

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

When I was a student at university in the late 1960s -- the era of student protests, psychedelic drugs, and the Beatles meditating with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi -- a story went the rounds. An American Jewish woman in her sixties travelled to north India to see a celebrated guru. There were huge crowds waiting to see the holy man, but she pushed through, saying that she needed to see him urgently. Eventually, after weaving through the swaying crowds, she entered the tent and stood in the presence of the master himself. What she said that day has entered the realm of legend. She said, "Marvin, listen to your mother. Enough already. Come home."

Starting in the sixties Jews made their way into many religions and cultures with one notable exception: their own. Yet Judaism has historically had its mystics and meditators, its poets and philosophers, its holy men and women, its visionaries and prophets. It has often seemed as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity. We prefer the far to the near.

Moses already foresaw this possibility: Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel's history during the First and Second Temple periods. First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite

Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon. Later, in Second Temple times, they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. It is a strange phenomenon, best expressed in the memorable line of Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who do not love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism, Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. And this tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Deuteronomy. It occurs in ages of affluence, not poverty, in eras of freedom, not slavery. When we seem to have little to thank God for, we thank God. When we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of Emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end antisemitism; it inflamed it. Hence the power of Moses' insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have to go elsewhere. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler's Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a chazzan, wrote "White Christmas." Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the first "enlightened" Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach's long-neglected St Matthew Passion. Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
to my new parents

Dani & Penina Weiss!

I love you and can't wait to find out my name!

PS - so sorry for keeping you up all night

I'm still getting used to this whole in-body experience



**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 & various websites. It is 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**

thinkers of the twentieth century -- described by Albert Camus as "the only great spirit of our times" -- was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a Jew. And so on.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism's failure to confront the challenge? The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and in the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers. But we still spiritually underachieve. The deepest roots of spirituality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism God is close. You do not need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence. It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the challot, in the praise of the EishetChayil and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying -- the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, God is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, and the contrition of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

God is near. That is the overwhelming feeling I

get from a lifetime of engaging with the faith of our ancestors. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstruse theologies, no metaphysical ingenuities -- beautiful though all these are -- because for us God is the God of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.

I am a Rabbi. For many years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the Rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that our ancestors knew so well and loved so much. We were afraid -- of the intellectual challenges of an aggressively secular culture, of the social challenges of being in yet not entirely of the world, of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the State of Israel criticised and condemned. So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful. What makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, "It is not in heaven... nor is it beyond the sea," was: Kinderlach, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of God at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So God found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is Shechinah, from shachen, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world.

When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him. Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you do not have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You are all standing before God your Lord -- the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your

bailiffs, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water. [The purpose is that] you should enter into a covenant with God, and into His oath, that He is making with you today." (Deuteronomy 29:9–11)

We read a bit further on, in the book of Joshua (8:33–34), "And all of Israel and its elders, its heads of tribes and its judges.... Priests and Levites, half facing Mount Gerizim and half facing Mount Eyal... Joshua read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse." Why must Moses make a covenant with the nations "today," in the plains of the Moab, so similar to the Covenant which will soon be made with Joshua on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eyal?

The Midrash Tanhuma, which is cited by Rashi and which opened our last commentary, provides an important insight by teaching us that what necessitated the Third Covenant is the sin of the Golden Calf. It might have been thought that once the Israelites formed and worshipped a golden calf – only forty days after they had ratified the covenant at Sinai and on the very watch of Moses – their evil deed of treachery and faithlessness, idolatry and adultery, abrogated the covenant forever. The Almighty therefore enters into a third covenant during Moses' lifetime as an affirmation of the truth that whereas a contract can be broken, a covenant is irrevocable; despite the backsliding of Israel, their covenant with their God who is always ready to accept their repentance remains eternally validated. "You have greatly angered the Almighty, but nevertheless you have not been destroyed, and behold you are standing here today." (See "Two Destructions and Two Redemptions.")

I would suggest another significance to this third covenant, and by so doing explain why and how the Israelites could have stooped to idolatry so soon after the glory of the revelation. In addition, we shall interpret the unique language of the Third Covenant itself.

What initially strikes us about the Third Covenant – and the manner in which it clearly differs from its predecessors – is its democratic element. Every single Israelite is summoned and included, from the chairman of the board to the lowly water carrier: "the heads of your tribes... your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water" (Deut. 29:9–10). In terms of the ancient world, what could possibly be more allinclusive and democratic?

This town-hall meeting is in sharp contrast to the Sinai covenant, as recorded in Parashat Mishpatim: "All of you must bow down at a distance. Only Moses shall then approach God. The others may not come close, and the people may not go up with him" (Ex. 24:1–2). The extraordinary demonstration of God's transcendent presence upon Mount Sinai necessitated

warnings and boundaries. The Revelation was clearly aimed for the entire nation, but God spoke to Moses in a special and unique way; the rest of the nation was warned to keep its distance from the frenzied fire of faith, which has the capacity to consume as well as to construct. Hence it was Moses who received the bulk of the Revelation, and he served as the intermediary to convey the divine will to the nation (Deut. 5:4, 20–25).

On this basis, we can readily understand why and how the Israelites could succumb to idolatry so soon after the Revelation; since the Revelation revolved so centrally about Moses, when Moses failed to descend from the mountain at the expected time, the people felt bereft and orphaned. After all, the nation related to Moses more than to God – and in their frightened and desperate moment, due to the absence of Moses, they turned to the familiar Egyptian idols.

Enter the covenant in our portion of Nitzavim, the covenant that stresses the truth that God has a unique relationship with every single Israelite – Jew and stranger, man and woman, rich and poor, elders and children, wood-choppers and tribal chiefs – and not only with Moses or the elite class of scholars and pietists. The Third Covenant attempts to correct the previous misimpression that God was primarily concerned with the religious elite; God entered into a covenant with every single Jew!

Furthermore, unlike the Sinai Covenant, the present covenant takes into account not only the totality of all Jews, an across-the-board horizontal gathering, but it's also a vertical covenant, extending both backwards and forwards, spanning even past and future generations: "Not with you alone do I make this covenant.... But with those who stand here this day before the Lord our God...as well as with those who are not here with us this day" (Deut. 29:13–14). The Third Covenant includes all of historic Israel, Knesset Yisrael entire, past, present, and future; it emphasizes the all-inclusive historical and eternal aspect of the relationship between God and Israel.

Years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 29, 1947, an earlier plan was offered which would have given the aspiring state a very meager parcel of land. David Ben Gurion, the chairman of the Histadrut HaTzionit, was unsure as to whether or not to accept the offer. He greatly respected Yitzhak Tabenkin, a leading Labor Zionist of that period, and so he uncharacteristically agreed to abide by Tabenkin's decision. Tabenkin asked for another twenty-four hours, insisting that he must first seek counsel with two individuals. The next day, he advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. "I accept your decision," said the modern-day Lion of Judah, "but just tell me by whom you were advised?" "I had to ask two very important individuals," said Tabenkin, "my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet

born." Yitzhak Tabenkin fully understood the significance of the Covenant of Arvot Moab, the Third Covenant. © 2019 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's reading in the Torah describes the eternal binding covenant between God and the Jewish people. This covenant has played itself out over thousands of years of world history and remains valid and operative today as it did on the day that Moshe presented it to the Jewish people at the end of his life. The covenant is all-encompassing and applies to all who were members of the Jewish people. It states specifically that even the lowest and least educated classes of the Jewish people -- those who chop the word and draw the water -- are as important and included in the terms of the covenant as are the wisest and most intellectually gifted of the Jewish people.

This is a remarkable statement for human society, which, since its inception has always divided itself into classes according to talents, education, and financial status. These differences also existed within Jewish society, but the covenant is not affected by these societal norms and differences that every generation of Jewish people exhibited. The Torah does not present for us a utopian vision of a classless society, where equality exists amongst all members of a certain nation or group. Such an idea flies in the face of human nature and behavior. The Torah does inform us though, that there is an over arching covenant that binds all Jews, no matter their station in life and their experiences, and it is this covenant that is the basis of the relationship between the God of Israel and the people of Israel.

The Torah recognizes that life is not always fair to everyone. The distribution of talent, opportunities and wealth has always been unequal, and no economic theory or legislative program will ever change that reality. The Torah does not countenance playing the victim card as an excuse for one's failures and shortcomings. The prophet Jeremiah stated this succinctly when he said, "Why should a human being complain, is it not sufficient that it is yet alive?".

Judaism measures people by their capacity to realize their potential. That is why the rabbis taught us that the righteous people are judged as finely as the breadth of a hair. The more righteous one is, the greater is the potential for performing acts of goodness. In effect, the Torah is teaching us that we are our own judges, each according to his/her abilities and opportunities. The question that will be asked of us is why we were not what we could have been, irrespective of the achievements and greatness we have achieved or compared to that of other human beings.

It is ironic that in world history the Jewish people could certainly be characterized as the victim

and would be justified for not being a contributory force in the advancement of world civilization. But, even the most cursory view of world history shows that it was the Jewish people, more than anyone else, who drove forward the forces of civilization for the betterment of the human condition, physically and certainly spiritually. © 2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion Nitzavim is replete with urgings to return to God. A term which jumps from the text is one describing God'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 God. 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 God, 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 God. (Exodus 19:19) This time, however, the voice of God was a call to commit to Torah practice as revealed at Sinai. Kol here speaks to the voice of God as expressed through observing God'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 God and His commandments, but of harnessing the energy of these messages into repairing the world—the Messianic period - the time when God'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 to be noted that the blessing preceding the shofar ritual does not state "to blow the shofar (li-t'koah)" 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 God, 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. © 2019 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVINE

Choose Life

Parashat Nitzavim ends with a section of the Torah which is familiar to many people based on one part of that section which says “uvacharta bachayim, and you should choose life.” These words are often taken out of context and the full meaning of them is lost because of that omission. Here is the full section: “See that I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil. That which I command you today, to love Hashem your Elokim to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes, and His ordinances and you will live and multiply and Hashem your Elokim will bless you in the land in which you come to take possession of it. But if your heart will stray and you will not listen and you are led astray and you prostrate yourself to the gods of others and serve them. I tell you today that you will surely be lost, you will not lengthen your days in the land that you cross the Jordan to come there to take possession of it. I call the heavens and the earth today to bear witness against you, I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse, and you shall choose life so that you may live, you and your children. To love Hashem your Elokim to listen to His voice and to cleave to Him for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya’akov to give them.”

This section begins with Moshe presenting the B’nei Yisrael with what appears to be a choice between life and death, good and evil. Rashi explains this choice in reverse: if you will do what is good you will have life, and if you do what is evil then you will have death. The Ramban stresses the fact that both good and evil are paths which only we can choose. According to the Ramban, Moshe tells the people that “there are two courses in their hands, and it is in their power to walk in whichever they desire, and there is no power below or above that will withhold them or stop them.” This appears to be why Moshe returns to this plea one last time before his death, for he has surely said these words before in many different forms throughout Sefer Devarim. The ibn Ezra defines “the life” as being length of days and “the good” as the wealth, health, and honor which is due a person who follows Hashem’s commandments. The Kli Yakar understands that it is by doing what is good that one receives life, yet the Torah places life before good. He

explains this problem in the following way: “to caution us not to seek out to do good in order to live but instead to live in order to do good.”

Moshe then gives the people instructions on the correct path to follow if they choose good. Hashem has given the B’nei Yisrael the perfect formula of life, the mitzvot, which include different forms of law. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains the first of these mitzvot: “to love Hashem your Elokim.” “Once again Moshe summarizes the conception of this ‘living’ in loving Hashem, which wishes for nothing else but to obey Him and in joy and sorrow, in life and death, close and intimately to remain bound to Him.” Hirsch quotes Gemara Nedarim (62a), “Do all the tasks of your life for the sake of Him Who sends them, speak about them for their own sakes, do not do them for self-aggrandizement, nor use them for a spade wherewith to dig.” With this in mind it is easy to understand why Moshe begins the mitzvot with “His statutes.” A Chok (Statute) is a mitzvah which is beyond our comprehension, but is performed because it is a commandment from Hashem. It is performed out of love of Hashem and the path which Hashem has chosen for us as the proper path in life. “His ordinances” are mitzvot which we might clearly derive from our everyday experiences were we without bias or seeking of personal gain. The reward for doing these mitzvot is, “you will live and multiply and Hashem will bless you.” Rashi explains that the mitzvah is listed before the reward as proof that one performs mitzvot in order to be rewarded with life.

Moshe now turns to the second path that man may choose. “But if your heart will stray and you will not listen and you are led astray and you prostrate yourself to the gods of others and serve them.” HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Hashem has shown man the proper, straight path and if man chooses to stray from that path, it is appropriate to use the term poneh (yifneh) which also means to turn. This turning is done with the heart, which here is referring to the emotional aspect of the heart rather than the intellectual aspect which is also attributed to the heart. The punishment which will follow from this behavior is then stated: “you will surely be lost, you will not lengthen your days in the land.” The Land of Israel is a collective reward to the B’nei Yisrael and can only be achieved with a dedication of the nation to the service of Hashem. The land was given to the people prior to them proving themselves and could only be lost by them if they did not meet Hashem’s challenge. If one studies the Prophets, one can clearly see that the people often fluctuated in their observance of the mitzvot and were often tempted to serve other gods. In spite of this, the B’nei Yisrael maintained possession of the land for many years. This can only be attributed to Hashem’s slowness of anger and His desire to accept the repentance of the people.

HaRav Sorotzkin speaks of the forces of artziyut, land based, and nishmat ru'ach chayim, a spiritual based seeking of the Heavens. There is a constant battle in Man between these two forces for man must live on this earth but must strive for something which may be beyond his grasp. This is the battle between Heaven and Earth and perhaps for that reason the two are chosen as our witnesses. HaRav Sorotzkin questions how Man, who must deal with the needs of basic survival can fight against that artziyut and reach for shamayim. He answers that the same One who created our soul has given us the Torah and the mitzvot which can enable man. When one studies Torah it is as if he brings Hashem down to join us and help our soul to do battle for that which is good.

This is the time of year when we must examine ourselves and determine whether we have sufficiently withstood the temptations which cross our paths daily and are part of this battle of good and evil. May we choose life, and may Hashem grant us that life so that we may serve Him through the study of Torah and the performance of His commandments, and, in that way, be worthy of living in His land. © 2019 Rabbi D. Levine

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

There is a Midrash (a commentary on the Five Books of Moses in the form of a parable) about a successful businessman who meets a former colleague down on his luck. The colleague begs the successful business man for a substantial loan to turn around his circumstances. Eventually, the businessman agrees to a 6 month loan and gives his former colleague the money. At the end of the 6 months, the businessman goes to collect his loan. The former colleague gives him every last penny. However, the businessman notices that the money is the exact same coins he loaned the man. He was furious! "How dare you borrow such a huge amount and not even use it? I gave this to you to better your life!" The man was speechless.

Likewise, the Almighty gives each of us a soul. He doesn't want us to return it to Him at the end of our days in the same condition that we received it. He wants us to better ourselves, to enhance our souls by doing the mitzvot (613 commandments). It is up to us to sit down before Rosh Hashana and make a list of what we need to correct in our lives between us and our fellow beings, us and God and us and ourselves!

Another story is told of an elderly sage named Reb Zusia who lay on his deathbed surrounded by his students and disciples. He was crying and no one could comfort him.

One student asked his Rebbe, "Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham." Reb Zusia answered, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they

won't ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham,' rather, they will ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential, why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine."

On Rosh Hashana we confront our potential as human beings, but even more so, as Jews. Let each of us use the opportunity to reevaluate our lives, our potentials, and our commitment to our God, our Torah, our People and ourselves. A sweet year to you and yours! © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

The Mitzvah of Hakhel

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit

by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather your nation, the men, women, children and the stranger in your midst, in order that they will learn, hear and fear Almighty G-d" (Devarim 31;10-12). This is the Mitzvah of "Hakhel", which occurs on Succot at the conclusion of the "Shmittah" year. The Torah designates who this Mitzvah is incumbent upon.

With regards to women, initially they would be required to fulfill the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" once in seven years, even though it is a Mitzvah based on time (which women are exempt). However, women are also essentially exempt from the Mitzvah of "Reiyah (coming to Yerushalayim on the festivals), since one must own land in Israel to fulfill this Mitzvah and generally women don't own any land. Hence ipso facto they would be exempt from the mitzvah of "Hakhel".

Regarding children, there are those sages that state that even a nursing child must attend "Hakhel". Others state that the children must be of educable age. What is interesting is that if we ascribe to the view that women are exempt from the Mitzvah of "Hakhel" because they don't own land, then while their husbands would be attending "Hakhel" the children who are in the category of exemption, would be supervised since their mothers (if they wish) would be available to tend to their needs. © 2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

There is a halachic principle that governs mitzvos that one fulfills by hearing from someone else, such as the mitzvos of shofar, megillah, and kiddush. That is, the one who enables others to fulfill their obligation must himself be obligated in that particular mitzvah. If the person blowing the shofar, reading the megillah, or saying kiddush is not required to perform the given mitzvah, such as if he is under the age of bar mitzvah, the listener does not fulfill his obligation and must perform the mitzvah again. Nevertheless, one who already fulfilled his obligation may still blow the shofar, read the megillah, or recite

kiddush for others. The halacha does not view him as an individual who is totally exempt; rather he is still labeled halachically as one who is obligated. How do we understand this distinction? If practically he no longer has to do this mitzvah because he has already done it, how can he enable others to fulfill their obligation?

Rashi in (Maseches Rosh Hashanah 29a) explains that the previously obligated individual is still viewed as being in a state of obligation because it does not suffice merely to fulfill one's personal mitzvah. As long as there is any Jew who has not heard the shofar, megillah, or kiddush, every Jew is still "obligated" in these mitzvos. This halachic principle is an extension of the concept of arvus, "kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh -- all Jews are responsible for one another." This principle is introduced in Parshas Nitzavim. Moshe Rabbeinu is instructed to tell the Jewish People that once they enter Eretz Yisrael they will be held accountable for one another. Torah is not just a covenant of individuals with Hashem, but rather with the entire Jewish Nation is one unit. It is this relationship that enables one Jew to assist another since in a very real halachic sense, one has never completed one's Avodas Hashem if there are others who have not yet completed theirs.

This unity of the Jewish People impacts on our fulfillment of tekias Shofar in another significant manner. The broken sound of the shofar is described by the Torah as being a Teruah which is translated to mean a crying sound. It is for this reason that we blow different forms of this sound. The Shevarim, Teruah, and Shevarim-Teruah are all different forms of crying, and because of the different possibilities of which one we should blow, we blow all of them. The very sound of the shofar highlights the emotional prayer that is symbolized by the cries of the shofar, which is an integral part of Rosh Hashanah. What should our focus be on as we pour our hearts and present our shofar cries to Hashem on Rosh Hashanah? There are two individuals who are referred to on Rosh Hashanah as crying and neither of them are appropriate models for us to emulate. In the Torah Reading of the first day of Rosh Hashanah we read about Hagar who cries when she was in great distress. Her son, Yishmael, was sick and the Torah describes how she left him alone and just cried. Rather than comforting her ill child, she is entirely wrapped up in her own sorrow. The mother of Sisra who cries when her son doesn't return from battle also plays a role on Rosh Hashanah. Our custom is to blow one hundred shofar blasts corresponding to the one hundred cries of the mother of Sisra. Perhaps our custom is highlighting the fundamental distinction between our hundred sounds and the sounds of crying of Sisra's mother. The mother of Sisra is described in Sefer Shoftim as sobbing for her son whom she is concerned about because he hasn't yet returned. She is comforted by the assurances that he must be

delayed because he is still involved in his murderous battles. She who at first appears to be a sensitive, caring mother who is crying for fear of her child's fate is actually one who shows no such compassion for the victims of her son's barbaric behavior. The mother of Sisra cries for her own pain but is oblivious to the pain of others.

In contrast to the tears shed by Hagar and Sisra's mother, the tears of Rachel also play a prominent role on Rosh Hashanah. In the haftarah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read of Rochel's tears that were shed as her children were exiled from Eretz Yisrael. The majority of the Jews exiled during the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash were not technically Rochel's children, rather they were mostly from the tribe of Yehuda who was Leah's son. Nevertheless, in Rachel's eyes, her sister's children were like hers. Chazal note that it was the sensitivity that Rochel had for Leah in helping her avoid embarrassment on the night that Lavan switched Rochel for Leah that ultimately merited Rochel's prayers being answered. Rochel symbolized the total selflessness of prayer. She cried for any Jew as she would for her own children.

As we blow the shofar and our prayers and tears ascend to heaven, we should look at others around us. What are their needs? What can we ask Hashem on their behalf? If we can elevate our prayers to include the needs of others, we are truly fulfilling "Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh", we are responsible for one another. As we beseech Hashem as a nation this Rosh Hashanah, may we merit that of our prayers be answers. © 2019 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb.org

RAV SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

In Parshat Nitzavim Moshe famously explains that the commandments are there for us to observe, and that "it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart, so that you can fulfill it" (30:14). Rashi explains that this curious "mouth/heart" wording refers to the Oral and Written Laws. While it makes sense for "in your mouth" to be relating to the Oral Laws, how does "in your heart" reference the Written Law? Wouldn't it be on your bookshelves?

One possible answer could be that after learning, analyzing, and appreciating G-d's laws, one would internalize them to the point where they happen naturally, from the heart. While that would be a significant accomplishment, why would it be "very close to you" at that point? The wording seems to imply that even internalizing it isn't enough.

It could be that the Passuk is outlining an action plan for complete internal harmony. The first step is to study and learn to appreciate the Torah's directions to the point where we internalize them. The second step is to express verbally what your heart feels, followed by

the third step of acting on those thoughts and expressions. When our minds, words, and actions all align, we are ready to live life fully.

© 2019 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros



"You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d. The heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers, all the men of Israel...from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water, for you to pass into the covenant of Hashem..." Be'er Mayim Chaim: "The Zohar (Pinchas 231a) observes that elsewhere in Tanach, the term hayom / today points to Rosh Hashanah, and it does as well here. It is not immediately apparent, however, how Rosh Hashanah ties in with the sense of these pesukim."

A quirk in the calendar offers us a breakthrough idea that will explain this passage in the Zohar. We call the Shabbos before Pesach Shabbos HaGadol / the great Shabbos, in commemoration of a great, miraculous event in the early history of our people. On the tenth of the month of Nisan, our ancestors responded to Moshe's instructions regarding the korban Pesach which would be offered a few days from that day. Fearlessly, they set out to take a lamb for each household, effectively announcing their intention to commit mass sacrilege. They were intent on slaughtering the Egyptian god and devouring it! Miraculously, an enraged Egyptian populace watched the drama unfold, but did nothing to protect the honor of their deity.

That year, the tenth of Nisan fell on a Shabbos. We mark the occasion by calling it the Great Shabbos, and reading a haftorah that speaks of another great day that will be the harbinger of Moshiach.

It is a lovely thought, disturbed only by the realization that the tenth of Nissan does not always fall on Shabbos, and the Shabbos before Pesach does not always coincide with the tenth of Nisan! Why do we mark the day of the week of the original event, rather than the calendar date, as we do on other occasions?

A different passage from the Zohar (2 88a) contains a clue. "And Hashem blessed the seventh day." (Bereishis 2:3) This blessing took place not once, at the time of Creation, but every Shabbos. All the blessing of all days of the week derives from what Hashem bestows upon Shabbos. Hashem provides all the berachah that He intends to give on Shabbos, and from there it flows to the week that follows. There is no difference between blessings meant for the community as a whole, and those sent for the individual. It all happens on the Shabbos before.

Shabbos Hagadol distinguished itself, then, in that regard. All the great miracles associated with the Exodus had already flowed from Heaven on that day,

placing them in position for the fifteenth of Nisan when they would become manifest.

Each Rosh Hashanah is awesome -- literally -- albeit in a different way. The detailed fate of everything in Creation is determined on Rosh Hashanah. All kinds of blessings, their form and their quantity, are fixed by the judgment of Rosh Hashanah.

Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 428:4) specifies that the parshah of Nitzavim should always be read on the Shabbos preceding it. Now we know why. All those blessings are set into motion and fixed into the earthly scheme of things on the Shabbos before. The first verse of the parshah is dead-on. "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem." Hayom -- on the day of Rosh Hashanah all things stand before Hashem -- but what they will receive in their judgment has already taken up residence in the lower worlds on the Shabbos before.

The pasuk addresses everyone, but stresses those who heard Moshe's words. Everyone and everything is judged on the great Hayom -- but the overall nature of the judgment is determined by the position of Klal Yisrael, to whom is entrusted Hashem's strategy for the future. The pesukim convey some of the seriousness of the day. It reminds us that everyone is scrutinized. Everyone's life hangs in the balance, beginning with the greatest and most important. They continue the inventory of the community, ending with the wood-choppers and water -- drawers. They are called out not to imply that they are less important or more menial than other vocations. Great tzadikim worked at these jobs, and became giants of Torah. Rather, the Torah wishes to convey that all the service industries ultimately are important for how they tie into the progress of the Jewish people, which remain at the center of His judgment.

In the final analysis, the judgment on Rosh Hashanah is meant to determine who the individual can "pass into the covenant of Hashem." We are here for a purpose; our lives are contingent. We are in covenant with G-d. Part of our responsibility is to accomplish particular tasks He has assigned to us. Each Rosh Hashanah we stand before Him, and He determines what set of circumstances are most suitable for us to achieve what He expects of us. For some, a life of plenty will facilitate maximum efficiency. Others will be spoiled by it, and their efforts hampered. They will do better under pressure or even deprivation. If that be the case, their judgment will reflect it.

In effect, what we have made of ourselves, especially the refinement of our personalities, will determine on Rosh Hashanah the parameters of the coming year. We are assigned the conditions that are best suited to our pursuing our main careers as servants of Hashem and His mission. (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Devarim 29:9-11) © 2015 Rav Y. Adlerstein & torah.org