

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In the glorious song with which Moses addresses the congregation, he invites the people to think of the Torah – their covenant with God – as if it were like the rain that waters the ground so that it brings forth its produce:

Let my teaching drop as rain,
My words descend like dew,
Like showers on new grass,
Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deut. 32:2)

God's word is like rain in a dry land. It brings life. It makes things grow. There is much we can do of our own accord: we can plough the earth and plant the seeds. But in the end our success depends on something beyond our control. If no rain falls, there will be no harvest, whatever preparations we make. So it is with Israel. It must never be tempted into the hubris of saying: "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17).

The Sages, however, sensed something more in the analogy. This is how Sifrei (a compendium of commentaries on Numbers and Deuteronomy dating back to the Mishnaic period) puts it: Let my teaching drop as rain: Just as the rain is one thing, yet it falls on trees, enabling each to produce tasty fruit according to the kind of tree it is – the vine in its way, the olive tree in its way, and the date palm in its way – so the Torah is one, yet its words yield Scripture, Mishnah, laws, and lore. Like showers on new grass: Just as showers fall upon plants and make them grow, some green, some red, some black, some white, so the words of Torah produce teachers, worthy individuals, Sages, the righteous, and the pious.¹

There is only one Torah, yet it has multiple effects. It gives rise to different kinds of teaching, different sorts of virtue. Torah is sometimes seen by its critics as overly prescriptive, as if it sought to make everyone the same. The Midrash argues otherwise. The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasise that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. We are not all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity. As a famous Mishnah puts it: "When a human being makes many coins from the same mint, they are all the same. God

makes everyone in the same image – His image – yet none is the same as another" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

This emphasis on difference is a recurring theme in Judaism. For example, when Moses asks God to appoint his successor, he uses an unusual phrase: "May the Lord, God of the spirits of all humankind, appoint a man over the community" (Num. 27:16). On this, Rashi comments: Why is this expression ("God of the spirits of all humankind") used? [Moses] said to Him: Lord of the universe, You know each person's character, and that no two people are alike. Therefore, appoint a leader for them who will bear with each person according to his disposition.

One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to respect the differences between human beings. This is a point emphasised by Maimonides in Guide for the Perplexed: Man is, as you know, the highest form in creation, and he therefore includes the largest number of constituent elements. This is why the human race contains so great a variety of individuals that we cannot discover two persons exactly alike in any moral quality or in external appearance.... This great variety and the necessity of social life are essential elements in man's nature. But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man. He must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, so that social order be well established.²

The political problem as Maimonides sees it is how to regulate the affairs of human beings in such a way as to respect their individuality while not creating chaos. A similar point emerges from a surprising rabbinic teaching: "Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says: Blessed Be He who discerns secrets – because the mind of each is different from that of another, just as the face of each is different from another" (Brachot 58a).

We would have expected a blessing over a crowd to emphasise its size, its mass: human beings in their collectivity.³ A crowd is a group large enough for the individuality of the faces to be lost. Yet the blessing stresses the opposite – that each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears,

² Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, II:40.

³ See Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

¹ Sifrei, Ha'azinu 306.

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and aspirations.

The same was true for the relationship between the Sages. A Mishnah states: When R. Meir died, the composers of fables ceased. When Ben Azzai died, assiduous students ceased. When Ben Zoma died, the expositors ceased. When R. Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ceased. When R. Chanina died, men of deed ceased. When R. Yose Ketanta died, the pious men ceased. When R. Yochanan b. Zakai died, the lustre of wisdom ceased.... When Rabbi died, humility and the fear of sin ceased. (Mishnah Sotah 9:15)

There was no single template of the Sage. Each had his own distinctive merits, his unique contribution to the collective heritage. In this respect, the Sages were merely continuing the tradition of the Torah itself. There is no single role model of the religious hero or heroine in Tanach. The patriarchs and matriarchs each had their own unmistakable character. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam each emerge as different personality types. Kings, Priests, and Prophets had different roles to play in Israelite society. Even among the Prophets, "No two prophesy in the same style," said the Sages (Sanhedrin 89a). Elijah was zealous, Elisha gentle. Hosea speaks of love, Amos speaks of justice. Isaiah's visions are simpler and less opaque than those of Ezekiel.

The same applies to even to the revelation at Sinai itself. Each individual heard, in the same words, a different inflection: The voice of the Lord is with power (Ps. 29:4): that is, according to the power of each individual, the young, the old, and the very small ones, each according to their power [of understanding]. God said to Israel, "Do not believe that there are many gods in heaven because you heard many voices. Know that I alone am the Lord your God."⁴

According to Maharsha, there are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas commented: The Revelation has a particular way of producing meaning, which lies in its calling upon the unique within me. It is as if a multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the plenitude of "absolute truth," as if each person, by virtue of his own uniqueness, were able to

guarantee the revelation of one unique aspect of the truth, so that some of its facets would never have been revealed if certain people had been absent from mankind.⁵

Judaism, in short, emphasises the other side of the maxim *E pluribus unum* ("Out of the many, one"). It says: "Out of the One, many."

The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven produces diversity on earth. Torah is the rain that feeds this diversity, allowing each of us to become what only we can be. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 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

"The Lord remembered Sarah as he had promised... Sarah conceived and bore a son..." (Genesis 21:1- 2) Rosh Hashanah always portends new beginnings and fresh opportunities: "This day the world was born," or at least the world beckons with possibilities of rebirth and renewal.

Hence I would have thought that Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we "enthroned" God as Lord of the Universes—and not Shmini Atzeret-Simhat Torah— would be the festival on which we should begin the new Torah reading cycle of the year, the most apt occasion for reopening our Book of Books with "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And to do so would not even be much of a stretch; after all, we are certainly on target, having reached the last chapters of the final Book of Deuteronomy during our regular Shabbat readings at this time of year.

So why have our Talmudic Sages ordained that we read of Isaac's birth and sacrificial binding on the two days of Rosh Hashanah? However, on second thought, I believe I understand the deep wisdom of our Sages. Yes, Rosh Hashanah is probably the most universally oriented of all of our festivals, and yes, the Jews of Israel have certainly returned to the global family of nation-states after a hiatus of close to 2,000 years, taking center stage on the world arena. Nevertheless, the "world" which initially and most compellingly consumes most of our day-to-day thoughts and activities is the more personal world of our individual families.

And perhaps, on an even deeper level, the building blocks of every national society are the individual families within the country's borders; the Nation of Israel emerged from the family of Abraham! Moreover, it is the family that is the necessary medium

⁴ Exodus Rabbah 29:1.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 190–210.

of communicating a specific national narrative from generation to generation. God elected Abraham as the first Hebrew because he commanded his own children and his household after him to observe [be responsible for] the path of the Lord, to do acts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Indeed, virtually all of our familial feasts and celebrations are dedicated to nurturing and transmitting our national narrative, values and lifestyle to our children and grandchildren.

From this perspective, since the road to new beginnings must be paved by acts of repentance—Rosh Hashanah ushers in our 10 Days of Repentance—we must concentrate our repentance and our resolutions for change upon our sins against family, spouse and children, rather than our sins against God. It is easier, and less personally threatening, to objectively assess our personal standing before the Unseen Seer of the Universe than before the parents, spouses and children with whom we have personal dealings every single day.

Permit me three stories:

1. The Talmud (BT Rosh Hashanah 16) provocatively suggests that the various and numerous sounds of the shofar call to repentance are meant to confound Satan. Who is Satan? Another passage of the Talmud (BT Gittin 52) explains: “A certain couple lived in one dwelling together with Satan; every Friday night they would argue with each other. R. Meir entered the household and lived there for three consecutive Friday evenings until he made peace between them.

He heard Satan cry out, ‘Woe unto me; I have been forced out of the house because of R. Meir...’ Satan is family discord.

2. The Talmud further records (BT Brachot 8) the custom of one community that the morning after the wedding night, a friend of the groom would ask him, “Matza or Motzi?” “What kind of wife have you found? Which verse applies to you? Is it ‘one who has found [matza] a wife has found only good’ (Prov. 18:22), or is it ‘I find [motzi] that more bitter than death is the woman’ (Eccl.7:26).” What kind of question is this? It decries all prohibitions against slander. How dare the friend ask, and the groom answer, concerning the wife he has just married? I would suggest that the friend is asking the groom about the groom, not about his bride. Now that the wedding is over and your life together has just begun, who do you think about first when you arise in the morning? Is it “one who has found [matza] a wife,” your wife whom you are concerned about first, then you have “found only good”; but if it is “I find [motzi],” yourself that you think about first, then your life will be more bitter than death...”

3. When I was a young rabbi in Manhattan with a growing family, I got into a cab. During my conversation with the driver, a foreign immigrant who lived in a “slum” neighborhood, he told me he had been married to the same woman for 35 years, had four

professional children and had never been schooled beyond the eighth grade. “To what do you owe your incredible success?” I asked. He explained: “As long as the children lived in the house, all of us had to be around the dinner table at 7 p.m., without radio, television or newspaper. Everyone had to tell the best moment of the day, and the worst moment of the day. That’s how I brought the family together, and was able to give over how important I think education is.”

I burst into tears; that taxi driver who never went past elementary school was much wiser than I...
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The "one day" of the year is now upon us. Yom Kippur carries with it a fascination for all concerned. The concept of forgiveness, that transgressions can be forgiven, that words can be retracted and that actions and commitments can somehow be annulled is a most radical one. For after all, in our real world of mundane life we remember yet every slight and insult hurled against us even decades later. We may be able to move on from that experience but we remember it.

But Yom Kippur creates a situation that spiritually erases the experience. It allows for a clean slate unfettered by past transgressions and failures. This makes Yom Kippur the greatest gift that Heaven can provide for us while we are alive. This concept of forgiveness and starting again is in turn one of the greatest of the many gifts that Judaism has granted to humankind but, there are few gifts in life that do not also carry with it obligations and responsibilities.

Forgiveness on Yom Kippur comes with the requirement of introspection and resolve to do better and not to continue to repeat the errors of the past. In the listing of the sins that we recite in the Yom Kippur prayers emphasis is placed upon the words that we have uttered, the legs that carried us to transgression and the hands that are usually the culprit in our actual sinning.

The listing of these body parts, so to speak, is not done unintentionally or merely poetically or metaphorically. They describe for us the areas of our lives that demand constant improvement and care. As such they deserve a modicum of study and understanding.

Life and death depend on one's speech. It is difficult many times to be truly careful in speaking to others or most often about others. We often truly believe that talk is cheap. Yet talk can be very damaging. The rabbis stated that there are three victims of bad speech or even of careless speech. They are the speaker, the listener and the person that was the subject of the remark or the speech.

Bad speech is thus a serial killer, a multiple

murderer. We all misspeak at times, most of the time unintentionally, but nevertheless consequences follow. As one whose profession is to constantly speak and teach I am well aware of how easily statements can be made that are not completely accurate and many times not wise at all. I truly regret those misspoken words.

That is the hazard of my profession but it is a hazard for all of us as well. Care in speaking is a commitment that should be at the top of our list of improvements that we pledge to ourselves on Yom Kippur. And in many respects it is probably the most difficult commitment to achieve. We are accustomed to speaking from our infancy so we do so almost out of rote. I once saw a sign that said: "Do not engage mouth unless brain is in gear." Truer words were never written or expressed.

Our legs move quickly when we are enthusiastic about where we are heading. King David said about himself that his legs almost automatically took him to the house of Torah prayer and study. Our legs carry us where we really want to go to. Thus they are a true measure of our goals and ambitions. They tell us what is important in our lives and what we truly value and prioritize. Our legs and where they carry us do not allow ourselves to be fooled by pious platitudes that we may sometimes utter.

There are times that we go places where we should not attend and participate in activities that are improper. Our legs brought us there and thus they revealed to us our true intent and uncovered weaknesses that we prefer to deny exist within us. How careful and measured our steps in life must be!

Yom Kippur also teaches us to guard our hands from doing wrongs. In haste and frustration we strike out at those that we feel have harmed or insulted us. The arch enemies of Moshe and the prototypes of evil men in the Torah, Datan and Aviram, are introduced to us in the Torah as two people striking each other. Unfortunately we live in a climate of violence, from the school yard, to the parking lot, to everyday life and domestic abuse. Basically Yom Kippur teaches us to maintain silence except where it is necessary to speak, walk slowly and in the right direction and to keep our hands to ourselves in almost all life circumstances.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The central theme of Yom Kippur is teshuva, commonly translated as "repentance." We hear so much about this term, but what, in fact does it truly mean?

On the simplest behavioral level, writes Maimonides, teshuvah involves "returning" to a

situation in which one had previously failed, and not making the same mistake a second time. (Laws of Repentance 2:1) It means being given a second chance. No wonder, Yom Kippur has elements of joy. We celebrate being given a second chance. In too many of life's pursuits, we are given only one shot. If we miss, it's all over. On Yom Kippur, God says, "no matter if you have failed before; you can still return."

A chassid once asked his rebbe, "why pray on Yom Kippur, after all, we'll inevitably sin again." In response, the rebbe asked him to look out the window behind him. Outside was a toddler learning to walk. "What do you see?" asked the master. "A child, standing and falling," replied the disciple. Day after day the chassid returned to witness the same scene. At the week's end, the child stood and didn't fall. The child's eyes expressed the achievement of having attained the impossible. "So with us," said the rebbe. "We may fail again and again, but in the end, a loving God gives us the opportunities we need to succeed."

The mystics understand teshuvah differently. For them, teshuvah means "returning," to being righteous. But suppose one has never been righteous, what does one return to? Says the Sefat Emet, the soul of every person is fundamentally righteous. There may be a layer of evil obscuring the inner being, but all people created in the image of God are inherently good. Teshuvah then, means to return to the inner kernel of goodness we all possess. And so, we sing, and dance on Yom Kippur. We celebrate the opportunity to discover our true selves.

Another classic story. Reb Zusha was on his death bed, and tears were streaming down his face. "Why are you crying?" asked his disciples. "If God asks me why I wasn't like Moses or Maimonides," answered Reb Zusha, "I'll say, I wasn't blessed with that kind of leadership ability and wisdom." But I'm afraid of another question," continued Reb Zusha, "what if God asks, 'Reb Zusha, why weren't you like Reb Zusha? Why didn't you find your inner being and realize your inner potential? Why didn't you find yourself?' That is why I am crying."

A third approach. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, among many other thinkers, understands teshuvah to mean "answer." That is to say teshuvah is a dialogue. On Yom Kippur we stand before God, a caring God who asks the question(s). We offer the answer(s). A God of love seeks us out. As much as we are in search of Him, He is in search of us. A comforting thought on Yom Kippur.

Yet another chassidic legend. A young girl came to the Ba'al Shem Tov – the father of chassidism – crying. "Why do you cry?" the rebbe lovingly asked. "I was playing hide and seek," said the young girl, "but no one came looking for me." "So, too, is it with God," reflected the Ba'al Shem Tov. "He, too, is crying. For as much as He is looking for us, we rarely look for

Him.”

It was left for Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha-Cohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel to offer an understanding related to the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Teshuvah, according to Rav Kook, ought be understood eschatologically. It quite literally means “go home,” to our homeland. It is not only an individual quest, but a communal mandate to establish a land that is different from all others. A land that is a light to the nations of the world: a land that marks the dawn of redemption, a land at peace. On this Yom Kippur – let it be, let it be. ©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

Two Forms of Hearing

Parashat Ha'azinu begins with the second longest Shira (song, poem) of the Torah, the first being the Shira which Moshe recited after crossing the Red Sea. This Shira is written in two parallel columns. That alone would set it apart from the other sections of the Torah. But there is much more to this Shira than how it is presented by the scribe. The Shira is a history of the B'nei Yisrael and a prediction of what lies ahead once they enter the land of Israel. The Ramban says, “It is plain that the Song speaks of our ultimate redemption...testifying that we will suffer Divine reproof, accompanied by the promise that our memory will nevertheless not be blotted out, but that Hashem will forgive us our sins and repay our enemies for His name's sake. The Sifrei says: ‘Great is this Song, as it embraces the present, the past, and the future, this life and the Hereafter.’”

Moshe begins his Shira with an entreaty to the Heavens and the Earth. “Give ear (ha'azinu), O heavens, and I will speak, and may the Earth hear (tishma) the words of my mouth.” HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that there are two different words used for listening or hearing (ha'azin and shama). The term ha'azin is in the grammatical form hiphil which is causative (cause your ear to listen). The term shama is in the kal form and indicates natural hearing. “The carrying out of the expected representation of the covenant of Hashem by Heaven and Earth, comes in the first place from Heaven, only indirectly is it then consummated by the Earth. The Heaven is primarily active, the Earth more passive....” Hirsch posits that this is the reason for the stronger term ha'azinu in the command form for the Heavens and the non-command form of tishma when applied to the Earth.

The Sforno contrasts Moshe's choice of words and those of Yeshayahu in the opening of his Sefer, “Hear, O Heavens, and give ear, O Earth....” Sforno

explains that ha'azin is used when something is close and therefore active whereas sh'ma is a more passive listening because something is further away. Moshe uses ha'azin by the Heavens because he is close to death and only peripherally, in a physical form, still on Earth. He has been so close to Hashem for so long that there really is little separation between the two of them. Yeshayahu is not nearly on the same level as Moshe so he is still quite bound to the Earth. Therefore, he uses ha'azin when referring to the Earth not the Heavens.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin has a different approach to this pasuk. In last week's Torah portion, Vayeilech, we were taught the mitzvah of hakheil, gathering the people together for the reading of the Torah by the King on the second day of Sukkot at the end of the seven-year harvest cycle (Shemittah). The song that Moshe sings now is taught to the people at the same time as Moshe is about to leave this world. He is still addressing the people and the references to Heavens and the Earth are really references to two different levels of people who will hear the reading of that Torah portion as well as Moshe's words on this day. HaRav Sorotzkin posits that the Heavens are those who look up, namely the leaders who devote their time to the study of Torah and therefore are more connected to Hashem than the lower, more mundane worker, represented by the Earth, who only listens to Torah that is told to him by others. His connection to Hashem is not nearly on the same level as those who devote their time to study the intricacies of Torah, but he is also capable of receiving the responsibilities of Torah and mitzvot and therefore also its rewards.

The Torah continues its metaphor of the connection between Heaven and Earth. “May my teaching drip like the rain, may my utterance flow like the dew, like storm winds upon vegetation and like raindrops upon grass.” The oref is the back of the neck as in am k'shei oref, a stiff-necked people, or eglah arufah, the calf whose neck is broken. Hirsch explains that the joint of the neck is the most responsive and most mobile joint in the body. He explains that the use of the word oref in this context is that the rain loosens the soil, enabling the plants to grow and gain the soil's nutrients. HaRav Sorotzkin continues with his previous interpretation. The rain which comes down heavily is the source of the word oref (breaking up the soil), and this type of rain is good for trees. Hashem's teachings through Moshe to the people are what enable the trees, the strong Torah students, to grow and bring out their produce. That rain which merely trickles down is compared to the gleanings of the Torah which pass down to the general population even though they may not have the time to devote to the Torah or the skills or patience to learn more regularly.

The Or HaChaim takes a different, more literal approach. He sees the rain as the agricultural

equivalent of Hashem supplying man with a livelihood. Since each tribe would divide its land among its families, every family was given a plot of land as its livelihood. Man was required to till the land, plant, and harvest while Hashem provided the means for growth, the rain. As the Or HaChaim explains, "if there is no food there can be no Torah." Hashem does not ask of man to study Torah completely until which time he is prepared to earn a livelihood. Hashem provides him the rain in order to enable him to learn as he works to feed himself and his family.

We have just completed the Aseret Y'mei Teshuva, the Ten Days of returning to Hashem. Our return to Hashem should demonstrate to Hashem that our people are doing teshuvah as a whole and are prepared to receive the rewards that the Shira describes. Hashem has brought us back to the land of Israel, and our numbers here will soon outnumber the Jews who still live outside the land. We are truly grateful to Hashem for accepting our prayers for so long. May we continue to hear the Word of Hashem and rejoice in the reward which is His promise. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Hazin Lach

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

This title is not the beginning of a liturgical poem that one might recite, but rather signify the letters that start the various Aliyot in the portion of "H'azinu. The Kohen starts from the "He" of "H'azinu". The second letter appears six sentences later and starts with a "Zayin" signifying the word "Zachor". The third Aliya starts with a "Yud" referencing the word "Yarkivehu". The next Aliya starts with the letter "Vav" symbolizing "va'yare". The fifth Aliya starts with the letter "amed" symbolizing the word "Lu". The sixth Aliya starts with the letter "Kaf" referring to the word "ki". This continues to the end of the song and the seventh and last Aliya completes the portion to be read.

The purpose of these exact divisions is not to allow any stops during the song of "Ha'ziunu" except those enumerated above. The only possibility of adding an Aliya is at the end between the seventh Aliya and the end of the portion.

This division is found in the Code of Jewish Law ("Shulchan Aruch 428;5") but there are those sages that divide the contents of the song in a different way, however still maintaining the format of beginning letters that was enumerated above. The *Rambam*, Maimonides, (Laws of Prayer 13;5) states that these intervals represent words that hint at the act of repentance, since this portion is read before Yom kippur and though we generally shy away from beginning or ending an Aliya with words of rebuke, in this case it is acceptable since we are standing at the

threshold of seeking repentance. Perhaps as well the words "Haziv Lach, indicates that the light (Ziv) and beauty is with the Jewish people at this time since they are actively involved in seeking repentance.

Additionally, there is a difference of opinion amongst our sages if we must retain this division stated when we read the Torah on Monday and Thursday and on Shabbat Mincha. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vorah live in Efrat. All comments are welcome at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Call to Arms

Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of repentance, has the Jewish nation simultaneously praying, fasting and asking for forgiveness. It begins with the somber, quiet, and melodious intonation of Kol Nidrei and ends with the entire congregation shouting Hashem hu HaElokim (G-d is the Al-Mighty) seven times after various requests of forgiveness. It seems that at the time when our strength is waning our greatest and loudest pleas are spent. Shouldn't we begin the day with the strong requests for forgiveness and save the subdued prayers for when our bodies are weak from hunger and our lips parched from lack of water?

Rav Eichenstein, the Ziditchover Rebbe, tells the following story: One Friday, a man entered the study of the Tchorckover Rebbe with a request that was very common in those days.

"My son was drafted into the army," the man began. "However, we have a way out. On Sunday, we are going to a doctor who will falsely declare him unfit for service. This way he will be spared certain misery, perhaps even death in that terrible army. Rebbe," he asked, "I need your blessing that he evade the draft."

The Rebbe quietly told him that Shabbos was nearing and he could not concentrate on blessings. The man should return to him on Friday evening after his tisch (ceremonious chasidic table).

The man did so. After most of the chasidim had left, the man repeated his request, almost verbatim. Again the Rebbe was non-committal. "Return to me after the morning service."

Unperturbed, the man noted that he would really like to resolve this matter before Sunday morning.

Shabbos morning, after services, the man approached the Rebbe again. Calmly he repeated the predicament. "Sunday morning I am going to a doctor who will falsely declare my son unfit for military service. Please pray that we will evade conscription." The Rebbe was not moved. Again, he deferred until the afternoon.

At the third Shabbos meal, the scene repeated again, precisely the way it had the previous three times.

"I understand that you are leaving Sunday morning. Come back to me late Saturday night," said the Rebbe. "By then I will have an answer for you."

By this time, his Chasidim's curiosity was piqued. They had never seen their Rebbe so reluctant to mete a blessing, especially when it was one that would save a Jewish soul from the frightful Polish army.

Saturday night a large crowd gathered as the man approached with his request. Frustrated and disgruntled, the man, once again, repeated his story, almost verbatim, for the fifth time.

Immediately, the Rebbe sprung from his chair and began to shout. "What are you asking me? Why would one even try to evade the service of our wonderful country? How dare you ask me for a blessing of that sort? Your son would make a fine soldier for our country. I wish him the best of luck in the army!"

The man quickly scurried from the room and left town. The Chasidim stood shocked and bewildered. Never had they heard such an uncharacteristic outcry from the Rebbe.

"I will explain," said the Rebbe. "The man was a fraud. He had no son, and if he did, he wanted him in the army. He was sent by the government to test our loyalty. Thank G-d we passed the test."

"But, Rebbe!" cried the chasidim, "how did you know?"

"Simple," explained the Rebbe. "I watched the level of intensity. From the moment he met me until tonight there was no increase in intensity nor feeling of desperation with each request. The moment I heard his request tonight and it contained no more passion or desperation than his first request on Friday night, I knew he was a fraud."

We stand a whole entire day in prayer, and end with a ne'ilah prayer, after nearly 24 hours of pleading. The litmus test of our sincerity comes as the heavenly gates are being closed. As the sun begins to set, our pleas should intensify. That crescendo assures our sincerity. It also should assure us a happy & healthy sweet new year. © 2019 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RAV JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Remember the days of old; understand the years of generation after generation..." The obvious question here is how we can remember something we didn't witness. If I ask you for your memories of an event that you never attended, you won't be able to share any.

The simple answer is, as the posuk continues, that you ask your elders and they share their memories with you. If you internalize them they become yours. You may even be able to visualize the scenes they communicated to you, and in this way, you carry on their memories in you. This is one way of remembering our history. But why do we need to?

It would seem that the Torah's idea of remembering something is different than society's. Remembering is not about having a memory. It's about using the past experiences to mold your future. We are to constantly reflect on what has happened in the world in years past to know how to navigate the present. History has many lessons for us and this is why we are adjured to study it and put it into practice.

It is also a reminder that the world isn't that different a place when it comes to Hashem. He is unchanging and relates to us the same way whether we're in the stone age or the space age. The same lessons he taught our ancestors are the ones we need to learn. If we can gain that knowledge through inquiry, we can save ourselves a lot of trouble on experiences. © 1997 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"My lesson will drip like rain; my word will flow like dew; like storm winds on vegetation and like raindrops on grass." (Devarim 32:2)

There is only one type of criticism, but two kinds of people to "receive" it. There is the person who "hears" it, and the one who doesn't, or more accurately, CAN'T.

Of course there are many ways you can level criticism at someone, from "soft sell" to "all guns firing." But at the end of the day, or rather, at the end of the criticism, the point is the same: something is wrong and needs to be changed.

When it comes to the receivers of criticism, there are "Windows" and "Walls." Like real windows, these "Windows" let criticism in, and quite possibly, back out again. ("You're criticizing me? Before you criticize me, look at your own life..."). Like real walls, these "Walls" just let any criticism directed at them ricochet right off.

With "Windows," there is hope. These people may not change right away, but they will probably change over time, at least a little bit. There can BE improvement, and it is worth caring about what they do and how.

Not with "Walls," though. These people are hopeless, so you might as well save your breath. Unless it is simply therapeutic to speak your mind no matter WHO listens, perhaps save your energy for something that DOES make a difference.

True, the Talmud says that a person has to protest when something is wrong even if they do not believe it will change anything (Shabbos 55a). In fact, it goes so far as to say that if you don't at least say something, then you can end up being held responsible for their "sin." Keep THIS in mind next time you find yourself shouting at a "WALL."

Not all "Walls" are the same. Some might know better, but just refuse to face the less-than-nice facts about themselves. They're insecure, and have a difficult

time accepting that they are flawed, even though they so obviously are...even to THEM.

Then there are the Walls that are simply missing something. They lack some component that would allow them to see themselves in a true light. Whatever it is that allows a person to compare their behavior with a DECENT social norm in order to appropriately judge their actions, they lack. They just can't tell that they're doing something wrong.

About 30 years ago, a book came out that questioned the new standard of modesty winning over society. It bemoaned how things that used to embarrass people in public had become more acceptable, which is never good for mankind, not from God's perspective. Shame had gone missing from many sectors of society, and some of that had even spilled over into the Torah world as well.

That was then. Today, something ELSE seems to have disappeared. It seems we've reached that point in the historical cycle (because the pattern has repeated itself many times already) when people lose touch with the world around them. Social context, for many, is vanishing.

A simple example. A person needs to park, but all spots close to their destination are taken. So, they park on the sidewalk instead, possible inconveniencing, or worse, endangering pedestrians. Or there is a small spot remaining that is only big enough for part of their car, so they park part of their car in it, and let the rest of their car remain sticking well into the street, blocking traffic, endangering people, and putting their own car at risk.

The other day, while at the local grocery store, a woman pulled into a convenient parking spot right in front of the store. What she failed to realize, as she got out of her car talking on her cell phone, was that the spot was left open because other drivers had noticed that parking there blocked the entrance to the parking lot itself!

So I stopped her in her self-absorbed tracks and pointed out her error. She turned around to verify what I was saying, returned to her car, and moved it. Had she already known this, and chose to ignore it, or had she been too involved in her reality to care how what she did affected others? I didn't ask her that, and I doubt giving her mussar would have changed much anyhow.

But something I have noticed about many such people is that they are not malicious. They do not have ill-intent. In fact, a lot of times they think they are doing the right thing and helping out society with their convoluted way of thinking. They are, basically, very nice people.

That's important, for a number of reasons. For one, it makes it easier to not get angry at them for their somewhat reckless behavior. It is always a lot more annoying when people know better but do worse. It's

also a little easier to put up with when the problem is generational, and not specific to a few individuals.

Furthermore, as we learn from the story of Yonah, read at Mincha on Yom Kippur, God also deals differently with sin that is committed from sloppiness versus sin committed from a lack of mental capability:

"Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left...?" (Yonah 4:11)

That's certainly today. So many people do not know their right from their left, especially POLITICALLY, or -- right from -- wrong, SPIRITUALLY. And this saved Nineveh in Yonah's time, and who knows how much it is saving OUR generation in OUR time!

The question is, but for how long? One of the straws that broke the camel's back in Noach's time was a general disregard for the wellbeing of others. The world can handle only so much selfishness before God decides to lower the boom on mankind. Innocence can spare a person time in Gehinom, but not necessarily in everyday life.

It is the way the world is made. For example, it doesn't matter that the two drivers were trying to drive safely. When they hit each other, serious damage resulted, because that's the laws of Physics. Likewise, Creation is built to handle only so much "Me-ness." After that, it falls apart.

This is, perhaps, why such an integral part of Yom Kippur is asking forgiveness from others. We didn't do it on Rosh Hashanah, but we certainly do it on Yom Kippur. We even have a special prayer, "Tefillah Zakah," that we say before Kol Nidre with which we declare our forgiveness of others.

Why would a day of working hard on personal forgiveness start off with forgiveness of others? Why does God say that He won't forgive us for wronging others if they haven't first forgiven us, if not because how treat others is so integral to the purpose of Creation?

We're not here to create "Me" generations.

We're here to create "Others" generations.

So, maybe there is something missing from this generation that used to exist, either in education or in actual brain capacity. But we should work on reversing that and fast. God has patience with us. This is the time to fix that, especially as we become a bit closer to one another, leaving the privacy of our brick homes for the lack of privacy of our schach-covered "tents."

Anecdotally, one of the highlights of Succos for me has been sitting in my succah while being able to hear other families singing Yom Tov songs. It created a sense of achdus -- unity we don't get the rest of the year. Now it is clearer that even this is more intended than incidental.

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