

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

There are moments when Divine Providence touches you on the shoulder and makes you see a certain truth with blazing clarity. Let me share with you such a moment that happened to me this morning.

For technical reasons, I have to write my essays for the Covenant & Conversation series many weeks in advance. I had come to Matot-Masei, and had decided to write about the cities of refuge, but I wasn't sure which aspect to focus on. Suddenly, overwhelmingly, I felt an instinct to write about one very unusual law.

The cities were set aside for the protection of those found guilty of manslaughter, that is, of killing someone accidentally without malice aforethought. Because of the then universal practice of blood vengeance, that protection was necessary.

The purpose of the cities was to make sure that someone judged innocent of murder was safe from being killed. As Shoftim puts it: "And he shall flee to one of these cities and live" (Deut. 19:5). This apparently simple concept was given a remarkable interpretation by the Talmud: "The Sages taught: If a student was exiled, his teacher was exiled with him, as it is said: "(And he shall flee to one of these cities) and live," meaning do the things for him that will enable him to live." (Makkot 10a)

As Rambam explains: "Life without study is like death for scholars who seek wisdom." (Hilchot Rotze'ach, 7:1) In Judaism, study is life itself, and study without a teacher is impossible. Teachers give us more than knowledge; they give us life. Note that this is not an aggadic passage, a moralising text not meant to be taken literally. It is a halachic ruling, codified as such. Teachers are like parents only more so. Parents give us physical life; teachers give us spiritual life. (Talmud Torah 5:1) Physical life is mortal, transient. Spiritual life is eternal. Therefore, we owe our teacher our life in its deepest sense.

I had just written the text above when the phone went. It was my brother in Jerusalem to tell me that my teacher, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, zecher tzaddik livracha, had just died. Only rarely in this "world of concealment" do we feel the touch of Providence, but this was unmistakable. (The phrase comes from the Zohar.) For me, and I suspect

everyone who had the privilege of studying with him, he was the greatest teacher of our generation.

He was a master posek, as those who have read his Responsa will know. He knew the entire rabbinic literature, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash Halachah and Aggadah, biblical commentaries, philosophy, codes and responsa. His creativity, halachic and aggadic, knew no bounds. He was a master of almost every secular discipline, especially the sciences. He had been a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Toronto and had written a book about probability and statistical inference. His supreme passion was the Rambam in all his guises, particularly the Mishneh Torah, to which he devoted some fifty years of his life to writing the multi-volume commentary Yad Peshutah.

By the time I came to study with the Rav, I had already studied at Cambridge and Oxford with some of the greatest intellects of the time, among them Sir Roger Scruton and Sir Bernard Williams. Rabbi Rabinovitch was more demanding than either of them. Only when I became his student did I learn the true meaning of intellectual rigour, shetihyu amelim ba-Torah, "labouring" in the Torah. To survive his scrutiny, you had to do three things: first to read everything ever written on the subject; second to analyse it with complete lucidity, searching for omek ha-peshat, the deep plain sense; and third, to think independently and critically. I remember writing an essay for him in which I quoted one of the most famous of nineteenth century Talmudic scholars. He read what I had written, then turned to me and said, "But you didn't criticise what he wrote!" He thought that in this case the scholar had not given the correct interpretation, and I should have seen and said this. For him, intellectual honesty and independence of mind were inseparable from the quest for truth which is what Talmud Torah must always be.

Some of the most important lessons I learned from him were almost accidental. I remember on one occasion his car was being serviced, so I had the privilege of driving him home. It was a hot day, and at a busy junction in Hampstead, my car broke down and would not start up again. Unfazed, Rabbi Rabinovitch said to me, "Let's use the time to learn Torah." He then proceeded to give me a shiur on Rambam's Hilchot Shemittah ve-Yovel. Around us, cars were hooting their horns. We were holding up traffic and a considerable queue had developed. The Rav remained completely calm, came to the end of his exposition, turned to me

and said, "Now turn the key." I turned the key, the car started, and we went on our way.

On another occasion, I told him about my problem getting to sleep. I had become an insomniac. He said to me, enthusiastically, "Could you teach me how to do that?" He quoted the Rambam who ruled that one acquires most of one's wisdom at night, based on the Talmudic statement that the night was created for study. (Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:13; based on [a slightly different text of] Eruvin 65a.)

He and the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l were the Gedolei ha-Dor, the leaders and role models of their generation. They were very different, one scientific, the other artistic, one direct, the other oblique, one bold, the other cautious, but they were giants, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Happy the generation that is blessed by people like these.

It is hard to convey what having a teacher like Rabbi Rabinovitch meant. He knew, for example, that I had to learn fast because I was coming to the rabbinate late, after a career in academic philosophy. What he did was very bold. He explained to me that the fastest and best way of learning anything is to teach it. So the day I entered Jews' College as a student, I also entered it as a lecturer. How many people would have had that idea and taken that risk?

He also understood how lonely it could be if you lived by the principles of intellectual integrity and independence. Early on, he said to me, "Don't be surprised if only six people in the world understand what you are trying to do." When I asked him whether I should accept the position of Chief Rabbi, he said, in his laconic way: "Why not? After all, maybe you can teach some Torah."

He himself, in his early thirties, had been offered the job of Chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, but turned it down on the grounds that he refused to live in an apartheid state. He told me how he was visited in Toronto by Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz who had held the Johannesburg position until then. Looking at the Rav's modest home and thinking of his more palatial accommodation in South Africa, he said, "You turned down that for this?" But the Rav would never compromise his integrity and never cared for material things.

In the end, he found great happiness in the 37 years he served as head of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maale Adumim. The yeshiva had been founded six years earlier by Rabbi Haim Sabato and Yitzhak Sheilat. It is said that when Rabbi Sabato heard the Rav give a shiur, he immediately asked him to become the Rosh Yeshiva. It is hard to describe the pride with which he spoke to me about his students, all of whom served in the Israel Defence Force. Likewise it is hard to describe the awe in which his students held him. Not everyone in the Jewish world knew his greatness, but everyone who studied with him did.

I believe that Judaism made an extraordinarily wise decision when it made teachers its heroes and lifelong education its passion. We don't worship power or wealth. These things have their place, but not at the top of the hierarchy of values. Power forces us. Wealth induces us. But teachers develop us. They open us to the wisdom of the ages, helping us to see the world more clearly, think more deeply, argue more cogently and decide more wisely.

"Let the reverence for your teacher be like the reverence for Heaven," said the Sages. (Avot 4:12) In other words: if you want to come close to Heaven, don't search for kings, priests, saints or even prophets. They may be great, but a fine teacher helps you to become great, and that is a different thing altogether. I was blessed by having one of the greatest teachers of our generation. The best advice I can give anyone is: find a teacher, then make yourself a disciple. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

What unites Jews throughout the world as one nation and one people? What is the most critical factor responsible for our amazing persistence as a unique historical entity, despite our having been scattered throughout the globe and subject to persecution and pogrom, despite our having been chased from pillar to post? What idea and ideal have prevented us from falling prey to assimilation, from disappearing into the sands of time as just another grain of sand, indistinguishable from the other grains, simply being "a part of" rather being "set apart from"? Why have we insisted upon Jewish exclusivity, Jewish separatism, Jewish apartness?

Our biblical portion of Matot makes a distinction between two technical terms which it doesn't quite define: "If a man makes a vow [neder] to dedicate an object to the Lord, or takes an oath [shevua] to prohibit himself from partaking of a certain food or from participating in a certain activity, he must not desecrate his word" (Numbers 30:3). My revered teacher and mentor Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik defines a vow as pertaining to an object (a person is on a diet, and he vows that henceforth bread will become for him as prohibited as bacon), and an oath as pertaining to a subject (the person himself will no longer eat bread).

In the first instance of a vow, the emphasis is on the object, the bread, the "heftza" in the second instance of oath, the emphasis is on the subject, the person, the "gavra".

In the Talmudic school of Brisker methodology, much of the world may be divided between gavra and heftza, subject and object; indeed, in most instances a

human being, especially if he is born to be free ought to be seen as a “subject.” However, if a person is enslaved, he ipso facto has been turned into an “object,” having been denied his fundamental freedom of choice.

This distinction can serve us well in attempting to answer our opening philosophical query about what sets Jews apart and makes us unique. But, first, a personal experience of significance: At the end of the Yom Kippur War, while on an El Al airplane on the way to Israel, I was shocked to discover news about an acquaintance of mine, who had lost his first family in Auschwitz, remarried and had two sons on the West Side of Manhattan, had moved to Israel and lost his eldest boy in the Six Day War—I discovered that he had now lost his only remaining son in the Yom Kippur War.

I made a condolence call as soon as I got off the plane.

My disconsolate friend was sitting on the floor with his wife, surrounded by would-be comforters; no one, however, said a word, so that the atmosphere was tense with a heavy silence which shouted upwards to heaven in tear-filled protest. As I quietly intoned the condolence formula: “May the Place [Makom, a synonym for God] comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”, my friend looked up. “Why does the blessing use the word Makom and not Elokim or Hashem?” He didn’t wait for a reply, but himself offered the answer. “When I lost my first family in the Holocaust, an atrocity which I suffered as a passive victim of monstrous Nazi fascist-racists, I could not even mourn properly and I could not be comforted; it all seemed so absurd and meaningless.

“Now, however, although I am devastated and unable to speak to my comforters, I nevertheless do feel comforted.

“The place comforts me; the fact that my second set of children were killed because they chose to live in Israel which, is indeed a dangerous war zone, because they chose to realize our destiny which is Jerusalem, because they chose to guarantee Jewish future by risking their own present lives. Both sets of children were sacred sacrifices, but the first set were passive objects whereas the second were dynamic subjects who actively fought for our Jewish future!

Yes, the place comforts me...”

Allow me to interpret this distraught but wise father’s words on the basis of yet another insight from Rav Soloveichik. In Kol Dodi Dofek, my rebbe distinguishes between the Holocaust experience in which the Jews were united by a common fate (goral) foisted upon them from without, from a largely sinister gentile world cooperating enthusiastically with the “final solution” of Nazi Germanys—and the Sinai experience, in which the Jews were united by a common destiny (yi’ud) which they accepted upon themselves, pledging

to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers to convey God’s message of compassionate righteousness and moral justice to the world. It is this sense of destiny which brought us to Israel and compels us to fight against tyranny and terrorism.

At this time, we remember the three pure and holy sacrificial Jewish victims of six years ago—Gil-Ad Shaer, Eyal Yifrah and Naftali Fraenkel who were captured and mercilessly murdered outside Alon Shvut in Gush Etzion. Tragically an innocent Palestinian boy, Muhammad Abu Khdeir, was cruelly murdered at the hands of misguided and evil Jewish teenagers. The Gush lies geographically between Hebron—where God initially chose Abraham and made him the father of a multitude of nations including Ishmael because he was teaching his descendants God’s path of compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Gen. 18:18-19)—and Jerusalem, where Jewish and world history will culminate in the rebuilding of a Holy Temple from whence Zion’s message of a Torah of peace and redemption will be accepted by all the nations of the globe. Now too, the “place” (makom) comforts us in our period of national rebirth—among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. ©2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week’s Torah reading begins with our teacher Moshe calling together the heads of the tribes of Israel, and relating to them the laws of the Torah regarding vows, promises, commitments and verbal speech. On the surface, there seems to be no reason why these laws should especially be given through the offices and conduct of the heads of the tribes of Israel. These laws apply to all Jews, and are eternally relevant to all human situations. It is interesting to note that we do not find other occasions that the leaders of the tribes of Israel were specially chosen to be the conduits of the message that the Torah and Moshe wanted to communicate to all of Israel.

According to the tradition of the Talmud, as expanded upon by Rambam and other scholars, the elders of Israel, the leaders of the tribes were taught directly by Moshe the entire Oral Law as received by him at Mount Sinai. The fact that this portion of the law was taught to the elders of the tribes contains a particularly significant message that is truly relevant to our time in society.

Everyone must keep their word. There are no two different standards of observance for the leaders of the tribes and for the ordinary members of the tribe itself. Yet, we realize that the leaders of the tribes are particularly prone to violate this injunction, that demands full commitment and compliance with one’s words and promises.

We are all aware of political leaders who when

campaigning for office make grandiose promises and undertake to further proposed policies and agendas. And we are just as aware that when these very same people achieve office and power, they oftentimes renege and reverse the very ideas and proposals that they used to gain that power and position. The excuse that is always given is that one sees from here -- in a position of power -- what one did not see from there, when one was not in such a position or office of power. However, that is usually a lame excuse.

The words and promises of leaders and politicians in our time do not carry very much weight with the population that they are meant to represent. It is because of this tendency by leaders to say one thing and then do another that the Torah emphasizes that these laws of commitment, regarding the spoken word, that one is bound to fulfill whatever one says, is especially important to emphasize to the leaders of the tribes. Too often they have made commitments and statements before, that now, when they have achieved a leadership role, they are no longer willing to fulfill or honor. This is an important lesson for all times, but especially ours. ©2020 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

Responding to the request of the tribes of Reuven and Gad that they remain on the eastern side of the Jordan, Moshe (Moses) says: "shall your brethren go to the war, and shall you sit here"? (Numbers 32:6) In its broadest sense, Moshe is teaching the message of ahavat Yisrael – loving one's fellow Jews.

In the Torah there are two distinct commandments relating to loving one's fellow human being. One is the mitzvah (commandment) of ahavat ha-briyot, to love humankind, because every human being is created in the image of God. The other mitzvah is the more specific ahavat Yisrael, the love of one's fellow Jew. Why is there a separate Torah imperative to love Jews? Shouldn't loving Jews be subsumed under the general commandment to love everyone?

In addressing this question, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik suggests that the two loves are fundamentally different in nature. Loving all humankind is an intellectual love. It is a love that emanates from the mind, from objective reasoning. This love is conditional – if you cease caring about me, then I cease caring about you. It is a love dependent upon reciprocity.

Loving other Jews, on the other hand, is an emotional love. It is a love that emanates from the heart. This love is unconditional – I love you regardless

of whether you love me. And if you cease loving me, I still continue loving you.

Now, of course, one can develop deep, deep love for gentiles. The distinction made here between ahavat ha-briyot and ahavat Yisrael is generic, dealing with nations and people as a whole entity.

This distinction becomes clearer when one compares the love a person has for his or her family to that for non-family. I love my spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, and siblings in a way I don't love others. My connection is emotional; my love for them more intense. Am Yisrael, the People of Israel, are also my family – not my immediate family, but my larger family.

This does not mean we do not feel intensely connected to gentiles. Every human being is created in the image of God with endless and infinite value. Notwithstanding our love for humankind, it is only natural to feel more intense love for one's own people. To deny this disparity in our empathy with others is ultimately to deny our own human nature.

In fact, how a person loves all people is measured by the way a person loves his or her own people. An enlightened sense of national identity, rather than being a contradiction to universal consciousness, is a prerequisite for it.

And so, Moshe tells the tribes of Reuven and Gad, it is inconceivable you remain apart from your brethren in their hour of need. When your brethren are challenged and go to war, you (indeed, we) must all feel challenged and stand with them. ©2020 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 LEVIN

Changing Perspectives

For several generations, from the time of Avraham until the Exodus from Egypt, our forefathers were known as shepherds. Avraham had his flocks, and his shepherds fought with Lot's shepherds. Ya'akov was skilled at animal husbandry and instructed his sons to say that they were shepherds when they moved to Egypt. The one exception is Yitzchak who was noted for his farming abilities within the borders of Israel. When the B'nei Yisrael were taken out of Egypt, they were told that they would be brought to a land flowing with milk and honey. Metaphorically this referred to the Torah, but practically, it referred to the abundance of produce which the land would supply. The B'nei Yisrael were being groomed to move from a society of shepherds to one of agriculture. This was a purposeful decision by Hashem, to give the people the Land of Israel as their inheritance and to tie them to the land.

Every occupation gives a person a unique perspective on life. A teacher looks upon his students

with the task of giving over skills while trying not to stifle creativity. A doctor helps his patients find health and a lifestyle which will lead them to a longer life. An accountant sees the importance of order, structure, and planning. Each profession also gives one a unique perspective of Hashem's relationship to Man. The teacher looks upon Hashem as the center of wisdom and creativity. The doctor sees Hashem as a great healer both of our bodies and our souls. The accountant views Hashem as One who created order in the world.

Each perspective adds to our understanding of Hashem. What, then, was Hashem's message to the B'nei Yisrael as shepherds, and why did He choose to change that perspective to agriculture? A shepherd sees himself as one who must watch over his flock to protect it from danger. He moves his flock from field to field to ensure that they have a steady supply of food. He is careful that they do not go astray and become lost. This becomes the shepherd's view of Hashem. Hashem watches over His flock, protecting them, feeding them, and preventing them from going astray and becoming lost. The people are recipients of Hashem's guidance. They see that Hashem saves the B'nei Yisrael even from themselves. This is evident when the brothers threw Yosef into a pit and sold him to Egypt, hoping to thwart his dreams, but Hashem raised him to become head of Egypt which ensured His plan for Jewish history. This perspective was necessary throughout the Book of Bereishit to comprehend Hashem's protective nature to Man, but only later could Man understand his own responsibility to Hashem.

When Hashem took the B'nei Yisrael from Egypt, He had already envisioned the next step in their development. They were given the mitzvot which prescribed Man's behavior to his Fellowman as well as Man's responsibilities to Hashem. Man was no longer to be a flock led by a shepherd who alone decided the path and direction of the people. That relationship placed a limited responsibility on the sheep for its own protection. Now that Man had the Torah and its laws, he would play an active role in his own life. This parallels the perspective of the farmer. He plows his field, sows it with seed, protects his vegetation from bugs and animals, and finally harvests his crop. He is aware of the precariousness of his life. If there is too little or too much rain, a flood or a drought, excessive heat or cold, his crop may be endangered. He prays to Hashem that He will bless his crop and enable him to feed his family. A farmer understands that he must do the work, but Hashem must provide the proper conditions for his success. This becomes even clearer within the Land of Israel. When the people adhered to the mitzvot, the land would produce an abundance of the finest fruits, vegetables, and grains. When the people sinned, the land would not receive its proper rain and there would be a serious famine. Hashem

wished them to understand that once they had the mitzvot to guide them, they no longer needed a shepherd but instead a partner. The people were tied to the land, but now they had the proper tools to make that land flourish. With the Torah, they now possessed the mitzvot which would enable them to reap the benefits of a land which was created with the ability to sense the goodness of the people. They could see how their observance of the mitzvot affected their crops.

We can now understand the underlying elements of the request by Gad and Reuvein to remain on the other side of the Jordan. They prefaced their remarks by speaking of the large numbers of their flocks. Their focus was still on their animals, and we see that Moshe adjusted their focus to their children. Is it possible that Hashem did not know that they had a large number of animals? Is it possible that He would not have given them a land that was suitable to both farming and flocks? Gad and Reuvein feared the responsibility of being judged by their own righteousness. They preferred to remain in a relationship with Hashem which was not governed by their behavior but covered by His protection. Moshe tried to change their perception by reversing their order of focus. Had they focused on their children instead of themselves, they might have accepted the challenges of the land for the sake of their children.

Reuvein lost more than anyone by his decision. He would have been given a double portion in Israel, but received only a single portion in Jordan. His double portion went to Yosef and was divided among Menashe and Ephraim. Still, Menashe should have received a double portion, as the firstborn of Yosef. And now we can understand another problem in this section. Menashe never asks to be on the other side of the Jordan, yet Moshe assigns half the tribe to that inheritance. This seemed like a punishment as they would not experience this new perspective. But the two halves of Menashe would switch places every six months, thus enabling the full tribe to learn the proper, new perspective. This was also a lesson to Reuvein, that he could have done the same with the double portion he would have received. He lost that opportunity and was constantly reminded of his mistake by seeing the half tribe of Menashe.

Perspectives are important and it is only through learning with others that we can gain insight into perspectives that are not our own. The Bet Midrash with Chevruta learning is a primary source to gain more than one's own perspective of our relationship to Hashem and to Man. It is sad to see the college and political experience today where differing views are silenced, and being uncomfortable with someone else's perspective is not seen as an opportunity for honest debate but a reason to shut that debate down. That changes us from independent

thinkers who must argue to support our perspective, to sheep who allow a professor or a politician to make our decisions for us. We must not forget the importance of the less on which Hashem taught us, that the perspectives of being led and the leading ourselves must both be learned. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

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Galut

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Someone who killed another person unintentionally had to flee to a city of refuge (*ir miklat*) and stay there until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*. It is one of the 613 commandments for the rabbinical court to sentence the accidental killer to this exile.

The logic of this punishment is based on the assumption that it serves as atonement for the killer. Some *Rishonim* write that exile itself does not atone. Rather, atonement comes about only with the subsequent death of the *Kohen Gadol*.

When one person killed another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, he fled to a city of refuge. A court of twenty-three rabbis then summoned him to be tried. If he was found innocent (not responsible for the death), he was let go. If he was found guilty of murder, he was given the death penalty. If he was found unintentionally responsible for the death, he was sentenced to exile and sent back to the city of refuge.

The guilty party was escorted back to the city of refuge by two Torah scholars, to ensure that the relatives of the deceased did not kill him while he was in transit. Once exiled, the unintentional killer could not leave the city of refuge for any reason – neither to do a mitzva nor to testify. Even if he could have been of service to the nation, he did not leave. He did not leave to save people or property, whether from non-Jews, floods, fire, or landslides. If he did venture out, he was likely to be killed by avenging relatives.

As stated earlier, the death of the *Kohen Gadol* allowed him to return home. For this reason, the mother of the *Kohen Gadol* would provide food and clothes for the exiled killers, as she did not want them to pray for the death of her son.

If a killer died and was buried in a city of refuge, and subsequently the *Kohen Gadol* died, the killer's body could be reinterred in his home city.

Once the person exiled was free to go home after the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, he was like any other person. His time in exile had earned him atonement. If an avenging family member then decided to kill him, the avenger was liable to death (as he would have been for any intentional murder).

However, if and when the killer returned to his home town, according to Jewish law he was not allowed to return to his former position (if he had been a community leader). A horrible thing (the unintentional

accidental death) had happened through him, and it could not be ignored.

Today, the sentence of exile is not in effect, as we have no cities of refuge. Furthermore, rabbinic courts no longer try capital cases, so neither exile nor the death penalty can be carried out. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And Moshe sent them 1,000 from each tribe for the army, they and Pinchas, son of Elazar the Kohain to serve, and the holy vessels and the trumpets for sounding blasts in his hand." (Bamidbar 31:6) Hashem told Moshe to take revenge against the nation of Midian for what it did to the Jews by causing them to sin, which led to the death of tens of thousands. Moshe drafted one thousand men from each tribe, and put Pinchas in charge of these troops. He was what is known as the Kohain Mashuach Milchama, anointed to lead in times of war. This was the spiritual leader who accompanied Jewish armies when they went to battle.

The question is why "holy vessels" were needed for the fight. What constituted such vessels and what was the purpose of them?

Rashi (based on Tosefta in Sotah) comments that these items were the Aron, the ark that housed the luchos, as well as the tzitz, the headplate worn by the Kohain Gadol upon which was written, "Holy to Hashem." Rashi explains that Bilaam and the Midianites used black magic to fly up in the air, but when they saw the name of Hashem on this plate, they came crashing to earth. No word on why the ark was needed. The Ibn Ezra only mentions the ark but he also does not explain its purpose. Why were these vessels needed to be in control of Pinchas when the Jews went to battle?

The Haamek Davar earlier in Bamidbar (10:9) explained that when trumpets were sounded to call the Jews to pray to Hashem for salvation from their enemies, it could only be when they were "in front of Hashem." To be "in front of Hashem," they needed a holy vessel, such as the ark or the tzitz, and it's the subject of debate whether it was the ark or the tzitz that was necessary. So what can we learn from this requirement?

When the Jews would blow the trumpets and turn their hearts to Hashem, it could not be an empty recitation of words. They could not rely on their physical strength or prowess and merely offer lip service to Hashem's Divine role in their victory. Therefore, they needed a conduit to help focus their thoughts and concretize their feelings.

Having the aron there, which symbolized the Torah through which we sanctify our lives and live as Hashem wants us to live, or the tzitz, which symbolizes

how a person can be so dedicated to Hashem like the Kohain Gadol that he lives on another plane, would allow those davening to concretize their feelings by doing something to further connect.

When we reach out to Hashem, we should be trying to make a connection. It's not the asking which effects the answer, but the closeness in those moments of prayer when we join with Hashem and become a part of His presence.

This was the message of the holy vessels. If you want to cry out to Hashem, you need to have a plan and a vehicle for enhancing the relationship, or else you're simply making a lot of noise.

Once upon a time, a Kollel fellow had a fight with his wife. She was very upset by something he had said or done (or not said or not done) and she was barely speaking to him. Not knowing how to respond to this, he went to his Rosh Yeshiva who counseled him on how to restore peace in the home.

"Bring her some nice flowers. It will make her feel better." The young man dutifully went out and got a lovely bouquet. He brought them home to his delighted wife, who became markedly less delighted as he lovingly said, "Here. My Rosh Yeshiva said these would make you feel better." © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah continues the theme of the three weeks and introduces the month of Av. The prophet Yirmiyahu reprimands the Jewish people and reminds them, in the name of Hashem, of all of the favors they have received over the years. Hashem asks, "What wrong did your fathers find in Me that distanced them from Me and resulted in their following the empty practices of idolatry diminishing the Jews to nothingness? They didn't turn to Hashem who brought them up from Egypt and led them through the desolate dangerous desert." Hashem continues, "And I brought them to the fertile land of Israel to partake of its fruits and goodness. But they defiled My land and disgraced My inheritance." (Yirmiyahu 2:5) Hashem faults the Jewish nation for presently rejecting Him and resorting to the shameful ways of idolatry.

Hashem says, "They forsook Me, the source of the waters of life; to dig empty cisterns." But the blame wasn't limited to the common folk, it even extended to their leaders and prophets. Hashem describes their spiritual decline in the following terms, "The Kohanim didn't revere Me and the upholders of Torah didn't publicize My name, the kings rebelled against Me and the prophets delivered false prophecy." (2: 8) This bleak picture of the Jewish people was certainly not a comforting one and almost promised immediate retribution and destruction.

Yet, we discover that Hashem's response to all

the above was one of concern and compassion. Hashem surprisingly responded, "Therefore I will continue to quarrel with you and even with your grandchildren." Hashem vowed to send more prophets and continue showing them and their descendents the proper path. Although every attempt thus far had been unsuccessful Hashem remained determined to help His people. Hashem refused to reject them even after the numerous rejections they showed him. The present leaders were not loyal to Hashem and didn't inspire the nation to repent and follow the proper path. Perhaps the next group of leaders would be more loyal and could successfully leave their imprint on the Jewish people. Although the Jews had reduced themselves to the point of emptiness and nothingness Hashem still cared about them with deep compassion. He wouldn't leave His people until every last avenue had been exhausted and it had been determined that there was literally no more hope for them.

This unbelievable degree of compassion is explained in the verses immediately preceding this week's haftora. Hashem says, "I remember you for the kindness of your youth, the love of our initial relationship when you blindly followed Me in the desert." Even after all the offenses the Jewish people committed against Him, Hashem still remembered His initial relationship with His people. Hashem never forgets those precious years wherein He enjoyed a perfect relationship with His people. Hashem actually longs for the opportunity of returning to that relationship and will do virtually anything to restore things to their original perfection. This explains Hashem's persistence in sending prophets to the Jewish people attempting to persuade them to return. In truth, Hashem views the Jewish people from an entirely different perspective than their present rebellious state. Hashem sees them through the visions of the past. True, they have presently gone totally astray but Hashem sees in them their perfect past as the devout people whose intimate relationship with Him directed them to follow blindly wherever they were led. Hashem therefore expresses His sincere desire that the present Jewish nation live up to His perfect vision of them, the glorious vision of the past. Through this perspective the Jewish people deserve every last chance they can to return to their glorious era.

With this insight in mind we can truly appreciate the words of Chazal in Midrash Tehilim (137) which reveal Hashem's indescribable love and compassion for His people. The Midrash relates that the Prophet Yirmiyahu accompanied the Jewish people into their exile until the Euphrates River, the doorstep of Bablyonia. He then informed them that he would be leaving and returning to the segment of Jewish people left behind in the land of Israel. Suddenly there was an outburst of uncontrollable weeping from the Jewish people who realized that they were being abandoned

by Yirmiyahu. He responded with the following words, "I testify in the name of Hashem that if this sincere cry would have transpired moments ago, when we were still in our homeland, the exile would never have come about." So great is Hashem's love for His people that even after all the atrocities they committed, rebelling against Hashem and intentionally spiting Him, one sincere gesture from the Jewish people was all that was needed. Even one emotional outburst, sensing Hashem's rejection would have sufficed to hold back the terrible calamity they now faced. Hashem loves His people so deeply that even at the last moments He still awaited their return to Him and was prepared to call off their imminent exile. In Hashem's eyes we will always be seen through the perspective of our past, a perfect devout people ready to serve Him unconditionally. And Hashem is therefore always prepared to do anything He can to restore us to that glorious position, His perfect nation. ©2020 D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Tricks of the Trade - Trade of the Tricks

Those who live by the sword," the cliched expression goes, "die by it as well." What about those who live by other means of evil? What happens to those who live by the curse, do they die by the curse? Or do they die by the sword as well?

Parshas Matos tells us of the fate of Bilaam ben Be'or, the world's most trusted and experienced sorcerer, whose curses never failed to hit their mark. Bilaam was hired by the king of Moav to curse the Jews and only through the merciful intervention of the Almighty's Divine Hand were his efforts thwarted.

After his original scheme had failed, Bilaam devised a plot that found the chink in our spiritual armor. He advised Balak to seduce Klal Yisrael to sin with Midianite women.

The Jews unfortunately fell prey to his plot and the wrath of Hashem was unleashed against His people. Thousands of Jews were killed in a plague and if not for the brave intervention of Pinchos, the grandson of Ahron, the toll would have been higher.

But now it was time for payback. Moshe amassed an army led by Pinchos, which struck Midian hard. The Torah tells us: "They massed against Midian, as Hashem had commanded Moses, and they killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian along with their slain ones -- Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; and Balaam son of Beor they slew with the sword." (Numbers 31:7-8).

The final few words of the posuk raise a question: Does it really make a difference how they killed Bilaam? They killed him. Does it make a difference if they killed him by drowning or they killed him by arrows. Perhaps the Jewish nation gave him a

taste of his own medicine and cast a spell upon him like he attempted to do to Klal Yisrael? Is it really significant to tell how the Jews killed Bilaam? Why does the Torah tell us how he died?

The commentaries contrast the normal method in which Jews did battle -- their mouths, with the way our Biblical nemesis Esav did battle -- his sword. In this case, the roles seem reversed. Bilaam used his mouth, we used the sword. Is there a lesson in that as well?

World champion heavyweight boxer Joe Lewis reigned for over a decade from the late 1930s to his retirement in 1949. As a black man, he endured racist abuse despite his status as a major sports hero.

During his period of army service, he was driving with a fellow GI when he was involved in a minor collision with a large truck. The truck driver got out, yelling and swearing racial epithets at Louis, who just sat in the driver's seat smiling.

"Hey you're Joe Lewis! You're not gonna let him get away with that! Why didn't you get out and knock him flat?" asked his buddy after the truck driver had moved on.

"Why should I?" replied Joe. "When somebody insulted Caruso, did he respond by singing an aria?"

Rashi explains the Torah's underlying aim in telling us how Bilaam was killed. Bilaam was a descendant of Esav, whose existence and mtier was decreed centuries before by his father Yitzchak, ""And by your sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40). Yaakov's weapon of choice throughout history came from Yitzchak's words, "the voice is the voice of Yaakov," it is through Yaakov's mouth -- through prayer and petition, persuading and cajoling that he was most successful. Bilaam did not use his trademark weapon -- the sword -- against Israel. Instead he attempted to cast a spell upon the Israelites, Bilaam switched venues and used the mouth -- the instrument of brother Yaakov.

And so, explains Rashi as Bilaam exchanged his mtier for the mtier of Israel, Hashem showed the world that we do not have to rely solely upon our weapons of choice. As Bilaam exchanged his weapon, we, too, exchanged ours.

When it comes to dealing with our enemies, we have to use every appropriate means that fits the needs of the hour. Despite the fact that we are the people of words, we must know when to put our forte aside and use a different tool. Because in order to survive, we need not only know the tricks of the trade, but also how to trade our tricks! ©2020 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

