Ki Tavo 5776 Volume XXIII Number 53

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularisation is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

These cannot be answered by the four great institutions of the modern West: science, technology, the market economy and the liberal democratic state. Science tells us how but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. The market gives us choices but does not tell us which choices to make. The liberal democratic state as a matter of principle holds back from endorsing any particular way of life. The result is that contemporary culture sets before us an almost infinite range of possibilities, but does not tell us who we are, why we are here, and how we should live.

Yet these are fundamental questions. Moses' first question to G-d in their first encounter at the burning bush was "Who am I?" The plain sense of the verse is that it was a rhetorical question: Who am I to undertake the extraordinary task of leading an entire people to freedom? But beneath the plain sense was a genuine question of identity. Moses had been brought up by an Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from the local Midianite shepherds, they went back and told their father, "An Egyptian man delivered us." Moses looked and spoke like an Egyptian.

He then married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters, and spent decades as a Midianite shepherd. The chronology is not entirely clear but since he was a relatively young man when he went to Midian and was eighty years old when he started leading the Israelites, he spent most of his adult life with his Midianite father-in-law, tending his sheep. So when he asked G-d, "Who am I?" beneath the surface there was a real question. Am I an Egyptian, a Midianite, or a Jew?

By upbringing he was an Egyptian, by experience he was a Midianite. Yet what proved decisive was his ancestry. He was a descendant of Abraham, the child of Amram and Yocheved. When he asked G-d his second question, "Who are you?" G-d first told him, "I will be what I will be." But then he gave him a second answer: Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the G-d of your fathers -- the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob -- has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.

Here too there is a double sense. On the surface G-d was telling Moses what to tell the Israelites when they asked, "Who sent you to us?" But at a deeper level the Torah is telling us about the nature of identity. The answer to the question, "Who am I?" is not simply a matter of where I was born, where I spent my childhood or my adult life or of which country I am a citizen. Nor is it answered in terms of what I do for a living, or what are my interests and passions. These things are about where I am and what I am but not who I am.

G-d's answer -- I am the G-d of your fathers -- suggests some fundamental propositions. First, identity runs through genealogy. It is a matter of who my parents were, who their parents were and so on. This is not always true. There are adopted children. There are children who make a conscious break from their parents. But for most of us, identity lies in uncovering the story of our ancestors, which, in the case of Jews, given the unparalleled dislocations of Jewish life, is almost always a tale of journeys, courage, suffering or escapes from suffering, and sheer endurance.

Second, the genealogy itself tells a story. Immediately after telling Moses to tell the people he had been sent by the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, G-d continued: Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The Lord, the G-d of your fathers -- the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites -- a land flowing with milk and honey.' (Ex. 3:16-17)

It was not simply that G-d was the G-d of their ancestors. He was also the G-d who made certain

TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM
The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.
TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL (973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM

promises: that He would bring them from slavery to freedom, from exile to the Promised Land. The Israelites were part of a narrative extended over time. They were part of an unfinished story, and G-d was about to write the next chapter.

What is more, when G-d told Moses that He was the G-d of the Israelites' ancestors, he added, "This is My eternal name, this is how I am to be recalled [zikhri] from generation to generation." G-d was here saying that He is beyond time -- "This is my eternal name" -- but when it comes to human understanding, He lives within time, "from generation to generation." The way He does this is through the handing on of memory: "This is how I am to be recalled." Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of what they remembered and handed on to me. Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory.

All of this is by way of prelude to a remarkable law in today's parsha. It tells us that first-fruits were to be taken to "the place G-d chooses," i.e. Jerusalem. They were to be handed to the priest, and each was to make the following declaration: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the G-d of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our suffering, our harsh labour and our distress. The Lord then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearsomeness and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. I am now bringing the first-fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me." (Deut. 26:5-10)

We know this passage because, at least since Second Temple times it has been a central part of the Haggadah, the story we tell at the Seder table. But note that it was originally to be said on bringing first-fruits, which was not on Pesach. Usually it was done on Shavuot.

What makes this law remarkable is this: We would expect, when celebrating the soil and its produce, to speak of the G-d of nature. But this text is not about nature. It is about history. It is about a distant ancestor, a "wandering Aramean", It is the story of our ancestors. It is a narrative explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi said in his classic book Zakhor, Jews were the first people to see G-d in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and the first to make memory a religious duty.

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the land and state of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. We are what we remember, and the first-fruits declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget.

In the past few years, a spate of books has appeared in the United States asking whether the American story is still being told, still being taught to children, still framing a story that speaks to all its citizens, reminding successive generations of the battles that had to be fought for there to be a "new birth of freedom", and the virtues needed for liberty to be sustained.

(Among the most important of these are Charles Murray, Coming Apart, Crown, 2013; Robert Putnam, Our Kids, Simon and Shuster, 2015; Os Guinness, A Free People's Suicide, IVP, 2012; Eric Metaxas, If You Can Keep It, Viking, 2016; and Yuval Levin, The Fractured Republic, Basic Books, 2016.)

The sense of crisis in each of these works is palpable, and though the authors come from very different positions in the political spectrum, their thesis is roughly the same: If you forget the story, you will lose your identity. There is such a thing as a national equivalent of Alzheimer's. Who we are depends on what we remember, and in the case of the contemporary West, a failure of collective memory poses a real and present danger to the future of liberty.

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole. You can't delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation. Winston Churchill said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward." Or to put it slightly differently: Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Cursed be the individual who does not carry aloft the words of this Torah." (Deuteronomy 27:26) Although I have been blessed with many magnificent students over my five decades of teaching, I shall never forget the piercing words penned by one of my most treasured students, who suddenly and inexplicably turned away from a Torah way of life. For a time he refused to answer any of my heartfelt entreaties for a dialogue – before eventually leaving a poem at my home. In part, it read:

Beloved teacher, both of us are often blind; you do not always see how much you taught me and I do not always see how much I learned from you. You think I took the Tablets of Testimony and threw them insolently at your feet. That's not at all what happened. The commandments merely became too heavy in my hands, and they fell to the ground.

As a Torah educator, I still feel the searing pain of losing students such as this one, in whom I had seen so much potential. It led me to difficult questions of myself: Where had I gone wrong as an educator? To what extent was I responsible for his decision?

These questions bring to mind a verse from this week's Torah portion, Parshat Ki Tavo, which announces blessings for those who observe specific Biblical commands, and curses for those who reject them. The final denunciation, however, "Cursed be the individual who does not hold aloft the words of this Torah" (Deuteronomy 27:26), is difficult to define. To what is this verse referring?

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sota 7:4) pointedly asks, in rhetorical fashion, "Is there then a Torah that falls down?" Indeed, the answer is, yes, there is, and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta specifies the responsible party for this tragedy: the spiritual leaders of the Jewish community!

While spiritual leaders can be measured to a certain extent by whether those in their care are completely observant of the Torah's teachings, their true mettle is tested by how they respond when their students fall short. Moses demonstrates how a teacher should react in such a situation. Upon witnessing the Jews serving the Golden Calf, he realizes that he has not succeeded in holding aloft the Torah, given that a mere forty days after temporarily ascending Mount Sinai, his people had departed from its ways so quickly. Thus, he casts the Tablets of the Covenant to the ground, smashing them.

At that moment, G-d saw the profound responsibility that Moses took upon himself for the broken tablets, and, according to the Yerushalmi (ibid.) placed within Moses' heart the words of King Josiah: "It is upon me to hold aloft [the words of the Torah]". Hence the Almighty commands Moses to sculpt two tablets just like the earlier two which had been broken (Ex. 34:1).

Fascinatingly enough, this verse is the very source for the Oral Law, specifically unique to the Second Tablets (Midrash Shemot Rabba, ad loc.), and which consists of the input of the Sages in every generation to ensure that the Torah continues to be held aloft.

The Torah "falls" when the Jewish People do not uphold its laws and values. Once the Oral Law – the application of the Torah in every generation – was placed in the hands of the rabbis and teachers, it becomes these leaders' obligation to make certain that it is a Torah of love and a nourishing source of life.

Indeed, it is the responsibility of the spiritual leaders of every generation to see to it that the Torah becomes, in the eyes of the Jewish People, neither so light – of such little significance that it can be easily discarded – nor so heavy and onerous that it can hardly be borne. Those who teach G-d's Torah must help every Jew feel and understand the loving embrace of Torah, the profound wisdom of Torah, the timeliness and timelessness of Torah. *© 2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The warnings to the Jewish people as contained in this week's Torah readings are awesome (how I despise that word as currently used in popular vernacular!) in their ferocity and cruelty. Unfortunately, they are also unerringly truthful and accurate. Everything in its minutest detail did befall us, not only over the long millennia of our existence as a people but as an accurate description of our fate in the last century.

The eternal question that nags at our very being as a people is "why?" or perhaps better still "why us?" Though the Torah implicitly and explicitly puts the onus for all of this on the obstinacy and waywardness of the sinful behavior of the Jewish people, Jews throughout the ages have found it difficult to fit this punishment to the crime.

Even in Second Temple times already, the rabbis were hard pressed to determine the cause of the Temple's destruction and resorted to explaining it in terms of baseless internal feuds and hatreds. As destructive as these traits undoubtedly are, they are difficult to pin down and identify as part of a national policy of a society of millions of individuals. We are therefore left to deal with the issues purely as a matter of faith and acceptance.

G-d's judgment and policies are correct, exquisitely so, but completely beyond human understanding and rationalization. Though the Torah demands rational thought and analysis in interpreting

its laws and value system, in essence it is obvious that it must be dealt with, in its authority and influence over human events, more as a matter of Heavenly understanding than human intelligence.

We have the great example of Rabi Akiva, who saw in the destruction of the Temple and the terrible scenes of cruelty that the Romans wrought against the Jews, the seeds of rebirth and resilience of the Jewish people. It is one of the mysteries of nature that destruction is always part of rejuvenation and renewal. The raging and most destructive forest fire somehow preserves and guarantees the growth of a new, greater and more verdant forest.

There is an interesting interpretation of the well-known verse in Kohelet: "A generation departs and a generation arrives and the earth survives forever." Aside from the usual understanding of the verse in regard to human mortality and the unchanging state of the world and its challenges, the verse can be viewed as teaching us another lesson. Namely, that it is only because of the departure of one generation and the consequent renewal caused by the arrival of another generation that the world is able to survive and remain vital.

Now this begs the question as to why G-d created nature and the world in such a pattern. But, at least to me, it does signify the eternal path of the Jewish people through history as being in line with nature's pattern of eternity itself. Just as nature with its very destructive forces nevertheless guarantees the eternity of the world, this parsha guarantees the survival of the Jewish people.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

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

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

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

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

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

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

In relating the consequences for not following the Almighty's commandments, the Torah states: "Your life shall hang in doubt before you, and you shall fear night and day, and you will not be sure of your livelihood" (Deut. 28:66). What is the meaning of this verse?

The Talmud (Menachos 103b) explains that the verse refers to the pain and suffering of worrying about the future. "Your life shall hang in doubt before you"

refers to someone who does not own land and buys a year's supply of grain each year. Though he has grain for this year, he worries about next year. The second level, "You shall fear night and day" refers to someone who buys grain once a week. He is in a worse situation; he has to find new grain every week. The most severe level, "you will not be sure of your livelihood" refers to someone who has to buy bread every day. He constantly has what to worry about.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, the former head of the famed Mir Yeshiva, frequently cited this statement of the Sages and pointed out that a person creates his own mental torture by his own thoughts. If you have enough food for today and you appreciate what you have, you are a fortunate person. You will live a happy life. If you keep worrying about the future, you will never have peace of mind. Even if you have enough to eat for the entire year, you can easily destroy the quality of your life by keeping your mind focused on all that can go wrong next year. Regardless of what will be next year, you are causing yourself suffering right now.

Learn to have mental self-discipline. Don't dwell on what you are missing unless it can lead to constructive planning. Why cause yourself unnecessary pain and anguish when you can choose to keep your thoughts on what you do have in the present? If you are a worrier, the best thing you can do for yourself is to train yourself to be the master of your thoughts. Even if you never gain complete control, whatever control you do have is a blessing! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Eating of the First Fruits

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week's portion there is reference to the Mitzvah of "Bikurim" (first fruits) and the Mitzvah of "Maaser Sheini" (tithes that one must bring and consume in Yerushalayim).However the Mitzvah of actually eating the" Bikurim" and "Maaser Shani" is found elsewhere. The Mitzvah of eating Bikurim is found in Devarim 12;5,6, and of the eating of "Maaser sheni" in Devarim 14;26.

Since however, both Mitzvot are mentioned in this week's portion and are in close proximity to each other and have many similarities, our sages learn one from the other with the exception that "Maaser Sheni" is eaten in Yerushalayim by its owners, but the "Bikurim" are presented to the "Kohanim" (priests) when the people arrive in Israel with their first fruits.

The declaration when one brings his "Maaser Sheni" to Yerushalayim is "I have not eaten of it in my intense mourning" which we derive that one must be happy when eating of the "Maaser Sheni" when one comes to Yerushalayim. As well, the Kohen who is receiving the "bikurim" must also be happy and not in a state of mourning. Some derive this from the passage "And you should be happy because of all the good".

The Mitzvah of "Bikurim"and all of its requirements, is not only upon an Israelite who brings his fruit to a Kohen, but also is applicable to the Kohen who receives the " Bikurim" and indeed he is required to recite the blessing "Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav vtzivanu le'echol Bikurim" (who has commanded one to eat Bikurim) when he receives the "Bikurim".

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"If you do not obey G-d, your G-d... that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you." (Devarim 28:15) One week until Rosh Hashanah, b"H. Are you ready? "Ready for what?" you may ask. "All that time in shul? All that cooking? All those guests?" Well, not exactly. I'm asking more about being ready for what is supposed to happen on those days, Above and below. In essence, I'm really asking if you are yet real with the holiday itself.

Real with the holiday? What's that supposed to mean? What does it mean to be real with anything? It means that you understand the opportunity a situation offers you at any given moment in time, to the point of not missing it. A person has limited time and resources, and a huge part of life is about wasting neither. You have to know when and where to use both of them.

The Talmud says: "The righteous, even in death are called 'living'... Evil people, even while alive are called 'dead.'" (Brochos 18a)

"Living" in this sense is obviously about more than properly functioning body organs. The "living" here are those people who correctly use the opportunity of life, and the "dead" are those who waste it. They squander their time on earth and misuse their resources until they are part of the "living dead."

Why, though, are the righteous called "living" if they are actually dead? When a person uses the opportunity of life correctly, it still serves him after he has passed from this world, as if he is still alive. He leaves a positive legacy based upon his past good deeds, deeds that still impact the world after he has died.

This is what we are judged for on Rosh Hashanah, how real we were, are, with life. The Talmud says: "Three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah, one for completely wicked people, one for completely righteous people, and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous people are immediately inscribed and sealed for life. The completely wicked people are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. Those in the middle have their judgment suspended until Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are written for life, and if not, they are written for death." (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

This statement can be seen as a line that stretches between two points. To the extreme left of the line, the "home" of the completely evil, is the category, "Not Real," as in not real with life. At the other end, where the completely righteous "live" is "Real." The rest of mankind can be found at billions of different points along this line, depending upon how real each person is with life.

It is a struggle. It is the struggle of life. It is actually the battle between the yetzer tov, man's good inclination, and the yetzer hara, his evil inclination. The yetzer hara is the partier, the one who wants life to be a blast. Fun catches his attention and energizes him to act. Just watch how many people, even as adults, literally run to have fun.

The yetzer tov is real with life. It not only knows about the concept of death, physical and spiritual, it takes them seriously. It is not one to throw caution to the wind, to sacrifice long term gain for short term pleasure. It knows that the temporal is only meant to be a means to the eternal.

The yetzer hara was the author of, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Though it was literal during the French Revolution, it is certainly symbolic at all other times. This is why we are born completely selfish, since we do not receive a yetzer tov until later. Maturity is mostly a function of selflessness. A large part of growing up is learning how to wait for pleasures in life, how to curb the need for instant gratification in pursuit of nobler goals.

Enter this week's parshah. Blessings and curses. Ninety-eight threats. Some more gruesome than others. The parshah is so scary that some congregations used to omit it out of fear. Once upon a time, Jews took its threats seriously, probably because they witnessed their actualization firsthand.

Make no mistake about it: G-d does not enjoy punishing His people. He makes this clear by beginning with a whole list of blessings and promises of good. He starts with this because He wants us to know that this is the way it ought to be, the way He wants it to be.

However, the Torah says, the good is not free, nor should it be. It is the result of living a Torah lifestyle. It is the product of working on living up to your spiritual potential to the best of your personal ability. It is the spoils of war when we defeat the yetzer hara and its drive for temporal pleasures. None of it is to be taken for granted.

To drive the point home, the Torah then launches into the many curses for doing exactly this. The Torah is not saying that G-d is vindictive. The Torah is saying, "Understand what it means to stray from Torah, to your spiritual health and to the health of the world.

It's like a doctor who tells his patient, "If you watch what you eat and take care of yourself, you can live a long, healthy life. If you don't, your health will not take care of itself. On the contrary, it will deteriorate rapidly. You will get weaker faster, sicker more often. You might even get cancer, G-d forbid. Let me take you and show you patients who did exactly that, and how sick they became. It is truly tragic."

Physical health is one of those things for which there is no automatic status quo. It has to be maintained, or it worsens. Creation is the same way. It was founded on chaos, and if man does not actively work on keeping chaos at bay, it keeps coming back and wreaking havoc.

All the countless wars throughout history? Chaos. All the plagues that have killed countless people? Chaos. All the insanity that has intellectually infected society? Chaos again, the result of man not making enough of an effort to control it.

We were give free will to do exactly this. It is our most important distinguishing ability. It is what earns us reward in the World-to-Come. Yet, how many people actually pay attention to it? How many people keep track of just how many REAL free will choices they make on a daily basis?

What IS a real free will choice? It is not choosing between vanilla or chocolate ice cream. It is desiring to do something the Torah forbids, and choosing not to do it instead. Or, it is not feeling like doing that which the Torah commands, and choosing to do it anyhow. It is choosing not to "eat" that spiritually unhealthy thing when almost every molecule in your body is pushing you to "consume" it.

Once there used to be only two categories with respect to the illness of Diabetes: "Diabetes" and "No Diabetes." Since people did not recognize in time when they were transitioning from the latter to the former, the Medical Profession created a new category called "Pre-Diabetes," to act as a warning buffer for people moving in the wrong direction.

Does it work? Does it help people stop eating too much sugar in time to avoid becoming diabetic? It all depends upon the person. If he is real with how close he is to becoming diabetic, and more importantly, the consequences of becoming so, then it works. If not, then the person eats sugary foods thinking that he is safe when he really is not.

One of the greatest obstacles to becoming real with life today is hester panim, G-d's "hidden face." Evil exists and is even rampant. People get away with so much. They break the Torah with impunity, or so it seems. Although the Holocaust was less than 100 years earlier, Torah consequences have no teeth today.

Even the Holocaust is not necessarily viewed as Divine retribution for straying from Torah. Religious and secular alike suffered equally, even righteous people as well. The Holocaust is a complicated topic, and many prefer to not discuss it in terms of religious implications.

Thus, becoming real with life and free will is really up to the individual. Each person has to take the time to understand that G-d is not only here today, He's as actively involved in our lives as ever before. The rules of Creation still apply, even if we can't see them in action.

The 10 days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are a tremendous gift that no other nation has. It's like attending a 10-day seminar on the reality of existence and how to work with it to maximize the opportunity of life. It only works, though, if you "attend" it. The more seriously you take the Ten Days of Repentance, the more life becomes real to you.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"You did not eat bread, nor did you drink wine" (D'varim 29:5). Although it is certainly true that because G-d provided "manna from heaven" every day (except Shabbos, which was covered by Friday's portions) and a well from which they drank water, the Children of Israel didn't need to "eat bread or drink wine," is it really true that they never did? What about the food and drink they purchased from Edom and Moav (D'varim 2:28-29)? Or the food purchased from the traveling salesmen from nearby countries (Yoma 75b)? [It can be suggested that the Amoni wine offered by the women who tried to seduce them at P'or (see Sanhedrin 106b) was only consumed by those who sinned, and none of them were still around now (D'varim 4:3-4), but according to most they did buy food from Moav, as well as from others.] How can the Torah say they didn't eat any real bread or drink any wine during the entire 40 years in the desert if they actually did?

Ramban explains the verse to mean that they couldn't survive on the real food they bought from others, so even though it's not literally true that they didn't eat or drink anything else, the verse only means that it wasn't their primary source of nourishment. Although this wouldn't explain not drinking wine since it is not a primary source of nourishment for anyone (see Iyun HaParasha #115), it can be suggested that wine was the usual during meals, which was not the case in the desert. However, if this verse is supposed to match the previous one (their clothes not wearing out), we would expect both to be taken literally.

Tz'ror Hamor and Chasam Sofer connect this verse with the next one, being victorious over Sichone, suggesting that the point isn't that they never ate bread or drank wine, but (similar to Ramban) that it wasn't their normal fare. Bread and wine was thought to provide warriors with strength (Malki Tzedek bringing Avraham bread and wine after his war with the kings to give him back his strength is referenced), and this wasn't the regular diet of those who fought Sichone, yet they were victorious. Aside from the verse still not being literally true (as they did eat real bread), it seems more closely connected to the previous one, not the one after it.

Abarbanel (addressing a different question) says the point of the verse is not whether they actually ate bread or drank wine, but that they were not faced with the tasks and distractions of working the land in order to eat/drink them. They didn't need to plant any fields or vineyards, harvest any grain or grapes, or turn them into bread and wine, thereby allowing them to focus on their spiritual growth.

Besides the verse not being true in a literal sense (as they did eat bread and drink wine, albeit without having to go through the long laborious process of growing them and making them from scratch), the point of the verse seems to be that G-d provided everything for them, not that they didn't have to work.

Malbim (who often builds upon Abarbanel's approach), adds that G-d's intent (when He brought them into the desert) was not only so that they wouldn't be distracted by work, but also so that they wouldn't eat physical food, which can be an obstacle to spiritual growth. Instead, G-d provided them with spiritual nourishment that took care of their physical needs as well, allowing them to experience optimal spiritual growth. From this perspective, the point isn't that they never ate bread or drank wine, but that they didn't need to, as they could have been fully sustained without buying any real food from others. Nevertheless, a simple reading of the verse is that they actually didn't eat bread or drink wine, not that they didn't have to.

Maharil Diskin compares the "bread and wine" here to their earlier complaints (Bamidbar 21:5) about there being no "bread and water," even though there was plenty of water (most of the time) and the manna replaced the bread. Just as their complaint was based on their (unjustified) fear that the food they were eating wasn't being digested properly (see Rashi), here they were being told that they were able to live on the miraculous food G-d provided for them despite usually not eating any real food with it to help the digestion. Even though this comes closer to explaining the verse literally than any other approach I have seen, it still doesn't explain it 100% literally, as rather than meaning "you never ate bread or drank wine," it means "you remained healthy even though most of the time you didn't eat bread or drink wine." More importantly, the point of the verse is changed so drastically that it is unlikely to be its intent. The message is no longer that G-d provided miraculous sustenance for them the entire 40 years, but that the miraculous food He provided didn't harm them. The focus of the message would not be any miracle, but that an unjustified fear wasn't realized, more like an "I told ya so!"

The previous verse (D'varim 29:4) raises a different issue, one worthy of a full discussion; I am

only mentioning it here because of one seemingly problematic approach to it. In this verse the nation was told that “your shoe did not wear out,” whereas earlier (8:4) they were told that “your foot did not swell.” Did they wear shoes, or not? If they did, why should their feet have become swollen that this was so extraordinary? If they didn’t, there were no shoes that should have worn out but didn’t! Even if this conundrum can be resolved (such as suggesting that feet normally swell from the amount of walking they did even if in shoes), why was one aspect highlighted the first time and the other the second time?

Tzafnas Pa’anayach reconciles these two verses by saying that the second verse refers to the Tribe of Levi, who were not “pushed away” after the sin of the golden calf, so were still allowed to wear shoes. The rest of the nation, on the other hand, were not allowed to wear shoes because of their state of excommunication. [Even if the excommunication only applied to the first generation, whereas those being addressed now, the next generation, were allowed to wear shoes, see Rashi on D’varim 2:16-17, the point being made is that feet didn’t swell and shoes didn’t wear out the entire 40 years.] Therefore, the first verse was said to the entire nation, who could not wear shoes and yet their feet didn’t swell, while the second verse was addressed to the Tribe of Levi, who did wear shoes, which didn‘t wear out.

The question this approach begs is why the Levi’im were the only ones being addressed here. Additionally, this paragraph (29:1) starts with Moshe addressing the entire nation, not just the Levi’im. However, this issue is taken care of by a different one, as first it was Moshe doing the talking (29:1-3), with G-d being referred to in the third person, then G-d Himself talks (29:4-5), referring to Himself in the first person, before Moshe takes over again (29:6-8), referring to the nation as “we” (see Chizkuni on 29:5). It can be suggested that Moshe was talking to the entire nation, while G-d (being quoted by Moshe) spoke only to the Levi’im. Nevertheless, we are still left with the question of why G-d’s words to the Levi’im are inserted into the message being given to the entire nation.

Moshe had just told them that they hadn’t been able to really know or understand G-d until that day, at the very end of the 40 years. This was in contrast to the Levi’im, who had attained that level decades earlier, which is why originally Moshe only gave a copy of the Torah to them (see Rashi on 29:3). G-d’s interjection explained how the Levi’im were able to attain that level; because He had led them in the desert for 40 years, removing any obstacle that could have distracted them from their spiritual growth. Their clothes never wore out (including their shoes), they didn’t have to work for their food, and the food they were provided was of a spiritual nature. True, this was an environment that the entire nation was given the opportunity to take advantage of, but only the Levi’im (and Kohanim, who were also from the Tribe of Levi) seized it. Therefore, addressing the Tribe of Levi (and only the Tribe of Levi, even though the rest of the nation got the message), G-d told them that their shoes never wore out, and they didn’t eat any (real) bread or drink any wine. (After this interjection to explain why the Levi’im were different, and that the rest of the nation could have done the same, Moshe continued to address the nation.)

Did most of the nation eat bread or drink wine during their travels in the desert? Yes. But the Levi’im didn’t. So when addressing them it could accurately be said that “you did not eat bread, nor did you drink wine.” Neither figuratively, or literally.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Today. It's a powerful word. It is used by doctors to define the exact moment their patients are to stop over-indulging, smoking, and drinking. It is used by account receivables to exact when they want their bills paid. Most importantly, it's used by the Torah in describing what It wants from our attitudes. This week the Torah portion tells us: "Today Hashem commands you to perform these decrees and statutes." (26:16) There is obviously a deeper connotation. The commandments were not given on the day that Moshe read this week's portion. They were given forty years prior. Also, at the end of the Parsha, Moshe calls the nation together and reminds them of the miraculous events that transpired during the exodus from Egypt. He discusses "the great wonders, signs, and miracles that your eyes beheld." (29:1-3) Then he adds something shocking: "But Hashem did not give you a heart to understand or eyes to see until today." What can the word "today" mean in this context? Did the Jewish nation not have the heart to appreciate the value of splitting the Sea forty years back? Did they not revel in the miracle of Manna from its first earthly descent decades previously? How can Moshe say that they did not have eyes to understand until today?

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky explains that perhaps Moshe is telling his nation the secret of eternal inspiration. One may experience miraculous events. They may even have the vision of a lifetime. However, they "will not have the heart to understand or the eyes to see" until that vision is today. Unless the inspiration lives with them daily, as it did upon the moment of impact. Whether tragedy or blessing, too often an impact becomes as dull as the movement of time itself. The promises, pledges, and commitments begin to travel slowly, hand-in-hand down a memory lane paved with long-forgotten inspiration. This week Moshe tells us that even after experiencing a most memorable wonder, we still may, "not have the heart to discern nor the eyes to see." Until we add one major ingredient. Today.