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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Biblical Israel from the time of Joshua until the destruction of the Second Temple was a predominantly agricultural society. Accordingly, it was through agriculture that the Torah pursued its religious and social programme. It has three fundamental elements.

The first was the alleviation of poverty. For many reasons the Torah accepts the basic principles of what we now call a market economy. But though market economics is good at creating wealth it is less good at distributing it equitably. Thus the Torah's social legislation aimed, in the words of Henry George, "to lay the foundation of a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want should be unknown."

Hence the institutions that left parts of the harvest for the poor: leket, shikchah and peah, fallen ears of grain, the forgotten sheaf and the corners of the field. There was the produce of the seventh year, which belonged to no-one and everyone, and maaser ani, the tithe for the poor given in the third and sixth years of the seven year cycle. Shmittah and yovel, the seventh and fiftieth years with their release of debts, manumission of slaves and the return of ancestral property to its original owners, restored essential elements of the economy to their default position of fairness. So the first principle was: no one should be desperately poor.

The second, which included terumah and maaser rishon, the priestly portion and the first tithe, went to support, respectively, the priests and the Levites. These were a religious elite within the nation in biblical times whose role was to ensure that the service of G-d, especially in the Temple, continued at the heart of national life. They had other essential functions, among them education and the administration of justice, as teachers and judges.

The third was more personal and spiritual. There were laws such as the bringing of first-fruits to Jerusalem, and the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, as they marked seasons in the agricultural year, that had to do with driving home the lessons of gratitude and humility. They taught that the land belongs to G-d and we are merely His tenants and guests. The rain, the sun and the earth itself yield their produce only because of His blessing. Without such regular reminders, societies slowly but inexorably become materialistic and self-satisfied. Rulers and elites forget that their role is to serve the people, and instead they expect the people to serve them. That is how nations at the height of their success begin their decline, unwittingly laying the ground for their defeat.

All this makes one law in our parsha -- the law of the Second Tithe -- hard to understand. As we noted above, in the third and sixth year of the septennial cycle, this was given to the poor. However, in the first, second, fourth and fifth years, it was to be taken by the farmer to Jerusalem and eaten there in a state of purity: "You shall eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your G-d at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His Name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your G-d always." (Deut. 14:23)

If the farmer lived at a great distance from Jerusalem, he was allowed an alternative: "You may exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the Lord your G-d will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish." (ibid., 25-26)

The problem is obvious. The second tithe did not go to poor, or to the priests and Levites, so it was not part of the first or second principle. It may have been part of the third, to remind the farmer that the land belonged to G-d, but this too seems unlikely. There was no declaration, as happened in the case of first-fruits, and no specific religious service, as took place on the festivals. Other than being in Jerusalem, the institution of the second tithe seemingly had no cognitive or spiritual content. What then was the logic of the second tithe?

The sages, (Sifrei ad loc.) focussing on the phrase, "so that you may learn to revere the Lord your G-d" said that it was to encourage people to study. Staying for a while in Jerusalem while they consumed the tithe or the food bought with its monetary substitute, they would be influenced by the mood of the holy city, with its population engaged either in Divine service or sacred study. (See also Tosafot, Baba Batra 21a, s.v. "Ki MiTzion") This would have been much as happens today for synagogue groups that arrange study tours to Israel. (A more extended version of this interpretation ca n be found in the Sefer ha-Chinnukh, command 360.)

Maimonides, however, gives a completely

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different explanation: "The second tithe was commanded to be spent on food in Jerusalem: in this way the owner was compelled to give part of it away as charity. As he was not able to use it otherwise than by way of eating and drinking, he must have easily been induced to give it gradually away. This rule brought multitudes together in one place, and strengthened the bond of love and brotherhood among the children of men." (The Guide for the Perplexed III:39)

For Maimonides, the second tithe served a social purpose. It strengthened civil society. It created bonds of connectedness and friendship among the people. It encouraged visitors to share the blessings of the harvest with others. Strangers would meet and become friends. There would be an atmosphere of camaraderie among the pilgrims. There would be a sense of shared citizenship, common belonging and collective identity. Indeed Maimonides says something similar about the festivals themselves: "The use of keeping festivals is plain. Man derives benefit from such assemblies: the emotions produced renew the attachment to religion; they lead to friendly and social intercourse among the people." (Ibid. IIII:46)

The atmosphere in Jerusalem, says Maimonides, would encourage public spiritedness. Food would always be plentiful, since the fruit of trees in their fourth year, the tithe of cattle, and the corn, wine and oil of the second tithe would all have been brought there. They could not be sold; they could not be kept for the next year; therefore much would be given away in charity, especially (as the Torah specifies) to "the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow."

Writing about America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville found that he had to coin a new word for the phenomenon he encountered there and saw as one of the dangers in a democratic society. The word was individualism. He defined it as "a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends," leaving "society at large to itself." (Democracy in America, Book II, ch. 2) Tocqueville believed that democracy encouraged individualism. As a result, people would leave the business of the common good entirely to the government, which would become ever more powerful, eventually threatening freedom itself.

It was a brilliant insight. Two recent examples illustrate the point. The first was charted by Robert Putnam, the great Harvard sociologist, in his study of Italian towns in the 1990s. (Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Nanetti. Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.) During the 1970s all Italian regions were given local government on equal terms, but over the next twenty years, some prospered, others stagnated; some had effective governance and economic growth, while others were mired in corruption and underachievement. The key difference, he found, was the extent to which the regions had an active and public-spirited citizenry.

The other is the experiment, known as the "free rider game," designed to test public spiritedness within a group. There is always a potential conflict between self interest and the common good. It is tempting to take advantage of public facilities without paying your fair share (for example, travelling on public transport without paying for a ticket: hence the term "free rider"). You then obtain the benefit without bearing a fair share of the costs. When this happens, trust is eroded and public spiritedness declines.

In the game, each of the participants is given $10 and invited to contribute to a common pot. The money in the pot is then multiplied, say, three times, and the amount is equally divided between the players. If each contributes $10, each will receive $30. However, if one player chooses not to contribute anything, then if there are six players, there will be $50 in the pot and $150 after multiplication. Each of the players will then receive $25, but one will now have $35: the money from the pot plus the $10 with which he started.

When played over several rounds, the other players soon notice that not everyone is contributing equally. The unfairness makes them all contribute less to the shared pot. The group suffers and no one gains. If, however, the other players are given the chance to punish the suspected cheat by paying a dollar to make him lose three dollars, they tend to do so. The free rider stops free-riding, and everyone benefits.

As I was writing this essay, the Greek economy was in a state of collapse. Years earlier, in 2008, an economist, Benedikt Herrmann, had tested people in different cities throughout the world to see whether there were geographical and cultural variations in the way people played the free rider game. He found that in places like Boston, Copenhagen, Bonn and Seoul, voluntary contributions to the common pot were high. They were much lower in Istanbul, Riyadh and Minsk, where the economy was less developed. But they were lowest of all in Athens, Greece. What is more, when players in Athens penalized the free riders, those penalized did not stop free-riding. Instead they took

revenge by punishing their punishers. (Herrmann, B., C. Thoni, and S. Gachter. "Antisocial Punishment Across Societies." Science 319.5868 (2008): 1362-367.) Where public spiritedness is low, society fails to cohere and the economy fails to grow.

Hence the brilliance of Maimonides' insight that the second tithe existed to create social capital, meaning bonds of trust and reciprocal altruism among the population, which came about through sharing food with strangers in the holy precincts of Jerusalem. Loving G-d helps make us better citizens and more generous people, thus countering the individualism that eventually makes democracies fail.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Behold I give before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing, when you will hearken to the commandments of the Lord your G-d... and the curse, if you will not hearken to the commandments of the Lord your G-d and you swerve from the path...' (Deut. 11:26-27)

We are reaching the third and final covenant of these Five Books of the Holy Torah, the covenant not only with a family (Abraham and his progeny forever, Gen. 15) and not only with a Divinely committed and religiously dedicated "people" (the Sinaitic Covenant, Ex. 20), but this time with a nation about to enter into a land, to form a nation-state, setting forth the terms of this nation-state's engagement with the other nation-states in the world. It begins with the verses cited above and concludes with chapter 30 of the Book of Deuteronomy, a covenant addressing ish, the generic human being, according to Rabbinic tradition, rather than the Jew, the Hebrew of the Israelite, and a covenant translated into 70 languages of the world.

Even more to the point, this covenant may well be called the Covenant of Life (haim). After all, its verses of introduction speak of a blessing and a curse, but a blessing and a curse identified respectively with hearkening to G-d's commandments or refusing to hearken to His commandments. The concluding verses of this covenant provide a deeper understanding of what the blessing really means by identifying the blessing with life and the curse with death, by charging us with the command to "choose life, you and your seed, to love the Lord your G-d, to hearken to His voice and to cleave until Him, for He is your life and the length of your days to dwell upon your land which the Lord swore to give to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob" (Deut. 30:15-20).

Permit me to delve more deeply into this supercharged word haim, life, which really becomes synonymous with blessing whenever we lift up a glass of wine or liquor and cry out the traditional Jewish blessing "to life, l'haim." How can we choose life, for ourselves and our progeny? Would that it were so, but everyone existentially understands that the length of our individual lives is not subject to anyone's individual volition or desire; "against one's will is one born and against one's will does one die" seems to ring much truer than a commandment to choose life! Moreover, the very word haim seems to be a rather strange noun; it is a plural word, ending with the usual plural suffix "-im". When we pray for life, we usually concentrate on one's individual life; from what I was able to discover, only in Hebrew does the word for life assume a plural form. Why? And to be sure, the opening and closing paragraphs of this third covenant must certainly be taken together; after all, they each begin with the arresting word re'eh, look, see, clearly suggesting a unity of connection between the two.

For some clarity, let us explore the first time that the word haim appears in the Bible: "And the Lord G-d formed the human being of dust from the earth, and He breathed into its nostrils the soul [or breath of life, nishmat haim] and the human being became a living being [nefesh haya]" (Gen. 2:7). The sacred Zohar, a mystical interpretation of the Bible, explains the stark imagery of the verse with the dictum that "whoever exhales, exhales the internal essence of his being," which is to say that G-d "inspirited" into the physical human being a portion of Divinity, an actual, integral part of G-d from Above, as it were.

Hence within every material human being resides a soul, a neshama, a transcendent, eternal aspect of the Divine which enables him to reach for the spiritual, to overcome his physical instincts and limitations and to share in eternity.

It is this transcendent essence which separates the human being (neshama) from every other physical creation-from reptiles, birds, animals and beasts (who are merely nefesh haya). And since the double letter "yod" spells out an attribution of G-d, the living human soul (nishmat haim) contains within himself an element of the Divine; hence the living human is never alone, G-d is always with him and within him, and so human life is in the plural. And this is the true blessing of l'haim, may you always feel the blessing of G-d with you and within you throughout all of your endeavors.

The truest expression of the Divine within the human lies in the ability of the human to transcend himself, to communicate with others, to express concern for others, to love others. Hence the Bible underscores the human need for companionship, prefacing the creation of Eve with the Divine value judgment: "It is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), and so it is a Divine Command to marry and have children.

G-d communicates to us human souls through His Torah, the way of life He wishes us to adopt in order for the world to live, in compassionate

righteousness and moral justice. We communicate with future generations by passing down our Torah narrative from generation to generation, and insofar as our teachings and our lifestyles are communicated successfully, we continue to live and G-d continues to live through them and in them. And so our hearkening to the Divine commandments truly gives blessings and even eternal life. And it is also this communication through the generations which makes haim, eternal life, a plural noun.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is interesting, at least to me, to note that in the review of the Jewish holidays of the calendar year that appears in this week's Torah reading, only the three festivals of Pesach, Succot and Shavuot are mentioned. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are noticeable in their absence from this list of holidays. The obvious reason for their omission is that the commandment to go up to Jerusalem for the festivals did not somehow apply to these two great holy days.

The emphasis that appears in our parsha is as much about ascending to Jerusalem as it is about the ritual aspects of the holidays themselves. Apparently even though the ritual aspects of the holidays are binding the world over and were to be observed even when ascending to Jerusalem was no longer a possibility in the Jewish and general world – as was the case for the many centuries of our prolonged exile – nevertheless without Jerusalem the holiday is somehow somewhat lacking.

In contradistinction to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, which are holy days but not necessarily festivals of joy and thanksgiving, the three other festivals of the Jewish year connected to agriculture in the Land of Israel are specifically holidays of celebration and happiness. And if there is one central theme regarding Jerusalem and all that it represents it is one of joyful appreciation. Jerusalem, even in its destruction and shambles, was still constantly described in terms of joy and beauty.

When the prophet wishes to describe the resurgence of the Jewish people and their return to the Land of Israel in great numbers, he describes that phenomenon as being "like the numbers of sheep that were in Jerusalem on its holidays."

There were a number of large cities in the Land of Israel during both First and Second Temple times. Jerusalem was certainly one of those great cities. We do not know if it was the largest of all of the cities, population-wise, but once it was established by King David, it certainly was the most important of all cities in the country.

Though it was the seat of government and the capital city of Judah/Judea, it was always more than that. It was the living representation of the connection between Heaven and earth, between G-d and the Jewish people. As such, its spiritual component was always as important, if not even more so, than its actual physical layout and numbered population. As such, it was inseparable, once it was established, from the cycle of the Jewish year and from the three festivals that marked it.

This connection between the holidays of the Jewish calendar year and the city of Jerusalem continues even in our time. Thousands of Jews make it a point to leave their homes and travel from the far-flung corners of this world to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the festivals of the yearly calendar in the holy city. It is a testimony to the resilience and faith of the Jewish people, that we are able to see the physical Jerusalem rebuilt in our time. Slowly, the spiritual Jerusalem is also being created and that itself is a cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The first word in our portion re'eh is one of the most powerful terms found in the Torah. In fact, G-d is described as a ro'eh on three different levels.

The first time the word is found in the Torah, the Torah states that after creating light or energy, "vayar Elokim ki tov, G-d saw it was good." (Genesis 1:4) Obviously an anthropomorphism. Still as G-d saw, so do we have the power to see.

On a deeper level, re'eh means to see in the sense of empathizing for the other. Note the description just prior to the deluge in the time of Noah. There the Torah states, "and the Lord saw (vayar Hashem) that the wickedness of man was great on the earth." (Genesis 6:5) This could mean that G-d saw with the sense of feeling the pain and horror which was unfolding—the wickedness of man whom he had created. As G-d felt the pain of humankind, so too should all people created in G-d's image empathize with the other.

There is yet another understanding – of ra'ah. Ra-ah could have covenantal connotations—that is G-d seen with an eye on establishing and fulfilling His covenant with His people. Indeed, the first time ra'ah appears after Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah were chosen, the Torah states "and the Lord appeared (veyera) to Avraham and said 'to your seed I will give this land.'" (Genesis 12:7)

Re'eh as used in our portion seems to echo the covenantal approach. Note that when G-d covenantally chooses Avraham, the Torah states, "I will bless those

who bless you and curse those who curse you." (Genesis 12:3) Similarly in our portion, the Torah states—"see (re'eh), I have placed before you a blessing and a curse." (Deuteronomy 11:26)

And just as Avraham first built an altar to G-d in Shechem—Elon Moreh (Genesis 12:6) and his rendezvous with G-d reaches a crescendo in Yerushalayim, (Genesis 12:9) so in our parsha is there discussion of how the blessing and curse would be put forth on Har Gerirzim and Har Eyval which are in the area of Shechem. (Deuteronomy 11:29) Not coincidentally, the parsha proceeds to discuss our obligations once we enter the land and come to Yerushalayim. (Deuteronomy 12:1-19)

Thus, ra'ah has a threefold meaning. To see, to empathize, to covenantalize. However, when Avraham and Sarah were chosen, ra'ah was in the context of the promised covenant. G-d was the ro'eh. Here, in our portion, as the Jews prepare to enter Israel, it is in the context of the covenant for the first time soon being realized. Re'eh, therefore, refers to the Jewish people achieving their covenant mission.

With the establishment of the State of Israel we are all of us a bit closer to the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. The Torah's words concerning re'eh as covenant should be carefully considered.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

This week's Parsha starts off with the word "Re'eh", which means "See". What are we seeing, and why do we need to see it? Rabbi Yehoshua Wender explains that in our lives we are all on a quest for truth. We are looking to find the real meaning behind everything in this world. However, we need to see everything in its proper light. In every thing in this world there is truth, and there could be falseness, and it is our job to not be tricked by the lies. So how do we know what's true and what's not?

G-d has given us a Torah that contains the ultimate truth, and that same protection from falseness. Living in this world is like being in a room of fun house mirrors. You walk in, and there are all these curvy mirrors that distort your image. Some make you look fat, others make you tall, and yet others make you skinny. The only way to get a true image of yourself is to look in a flat, uncurved mirror. The Torah is such a mirror: You can look in the Torah and find the truth, untainted, uncurved, undistorted. But it's also possible to get a true image from looking at a curvy mirror, if you stand in just the right spot, at just the right angle, you can see your self the way you really are. The catch is that you won't know that that's your real true image unless you've looked at yourself in a straight mirror and have that image to compare with. The world is the same way: It is possible to see the world truthfully using other sources, but unless we have studied the Torah and know what truth looks like, we'll never know if we've really found it.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Nesivos Shalom

"Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot, as it is said, 'When you eat of the labor of your hands, you are praiseworthy and all is well with you.' You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come. "

Some questions shouldn't be asked. A question for which everyone has the answer is no question. Do we have any doubt about who is rich? Possessing much money makes a person rich, end of story!

True, remarks Maharal. Money may make a person rich, but money comes and goes. The Mishnah questions whether a person can be essentially rich, rich by his nature, not by dint of something that may evaporate the next day. (Moreover, having money does not seem to slake a person's thirst for more. Chazal point out that to the contrary, the more a person has, the more he wants. People we routinely call rich, then, are some of the neediest people around.)

More importantly, what a man possesses does not make the man. Looking for person whose essence is rich-a person who never finds himself lacking- is a more daunting task. This is what the Mishnah sets out to do, and finds him in the person who always finds joy and happiness in his portion.

The benefits of such a mind-set are greater than initially apparent. The Sava Kadisha cautioned against seeing this attitude as an isolated midah. To the contrary, he taught, finding happiness in one's lot an all-embracing principle. It produces a cascade of benefits. It brings wondrous change to the heart of a man, and can lead him to teshuvah mei-ahavah. The life of a proper Jew depends on it.

We have to be puzzled about this attitude. Many people lead what objectively looks like lives of travail and sorrow. What is there to be happy about? We can suggest a number of approaches.

The first owes to the Noam Elimelech, who parses the conclusion of the Mishnah's thought in a novel way. "You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come" can be taken to mean that a person is praiseworthy in this world when he translates all experiences and opportunities into their value in gaining Olam Habo. In other words, a person can be happy with his lot, if he has no expectation-and no interest- in any temporal benefit, but stays focused entirely on acquiring his place in the world to come.

The value in this is not simply ascetically

shunning all pleasure in this world, but something more subtle. The gemara tells us that before a child is formed, it is ordained whether he will be rich or poor, wise or foolish. The point is that no two people are identical. Hashem gives each individual a unique set of challenges-the best way for him to gain his portion in Olam Habo. For some, the challenge comes from dealing with wealth; for others, the task is dealing with poverty. It would do a person no good at all to switch circumstances with another, because those circumstances are not going to help him gain eternal life. Everyone can be happy in this world because his own peculiar conditions and circumstances will lead to it being well in the world to come.

A different approach dovetails with a teaching of Toras Avos. When a Jew joyfully accepts the way Hashem conducts his life, then Shomayim reacts the same way to him. Measure for measure, the Heavenly courts look upon him kindly; they are happy with him, regardless of the details of his behavior.

Acceptance of the manner in which Hashem shepherds him is hinted at in the Shema. The phrase u-ve-chol me'odecha/with all your might can be seen as-with all your me'ods. In other words, thank Him exceedingly well. With all your "very much," your meod meod, acknowledge Hashem fully and enthusiastically in each and every measure that He measures out for you.

This approach comes from a different place. It is a tributary of a person's ahavas Hashem. A person who truly loves Hashem will be happy with anything that flows from Him, regardless of whether he understands it or whether it brings him immediate pleasure. (This explains the link between finding joy in one's lot and teshuvah me-ahavah. It is the ahavah itself that allows one to find joy in one's situation, regardless of the circumstances.)

Yet another approach to being mesame'ach bechelko is hinted at in the verse, "Hashem's portion is His people." If we assume the chelko of our Mishnah to mean Hashem's portion, rather than ours, we have a very different reading. Who is rich? The person who understands that he himself is a part of Hashem Above. A person who appreciates that his neshamah comes from a "place" under the kisei ha-kavod, the Throne of Glory, will never surrender to depression or melancholy. Recognizing the sanctity of his neshamah, nothing will disturb him other than a sense of distance from Hashem, and nothing will delight him more than his feeling of closeness and attachment to Him. He will always, however, find satisfaction in knowing the elevated source of his neshamah, the most personal and precious part of himself.

We have shown that finding joy in one's lot is not a simple slogan or aphorism. It includes many wonderful consequences, and takes significant spiritual accomplishment to get there. People who are not quite there find this disconcerting. The key here-as is true of other high levels of ruchniyus that Chazal teach about, like ahavas Hashem-is to realize that it is not the preserve of a privileged few. Everyone can have some portion of it. We are asked to take the first steps; HKBH will help us get as far as we can.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Giving Personally

This week the Torah teaches us about charity. It not only does it tell us who to give, it tells us how to give. And it does so in an uncharacteristic and seemingly repetitive fashion.

"If there shall be an impoverished person from among you or any of your brethren in your cities... you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather you should shall surely give him and you shall not harden your heart when you give him" (Deuteronomy 15:7-10).

The repetitive expression and emphasis on the word him is troubling. "You shall surely give him and not feel bad" would suffice. Why is the phrase "when you give him" necessary? The Torah is referring to the person to whom you have given. It tells us not to feel bad about giving charity. Why the extra phrase about the recipient?

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soleveitchik, the Rav (Rabbi) of Brisk, was revered throughout Europe as a foremost scholar and Talmudic sage. One aspect of his character was known to shine even brighter than his scholarship - his humility.

Once, he stopped by an inn in the middle of a freezing night and asked for lodging. He had no entourage with him, and the innkeeper treated him with abuse. He did not disclose who he was, and after pleading with the innkeeper, he was allowed to sleep on the floor near a stove. The innkeeper, thinking that the man was a poor beggar, did not offer him any food and refused to give him more than a little bread and water for which Rabbi Soleveitchik was willing to pay.

The next morning Rabbi Soleveitchik did not see the shocked expression on the face of the innkeeper when a few of the town notables came to the inn. "We understand that the Brisker Rav was passing through this town. Is it possible that he came by your inn last night?"

At first, the innkeeper dismissed the question - until the Rav appeared and the group entered to greet him warmly. In a few minutes the town dignitaries converged on the inn with their students and children all in line to meet the great sage.

Terribly embarrassed, the innkeeper, who realized that he had berated and humiliated a leading Torah figure, decided to beg forgiveness from the Rav.

"Rebbe," he cried, "I am terribly sorry. I had no idea that you were the Brisker Rav. Please forgive me."

The Rav replied. "I would love to, but you see that would be impossible."

"But why?" asked the owner in shock.

"You see, "explained the sage. "You are coming to ask forgiveness from the Brisker Rav. That is not who you insulted. You debased a simple Jew who came for lodging - and he is no longer here to forgive you."

The Torah explains that there are in essence two parts to tzedaka - the patron and the recipient. Often the giver becomes detached from the recipient; he wants to give but has no concern for the receiver. He may even have disdain for the person at the door, but the mitzvah of tzedaka overrides his pre-judgement and a contribution is given. Perhaps the Torah stresses the words "do not feel badly in your heart when you give to him," to teach us an important lesson.

In addition to the mitzvah of giving, one should identify with the recipient too. Know the true situation of the person to whom you are giving. Understand what you are giving for. Be sure that when you are giving to him, your heart should not be in bad spirits. The Torah recognizes the simplest beggar as someone worthy enough to have his pronoun repeated. "Surely give him; do not feel bad in your heart when you give him." If the Torah is careful enough to classify the beggar as an individual who transcends a generic recipient- and transform him into a personal beneficiary, then perhaps he is worthy of recognition by all of us. *© 1997 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org*

RABBI ZEV LEFF

A Life Lesson

In this week's Torah portion, Moses tells the Jewish people additional commandments they need to follow. And then he implores upon them to: "...do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d." (Deuteronomy 12:28)

It seems rather obvious for Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, to tell his followers to do what is right in the eyes of G-d. But this really isn't as much of a rhetorical statement as one might think.

We live in a society where we care enormously about what other people think about us. Whether you're aware of it or not, the things you say, the clothes you wear, and the places you shop are influenced largely by the perception you want to give to others. This is precisely why in public we might act one way towards someone, but in private-outside the watchful eyes of those we so much want to impress-we will act in a completely different way.

When Moses told the Jews to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d, he was teaching us all a life-changing insight: G-d is everywhere. He's right next to you as you're reading this. And He "follows" you when you walk to your car, and He sits right next to you at work. There isn't a cubic foot of space in which G-d is not completely and totally present and aware of everything this is being said and done. Remember, when it comes to G-d's presence, there's no such thing as privacy. G-d is always right there.

In New York City's Time Square there exists a massive television screen called the JumboTron. Thousands of people-some as far as 20 city blocks away- can see whatever images are displayed on this screen. What if you lived your life as though it was being shown live on the JumboTron? How much different would you act if everything you did was being broadcast in real-time on this giant screen?

But that's exactly the powerful message that G-d's teaching us. We are on this screen and G-d is observing everything.

So instead of doing what looks right in the eyes of your co-workers and friends, listen to the words of Moses. Concern yourself with impressing the One who truly wants you to become great and strive to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d. *© 2008 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.com*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

When a city (in the Promised Land) strays from G-d and worships other deities, the consequences are severe. “And all of its belongings you shall gather into its [main] thoroughfare, and you shall burn the city and all of its belongings completely with fire unto Hashem your G-d, and it shall be a mound [of destruction] forever; it shall not be rebuilt again” (D’varim 13:17). Rashi (and others) discuss what the words “unto Hashem your G-d” add. Isn’t it obvious that the destruction meted out on a city because of G-d’s commandment was done for G-d? Rashi says these words means that the destruction should be done “for Him (lit. for His name) and on His behalf.” But what is Rashi adding with these words?

Rabbi Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh’lita, (Rinas Yitzchok III) implies that the word “for Him” used by Rashi teaches us that we must have G-d in mind when we do the actual burning (as opposed to, say, a pyromaniac doing it for his personal enjoyment). Rabbi Sorotzkin then asks why Rashi uses two words (“for Him” and “on His behalf”) when one should be enough. After all, elsewhere when Rashi explains a verse to mean that the action described should be done “for G-d” he only uses the first of these two words (or a form of it), without adding the second one. [The examples Rabbi Sorotzkin gives are the donations for the Mishkan (Sh’mos 25:2) and not working the land during sh’mitta (Vayikra 25:2), but the same can be said of Sh’mos 25:8 and 29:25, Vayikra 3:11 and 23:17 (if you look carefully), and Bamidbar 6:2 and 15:20 (see

15:19/21). Notice, though, that almost all of these are said regarding offerings or something similar.] Rabbi Sorotzkin leaves his question unanswered.

There is a world of difference between making a personal sacrifice for G-d and doing something that adversely impacts others in the name of G-d. Unfortunately it is not uncommon for people, even (and perhaps especially) religious leaders, to (ab)use religion for personal gain (whether that gain be for prestige, power, financial improvement, or other personal benefits), so it is certainly appropriate to add an additional word when discussing destroying other people and/or their property so that we make doubly sure we are really doing it for the right reason -- on behalf of G-d. In this case, although there is no obvious personal benefit (since all of the possessions of the inhabitants of the city are burned), there is a danger that those destroying a city of idol worship may be not be doing it based on having a religious fervor to fulfill G-d's will, but to compensate for a lack of confidence in their own belief system. Nevertheless, I think Rashi added the second word to his commentary to include more than just an admonition that such an act has be done for G-d rather than to cover for any religious insecurity.

In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 111b) Rabbi Shimon explains the words "completely to Hashem your G-d" to mean that if we follow through with the judgment against a city of idol worshippers as prescribed in the Torah, which includes burning its contents completely, G-d will consider it as if we brought an "olah" offering, with is burned completely on the altar. It is likely that when the Targum translates the words "unto Hashem your G-d" as "before Hashem your G-d," this is what is meant; when burning the city and its contents, do it "before G-d" because it is as if you are bringing an offering to Him (see Sha'aray Aharon). The first word Rashi uses, "for Him," which is primarily used regarding things brought as offerings (and the like), is therefore appropriate if Rashi was referencing the comparison between burning this city "for G-d" and burning an offering for Him.

Tosfos (e.g. Da'as Z'keinim) explains why the city and all of its contents are burned "completely to Hashem your G-d" -- "so that everyone is made aware that you destroyed the city for G-d, blessed is He, and not in order to benefit from its possessions." By publicly burning everything (piling it up in the street, as opposed to leaving the possessions inside the houses to be burned when they are set ablaze), anyone seeing what's happening will know that the reason the city was destroyed was because they sinned against G-d, not because others wanted to get rid of the people to take their possessions. It is being done "on behalf of G-d," not for selfish reasons. The second word Rashi uses, "and on His behalf" (with a "vav" that indicates it is a separate thought from the previous word), fits well with this approach; not only should we consider burning the city down an offering to G-d, but we must do it in a way that shows we are doing it for Him, and not for ourselves.

It is therefore possible that Rashi uses the two words here, not just the one he uses elsewhere, to get across both ideas. We should do it "for Him" the way we bring offerings (or donate to the Temple, or let the land go fallow every seven years, etc.), i.e. "for Him," and do it in a way that makes it clear we are doing it "on His behalf" and not because of a personal agenda.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "You are children to your G-d -- you shall not mutilate yourselves... for a dead person... for you are a holy people to your G-d" (Deut. 41:1-2).

Grieving for the loss of a loved one is a normal human reaction, but halachah (Torah Law) prescribes regulations for grief. In particular, the Talmud forbids excessive mourning (Moed Katan 26b).

It is only natural to mourn and weep when one has suffered the pain of a loss. However, the intensity of the pain should be somewhat mitigated by the realization that a loving father would not be cruel to a child. The knowledge that G-d is a loving Father should make one's acceptance of a personal loss more tolerable. "You should know in your heart that just as a father will chastise his son, so your G-d chastises you" (Deut. 8:5). The pain of chastisement may indeed be intense, but faith in the absolute benevolence of G-d, even when it is beyond our ability to comprehend, should provide some measure of consolation.

Ramban explains that the phrase "for you are a holy people to your G-d" in this context refers to the eternity of the soul. As a holy people, when one leaves the earth, one enters into a more imminent presence of G-d. This is an additional reason why one should not mutilate oneself over a death. Whereas the pain of the loss may be intense, the knowledge that a loved one has arrived at a close relationship with G-d should mitigate one's initial reaction.

Self-mutilation is not healthy grief. Inflicting wounds on oneself when someone has died may be an expression of guilt. Most often this guilt is unwarranted. However, if one feels that he had in some way aggrieved the deceased person, he should look for ways to refine his behavior so that he does not offend anyone else. This is a constructive response to legitimate guilt. Self-mutilation is destructive and accomplishes nothing.

Grief is unavoidable. We should cope with grief constructively, as befits children of G-d. *From Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.*