongst all other nation-states (Deuteronomy 27:2). They are then to set up large plastered stones upon which the words of the Torah - according to most interpretation, the Ten Commandments - are to be written, "clearly explained" (ba'er heitev); the Talmudic Sages interpret this to mean that they are to be translated into the 70 languages of the world (Deuteronomy 27:8, Commentaries ad loc). A sacrificial altar to G-d is to erected," an altar of unhewn stones which iron shall not touch" (Deuteronomy 27:5).

The picture being presented is that of Israel, just about to join the world community of nations, establishing as its "calling-card"-the ten commandments of morality- placed at the entrance to the Holy Land and written in languages that every Gentile can understand. The prohibition of lifting iron to the stones of the altar is reminiscent of "turning swords into ploughshares; nation shall not lift up sword against nation and humanity shall not learn war any more" (Isaiah 2, Micah 4).

I would submit that this covenant is that of mutuality, inter-dependent co-signership, but not necessarily between Jew and Jew - that was already incorporated into the previous covenants - but rather between Israel and the other nations of the world. After all, when Abraham was originally elected, G-d commanded that "through you all the families of the world will be blessed" - through the message of Ethical Monotheism, the vision of a G-d who demands justice, compassion and peace, which Abraham's descendants must convey to the world. This is the true mission of Israel, imminently critical in a global village, wherein every nation is dependent upon every other nation, wherein a terrorist nation - oblivious to the G-d of freedom who punished the totalitarian Pharaoh and commanded "Thou shall not murder" - can destroy the world if it has the nuclear capability to do so. This third covenant is the covenant of Israel's responsibility to the world!

And so the covenant does not end with "These are the words of the covenant" (Deuteronomy 28:69), but continues to remind the Israelites how the Almighty punished Pharoah (Deuteronomy 29:1ff), and to define itself - in Nitzavim - as what G-d swore to the patriarchs (Deuteronomy 29:12), which I would take to mean that Abraham would be the Father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:1-3) that on Mount Moriah G-d would be revealed to the world and all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:14,18), and that a nation and a congregation of nations would emerge from Jacob-Israel (Genesis 35:11). Hence G-d declares that "not with you alone do I establish this covenant... but rather with those who stand with us here today and those who do not stand with us here today." (Deuteronomy 29:13,14). I take this to mean, both with the Israelites as well as with the Gentiles. And so the witnesses to this covenant are the heaven and the earth (Deuteronomy 30:19) - the entire world. And from this perspective, this covenant of our responsibility to all the nations extends to Nitzavim-Yayelech and most assuredly belongs before Rosh Hashanah, the day in which we re-establish our commitment "to perfect the world in the Kingship of G-d."

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

These final parshiyot of the Torah always coincide with the approaching end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. This is in line with the contents of these parshiyot which contain the review of Moshe's career as the leader of Israel and of his life and its achievements. So too does the end of the year demand of us a review, if not of our entire past life at least a review and accounting of our actions during the past year.

Moshe's review is really the main contents of the book of Dvarim itself. Though it recalls historical and national events, there is no doubt that Moshe himself is the central figure of the book. He records for us his personal feelings and candidly admits as to his disappointments and frustrations. But he never departs from his central mission of reminding the people of Israel of the unbreakable covenant that has been formed between them and their Creator.

That covenant is renewed again in this week's parsha. It is no exaggeration to assert that it is constantly renewed and at the year's end we are reminded of this automatic renewal. That is the essential essence of remembrance that characterizes this special season of the year. For remembrance brings forth judgment and accountability and leads to an eventual renewal of spirit and faith.

Moshe reminds the people that the future is also contained in their remembrance and observance of the covenant. All the generations past, present and future are bound together in this covenant of accountability. And through this process, the mortal Moshe gains immortality, as all of us can acquire this immortality through our loyalty to the covenant.

Moshe at the end of his life has in no way lost his acumen, strength or vision. He leaves this world in perfect health and free of bodily ailments and restraints. Yet he tells us in this week's parsha that he "can no longer go forth and return." For humans exist by the will of G-d and when that will decrees the end of life then the human being will cease to function on this earth. Who can claim greater merits in this world than Moshe had? Yet the hand of human mortality struck him down.

Part of the great lesson of Torah is that life continues without us necessarily being present. Moshe sees far into the distant future but knows that he will not be present to see those events actually unfold. He harkens back to the covenant of remembrance as being the instrument of his continuing presence throughout all of Jewish history. As long as the covenant is remembered and observed, Moshe is still present with Israel.

It is this covenant that defines us as a people and even as individuals. Our relationship to it is under constant heavenly review. It should be self-evident that for our part we should enthusiastically renew our allegiance to it at this fateful part of our life and year.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion Nitzavim is replete with urgings to return to G-d. A term which jumps from the text, is one describing G-d's hope that we, the Jewish people, would hearken to His voice "li-shmoah be-kolo." (Deuteronomy 30:20) The word kol, voice, resonates with deep meaning.

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

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

And, of course, kol is found again in the prophetic descriptions of the Messianic era. (Isaiah 40:3) In the liturgy we echo this prophecy with the words, kol me-vaser, the voice that announces the coming of the Messiah. Thus, kol, especially during this time of year, speaks to the challenge of not only hearing the voice of G-d and His commandments, but of harnessing the energy of these messages into repairing the world-the Messianic period - the time when G-d's voice will be heard by all.

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

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

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And you might see their abominable and repulsive idols of wood, stone, of silver and gold which are with them" (Deut 29:16).

Why does the Torah have to warn us about being negatively influenced by their idols if we will be repulsed by them?

Rabbi Yitzchok Zev Soloveitchik elucidated that a person might see idols and view them as abominations and feel strongly repulsed and sickened. However, the Torah warns us against being negatively influenced by them because everything that we see makes an impression on us. Even though at first you feel negatively about them, eventually you might be influenced to follow them. Negative influences are

powerful and must be kept at a distance.

THE TORAHWEB FOUNDATION

A Cry From the Soul

by Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

The essence of Rosh Hashana is encapsulated in the phrase "Yom teruah ye'hi'ye lochem -- a day of blowing of the shofar it will be for you." Chazal had a tradition that the word teruah refers to a broken sound similar to a cry. It is this tradition that is the source for the three different sounds of the shofar, the shevraim, the teruah, and the shevraim-teruah, which correspond to different types of crying. What is it about a cry that becomes the central feature of Rosh Hashana?

Tears are a reflection of a person's innermost feelings. Similarly, a proper fulfillment of the mitzvah of tekias shofar emanates from the inside of one's soul. Mitzvos that are performed with different parts of the body express our desire to serve Hashem with those external parts. We dedicate our hands to Hashem by wearing tefillin and our mouths by reciting berachos, and yet the mitzvah of tekias shofar is different. We blow the shofar with our breath, symbolically drawing upon our innermost soul to perform this miztvah. The word for breath, "neshima", is related to the word for soul, "neshama". When we blow the shofar, we are dedicating the very essence of our souls to the service of Hashem.

It is this dimension of tekias shofar which represents our peni'mi'us -- our internal self, rather than our chitzonius -- our external appearance, that explains a certain phenomenon we find about the shofar. There are three major historical events associated with the shofar. First, akeidas Yitzchak culminated with a ram being brought as a korban instead of Yitzchak, and thus we prefer to use specifically a ram's horn for our mitzvah of tekias shofar, harkening back to that ram. Additionally, the beracha of zichronos concludes with a plea to Hashem to remember akeidas Yitzchak. The second time a shofar plays a prominent role is during matan Torah, and we refer to the shofar of Har Sinai throughout the beracha of shofros. Finally, the shofar associated with the future redemption is the culmination of the special berachos inserted into the musaf of Rosh Hashana. Besides a shofar, there is another unifying theme between these three events, and that is the prominent role of a donkey. Avraham and Yitzcahk ride on a donkey on the way to the akediah, Yetzias Mitzrayim, which began the process that culminates with matan Torah, begins with Moseh returning to Mitzrayim on a donkey to lead the Jewish People to freedom, and the era of redemption will begin with moshiach riding on a donkey. Why do the donkey and the shofar go hand in hand throughout our history?

A donkey is unique in that although it is a non-kosher animal, a first born donkey has sanctity and must be redeemed. Externally, a donkey seems very far removed from holiness, yet a donkey has an internal sanctity. A donkey and a shofar both symbolize our deepest innermost desires for holiness even if our external appearances and actions are not living up to that yearning.

As we approach Rosh Hashana, let us turn inward and draw inspiration from the shofar of the akeidah, Har Sinai, and Moshe. As we cry out our innermost feelings to Hashem on Rosh Hashana, let us focus on those feelings being desires for a life of kedusha. May we reconnect to the shofar of the akeidah, the sounds of Har Sinai and thereby merit to hear the sound of the shofar of moshiach in our days.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Youthful Discretion

Children play a major role in this week's double portion. In Nitzavim, Moshe tells the nation, "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem." He enumerates the different categories of people, from elders to water-carriers, and he makes sure to include everyone, even the small children (cf. Deuteronomy 28:9-10).

In Vayeilech as well, the Torah is cognizant of the youth. Moshe commands that every seven years "the men, the women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities shall gather in Jerusalem to hear the king read the Book of Devorim" (ibid 31:12). Commentaries expound that the aforementioned children are those who are too young to understand. But Moshe also talks about youngsters who have a basic grasp as well: "And their children... they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it." The Ohr HaChaim explains that this verse refers not to toddlers, but rather to children who are old enough to learn the fear of Hashem. What troubles me is the end of the posuk, " they shall learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it."

Shouldn't the Torah say "all the days that they live on the land to which they are crossing the Jordan"? After all, we are teaching them, not the adults! Why does the Torah tell us to teach the children, for all the days that their parents live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it?

Lieutenant Meyer Birnbaum was one of the only Orthodox US army officers commissioned during World War II. Last year, he spoke at our yeshiva, and though I was enraptured by the harrowing tales of his war-time activities, one small incident that occurred to him as a young boy growing up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn during the Depression did not escape me.

In those days, few young men attended yeshiva or were committed to vigorous Torah observance. Meyer went to public school as well, but his parents wanted to raise him as an observant Jew. His friends would often make fun of his yarmulka, and few attended his bar-mitzvah. But that did not deter him. In fact, from the time he was old enough his mother would make sure that he attended the mincha service.

Imagine the sight. A young boy coming to pray together with a group of elderly men who were hanging on to their tradition while their inheritors looked for newfound freedoms outside the decaying walls of the synagogue. Even the men who came to pray were only there to say kaddish for a dearly departed. So when young Meyer entered the portals of the shul for the very first time their eyes widened in amazement. Their shock turned to pity as they assumed the young boy came to shul for the same reason that most of them came, and for the very reason that they prayed their children would one day come the sole purpose of saying kaddish.

The moment came when the kaddish yossum, the mourner's kaddish, was to be recited, and the congregation began in a cacophonous unison the hallowed words, "Yisgadal V'Yiskadash." Meyer just stared up into space, waiting to answer the first responsive Amen. He was startled by the jab in the ribs by a crooked finger, which left his searing side and began pointing to the correct place in the prayer book.

"Nu!" shouted the man, "They are saying kaddish!"

"I know that they are saying kaddish!" answered Meyer.

"So, what are you waiting for? Say along!"

Meyer did not understand where the conversation was heading. But he had no time to think when another old man looked his way, motioning for him to join the mourners in the kaddish recitation!

"But I don't have to say kaddish!" answered Meyer tearfully, "my parents are alive!"

"Your parents are alive?" asked the old-timer incredulously.

"Yes, thank G-d, they are both alive! Why do you think that they are dead and that I should say kaddish?"

They gathered around him as the final Amen was said and explained their actions. "We could not imagine someone your age coming to shul for any other reason!"

The Torah tells us that children must be trained and taught not for post-parental existence, but rather it tells the parents "all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan." You must teach them to practice while you can enjoy the nachas as well! Torah is a living entity, not only to pass from dying embers to rekindle new flames, but rather to pass a vibrant torch with leaping flames onto the youth whose boundless energy will inspire new generations, when even you live on the land that Hashem has given you!

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Life and death I have put before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life, in order that you and your descendents shall live" (D'varim 30:19). The ability to choose between "life and death," between right and wrong (or, more precisely, between long-term benefit and short-term benefit) is one of the cornerstones of our religion. Framed as a choice between "life or death," or even between being "blessed or cursed," the choice seems simple; simple enough that Moshe's advice/admonition to "choose life" seems almost superfluous. Why would anyone consider choosing otherwise? Yet, poor choices abound, perhaps because when faced with making choices we don't consider it as choosing between "life" and "death." (If we did, we wouldn't need the motivation of "blessing" and "curses" to help us make the right choices.)

When it comes to our own poor choices, we are given the option to make amends through repentance. What about the poor choices of others? We may be directly responsible for teaching our children and students what is right and what is wrong, and indirectly responsible (through the concept of "areivus," see Sanhedrin 27b and Rashi on 29:28) for everyone else, but all we can really "control" is ourselves. It can be very difficult to accept others despite their faults while considering our own deficiencies unacceptable. There are self-esteem issues at stake as well, as not correcting perceived personal flaws can (and perhaps should) lead to a poor perception of self. Nevertheless, when one is cognizant that an area needs improvement, it is usually within his or her ability to make that improvement. As far as others, though, how can I fully accept a flaw in someone else if I can't (and shouldn't) accept in in myself?

This issue was discussed a couple of months ago by Rabbi Dr. Gidon Rothstein (http://tinyurl.com/odbrctk), focusing on how the frum (religious) community perceives, or should perceive, the non-frum community. Typically, this issue is superficially skirted by classifying those who were not raised in a frum home as "tinokos shenishb'u," infants who were taken captive before they were exposed to a religious lifestyle, and therefore not responsible for not being religious. Those of us who grew up frum, on the other hand, are fully responsible to maintain our religious lifestyle. As Rabbi Dr. Rothstein pointed out, this would not be relevant to those who grew up frum but are not frum anymore. How are we to perceive them?

I have never been comfortable with the "tinok shenishba" concept being applied to those who didn't grow up in a frum home, primarily because although

they didn't have the benefit of a religious education, they weren't raised in a vacuum either, and at some point became fully aware that there is a religious community and could have/should have looked into what it's about. The myriad of Ba'alay T'shuva, who became frum later in life, prove that growing up in a non-frum home is ultimately not an excuse for not being frum. The issue therefore applies not only regarding those who abandoned the ways of their parents when they stopped being frum, but to anyone who is not frum. (There is obviously a difference in degree between the two, but the basic issue is the same.) Not only that, but even among those who are frum, there are degrees of "frumkeit," and figuring out how to accept someone who does things that you find unacceptable (or doesn't do things that you deem necessary) falls into the same category.

On numerous occasions (e.g. http://tinyurl.com/nuxor5r) I have discussed Rav Dessler's concept of "n'kudas hab'chira," the "point" at which free will operates. There are things that are beyond our (current) capabilities, choices we cannot make, so there is no internal battle as to whether or not to do (or not do) them. For example, most frum people would never even consider eating a cheeseburger. If a co-worker is ordering food and offers to buy pork ribs, declining the offer is not usually the result of a choice made then and there, but of a previously-made decision to keep kosher. That earlier choice may have been a function of free will, but once that commitment was made, unless there is a temptation to renege on that decision, following through is not considered using "free will." Similarly, a non-frum person going to a ballgame rather than a shiur is usually not a function of his or her free will, as even though no outside factor is forcing him or her to watch the game instead of studying Torah, there is usually no possibility of choosing the latter. Free will and freedom are not the same thing; just because I am "free" to choose between options doesn't mean that I am using my "free will" when I make that "choice."

Rav Dessler defines free will as the point at which there is recognition that one choice is "good" (or "true") while the other is "bad" (or "falsehood") and an internal battle ensues as to which one to choose. For example, choosing to put yellow mustard on my hot dog instead of spicy brown mustard because I prefer the former is not a function of free will. Choosing to take someone else's mustard because I like it better than the mustard I own would be (provided I recognized that taking something from someone else is wrong). Similarly, choosing not to take someone else's mustard even though it will make the hot dog taste better can also be a function of free will (assuming I might have considered stealing the mustard).

One of the examples Rav Dessler gives (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu I, pg. 114) is of a child who was raised by thieves. For him, stealing is the norm; the notion that he shouldn't steal never even enters his mind. Killing someone in order to steal, though, was not ingrained in him, and when faced with a situation where he must kill in order to complete the theft, there might be an internal battle, recognizing that killing might be wrong. Refraining from stealing is outside his "n'kudas hab'chira," as there is no possibility (at that point) that he wouldn't do it, but murder is within it, and a choice, based on free will, can be made. Once that choice is made, his "n'kudas hab'chira" is affected, so that things that until then would not have been considered might now be a possibility, and things that until now were within his "n'kudas hab'chira" (allowing him to make a choice based on free will) might now be outside of it. In this example, choosing not to kill might open up the possibility that he would consider not stealing either, while killing someone despite having an internal struggle about it might lead to no longer having that internal struggle. This, Rav Dessler says, is what is meant by "mitzvah goreres mitzvah" and "aveirah goreres aveirah," that doing one positive act leads to further positive acts while committing one sin leads to more sinning, as each choice (those that involve free will, anyway) moves a person's "n'kudas hab'chira" to a place that now encompasses situations that it hadn't and no longer includes situations that it had.

The bottom line is that not all "choices" are the result of "free will," as any option not within our "n'kudas hab'chira" is not really an option. We are, in a manner of speaking, "forced" to choose between options that are within our "n'kuda." (Several years ago I used this concept to explain why we ask G-d to forgive us for sins we were "forced" to do, as we were the cause of being "forced" to do them based on how we affected our "n'kudas hab'chira," see http://tinyurl.com/q87dq9f.)

Everyone has a "n'kudas hab'chira," and the internal struggles are just as fierce no matter which "choices" fall within it. Where those struggles are, though depends on our nature and our nurture. One of the main purposes of "chinuch," properly educating our children, is to improve the "starting point" of our children's "n'kudas hab'chira"; because we prefer that their struggles not be about whether or not to keep Shabbos, we try to raise them in a way that violating the Sabbath is not considered an option. But that doesn't mean it can't become an option, nor does it mean that it becoming an option is necessarily a result of free will.

Are we religious because we choose (or chose) to be, or because this was our starting point, and our "n'kudas hab'chira" never moved to a point where being religious was a choice? We are all born with different personality traits, which are part of the starting point of our "n'kudas hab'chira." Rav Dessler (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu V, pg. 458) discusses how different the starting points of Yaakov and Eisav were, and how they affected what their missions in life were. [According to a recent study (http://tinyurl.com/nzx4n6u), we are born with a "dispositional attitude" that affects how we respond to things.] Therefore, although it is certainly

true that we have the ability to change which options we will have, no one has the same starting point, and not every "choice" made is made by utilizing the free will bestowed upon us by our Creator. As a matter of fact, it seems pretty clear that the overwhelming majority of "choices" made are made by our physical bodies (including our brains), without giving our souls a chance to reconsider the "choice" using a "right/wrong" or "truth/falsehood" scale.

After telling us that sinners will suffer the consequences of the curses (D'varim 29:19-27), Moshe adds that "the hidden things are for G-d" (29:28), we only need to be concerned with things that are "revealed." Rashi explains the "hidden things" to be sins unknown to others, which they can't be responsible to try and correct. Ramban understands them to be things hidden from the sinner himself. This can be extended to things the sinner doesn't realize is a sin because its outside his "n'kudas hab'chira"; it is quite unusual for someone to realize that something is wrong and not even struggle to overcome it. There is no way for anyone to know whether a sin was within the sinner's "n'kudas hab'chira"; only G-d knows for sure. Although we must protest the sin itself (and educate the sinner, if necessary), we cannot pass judgment on the person who committed the sin. This is true whether discussing someone who never progressed from a non-religious background, someone who regressed despite having a religious background (especially if we don't know all the circumstances, or how we would react if faced with those same circumstances), or if it's just one area of religious life that seems deficient. That doesn't mean they're not responsible to move their "n'kudas hab'chira" to a point where they can improve in those areas, it just means that we can't know how responsible they are (at this time) for the choices they are making, whether they are even within the realm of "free will" or not.

Although we can't know whether a sinner could have prevented him or herself from sinning, if they could have, they will certainly be held accountable (by G-d). And even though we shouldn't pass judgment on others who sin, this shouldn't adversely affect how successful we are with our own struggles. After all, we may not be able to know where someone else's internal battles lie, but we are responsible to win every internal battle we have, whether it's the same struggle others face or not.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

The Midrash Rabbah on this week's parashah asks: When one wants to read from the Torah, how does he recite a blessing? Our Sages teach: He should recite a berachah before and after. Before--because we read (Tehilim 119:12), "Baruch attah Hashem, teach me Your laws." First, "Baruch attah Hashem"--a blessing, then, "teach me Your laws." After--because Moshe Rabbeinu uttered a blessing at the end of the Torah. [According to the commentary Tiferet Zion, this refers to Devarim 33:2.]

The midrash continues: If you recite a berachah on the Torah, I too will bless you, as it is written (Shmot 20:21), "In every place where I will mention My Name, I will come to you and bless you." [Tiferet Zion explains: This refers to a person who is called for an aliyah, so that he is reciting the berachah involuntarily. Because this circumstance was not brought about by the person himself, but by G-d, who caused him to be called, the verse refers to it as "every place where I will mention My Name.]

The midrash continues: The angels desired the Torah, but it was hidden from them. But from you it is not hidden, as it is written (in our parashah -- 30:11), "For this commandment that I command you today--it is not hidden from you." [Until here from the midrash]

R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (1843-1917; Yerushalayim) explains: The midrash was bothered by the verse's reference to the entire Torah as a single commandment. Therefore the midrash explains that while the Torah has many separate mitzvot--the purpose of each of which is to subdue or purify a different trait or attribute of a person--their inner significance is only one thing--to raise mankind above the level of the angels where they can appreciate what the Zohar refers to as the Oneness of G-d and the Torah. (Tiferet Zion)

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant... Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (30:11-14)

R' Yehoshua Rokeach z"l (1825-1894; Belzer Rebbe) asks: Why does the verse say, "in your mouth and [then] in your heart, to perform it"? Usually, thought ("in your heart") precedes action ("in your mouth")!

He explains: The ideal way to perform a mitzvah is to combine the required action with the proper intent. Having the proper concentration and focus are not always easy, however, and one might think that he should not perform a mitzvah if he cannot have the proper thoughts. Therefore our verse comes to teach: Place the action before the thought, if necessary. Perform the mitzvah to the best of your ability now, and the proper thoughts will come later. (Quoted in Mesilot B'ohr Ha'chassidut p.20)