

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Moses, having set out the prologue and preamble to the covenant and its broad guiding principles, now turns to the details, which occupy the greater part of the book of Devarim, from chapter 12 to chapter 26. But before he begins with the details, he states a proposition that is the most fundamental one in the book, and one that would be echoed endlessly by Israel's Prophets:

"See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced." (Deut. 11:26-28)

If you behave well, things will go well. If you act badly, things will turn out badly. Behaving well means honouring our covenant with God, being faithful to Him, heeding His words and acting in accordance with His commands. That was the foundation of the nation. Uniquely it had God as its liberator and lawgiver, its sovereign, judge and defender. Other nations had their gods, but none had a covenant with any of them, let alone with the Creator of heaven and earth.

And yes, as we saw last week, there are times when God acts out of chessed, performing kindness to us even though we do not deserve it. But do not depend on that. There are things Israel must do in order to survive. Therefore, warned Moses, beware of any temptation to act like the nations around you, adopting their gods, worship or practices. Their way is not yours. If you behave like them, you will perish like them. To survive, let alone thrive, stay true to your faith, history and destiny, your mission, calling and task as "a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation."

As you act, so shall you fare. As I put it in my book *Morality*, a free society is a moral achievement. The paradoxical truth is that a society is strong when it cares for the weak, rich when it cares for the poor, and invulnerable when it takes care of the vulnerable. Historically, the only ultimate guarantor of this is a belief in Someone greater than this time and place, greater than all time and place, who guides us in the path of righteousness, seeing all we do, urging us to see the world as His work, and humans as His image, and

therefore to care for both. Bein adam le-Makom and bein adam le-chavero -- the duties we have to God and those we owe our fellow humans -- are inseparable. Without a belief in God we would pursue our own interests, and eventually those at the social margins, with little power and less wealth, would lose. That is not the kind of society Jews are supposed to build.

The good society does not just happen. Nor is it created by the market or the state. It is made from the moral choices of each of us. That is the basic message of Deuteronomy: will we choose the blessing or the curse? As Moses says at the end of the book: "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." (30:15, 19)

The test of a society is not military, political, economic or demographic. It is moral and spiritual. That is what is revolutionary about the biblical message. But is it really so? Did not ancient Egypt have the concept of ma'at, order, balance, harmony with the universe, social stability, justice and truth? Did not the Greeks and Romans, Aristotle especially, give a central place to virtue? Did not the Stoics create an influential moral system, set out in the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius? What is different about the way of Torah?

Those ancient systems were essentially ways of worshipping the state, which was given cosmic significance in Pharaonic Egypt and heroic significance in Greece and Rome. In Judaism we do not serve the state; we serve God alone. The unique ethic of the covenant, whose key text is the book of Devarim, places on each of us an immense dual responsibility, both individual and collective.

I am responsible for what I do. But I am also responsible for what you do. That is one meaning of the command in Kedoshim: "You shall surely remonstrate with your neighbour and not bear sin because of him." As Maimonides wrote in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (positive command 205), "It is not right for any of us to say, 'I will not sin, and if someone else sins, that is a matter between him and his God'. This is the opposite of the Torah."

In other words, it is not the state, the government, the army or the police that is the primary guardian of the law, though these may be necessary (as indicated at the beginning of next week's parsha: "You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your

tribes"). It is each of us and all of us together. That is what makes the ethic of the covenant unique.

We see this in a phrase that is central to American politics and does not exist at all in British politics: "We, the people." These are the opening words of the preamble to the American constitution. Britain is not ruled by "We, the people." It is ruled by Her Majesty the Queen whose loyal subjects we are. The difference is that Britain is not a covenant society whereas America is: its earliest key texts, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and John Winthrop's address on board the Arbella in 1630, were both covenants, built on the Deuteronomy model. (See the recent survey: Meir Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver and Stuart Halpern, Proclaim liberty throughout the land: the Hebrew Bible in the United States, a sourcebook, 2019.)

Covenant means we cannot delegate moral responsibility away to either the market or the state. We -- each of us, separately and together -- make or break society.

Stoicism is an ethic of endurance, and it has some kinship with Judaism's wisdom literature. Aristotle's ethic is about virtue, and much of what he has to say is of permanent value. Rambam had enormous respect for it. But embedded in his outlook was a hierarchical mindset. His portrait of the "great-souled man" is of a person of aristocratic bearing, independent wealth and high social status. Aristotle would not have understood Abraham Lincoln's statement about a new nation, "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

The Greeks were fascinated by structures. Virtually all the terms we use today -- democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny -- are Greek in origin. The message of Sefer Devarim is, yes, create structures -- courts, judges, officers, priests, kings -- but what really matters is how each of you behaves. Are you faithful to our collective mission in such a way that "All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will be in awe of you" (Deut. 28:10)? A free society is made less by structures than by personal responsibility for the moral-spiritual order.

This was once fully understood by the key figures associated with the emergence (in their different ways) of the free societies of England and America. In England Locke distinguished between liberty, the freedom to do what you may, and licence, the freedom to do what you want. (The Second Treatise of Civil Government (1690), chapter 2) Alexis de Tocqueville, in Democracy in America (Introduction), wrote that "Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." In his Farewell Address, George Washington wrote, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion, and morality are indispensable supports."

Why so? What is the connection between morality and freedom? The answer was given by Edmund Burke: "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters." (Letter to a Member of the National Assembly (1791))

In other words, the less law enforcement depends on surveillance or the police, and the more on internalised habits of law-abidingness, the freer the society. That is why Moses, and later Ezra, and later still the rabbis, put so much emphasis on learning the law so that it became natural to keep the law.

What is sad is that this entire constellation of beliefs -- the biblical foundations of a free society -- has been almost completely lost to the liberal democracies of the West. Today it is assumed that morality is a private affair. It has nothing to do with the fate of the nation. Even the concept of a nation has become questionable in a global age. National cultures are now multi-cultures. Elites no longer belong "somewhere"; they are at home "anywhere." (David Goodhart, The Road to Somewhere, Penguin, 2017) A nation's strength is now measured by the size and growth of its economy. The West has reverted to the Hellenistic idea that freedom has to do with structures -- nowadays, democratically elected governments -- rather than the internalised morality of "We, the people."

I believe Moses was right when he taught us otherwise: that the great choice is between the blessing and the curse, between following the voice of God or the seductive call of instinct and desire. Freedom is sustained only when a nation becomes a moral community. And any moral community achieves a greatness far beyond its numbers, as we lift others and they lift us. *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

"If there will arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a convincing manifestation, and this sign or convincing manifestation which he had announced to you occurred; (And he utilized what appeared to be this miraculous occurrence) to say 'Let us follow after other gods...,' you must not hearken to the words of that "prophet"... After your God shall you walk, Him shall you revere, keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him and cleave unto Him..." (Deuteronomy 13:2-5). From the earliest Biblical times,

Judaism – a moral and enlightened religion based upon an ethical monotheism which taught justice, compassion and peace – was forced to struggle against idolatrous voodoo and magic. Apparently the more mysterious, uncertain and fragile life appeared to be, the greater the attraction to follow wonder – working, prophecy – speaking individuals who claimed a “local telephone” relationship to the Divine or to the various divinities in which they believed.

Fascinatingly enough, the twelfth century Commentary Ramban (Nachmanides) admits of the possibility that there do exist gifted individuals with what we would consider to be prophetic powers: “Possibly the Biblical text is hinting at a true phenomenon, that souls of several individuals have the prophetic power to know the future, and not one really knows the source of that power... an inner spirit comes to that individual saying that such and such will occur in the future to a certain object... and the matter proves to be true to those who see it happen...” (Ramban, ad loc). Nevertheless, if such a prophecy is used to turn someone away from the laws of Torah, the soothsayer is considered to be a malevolent idolater. Indeed, the entire introduction to this description of a false prophet is the Biblical insistence upon the ultimate truth of our Torah, “a Judicial code which dare not be compromised, not even by abilities to predict future events on the basis of heavenly voices: “Every word which I have commanded you, you must observe to perform; do not add to it and do not distract from it” (Deut 13:1). No one, not even the most gifted oracle, can rise above the authority and supremacy of our Torah!

Maimonides is likewise very stringent in defining all forms of idolatry. Our Bible insists that “there shall not be found among you... any soothsayer (Kosem), astrologer, enchanter or sorcerer” (Deut 18:10), and our great Spanish legalist – philosopher explains a Kosem as “one who does an act in order to free his mind from all distractions so that he can predict future events, and he says that something will occur or will not occur” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 11,6). Indeed, there may be individuals with such abilities, but that does not necessarily mean that such soothsayers have proper moral judgment or give wise halakhic counsel.

From this perspective we can readily understand why our tradition insists that “the Torah is no longer in heaven,” so we do not listen to heavenly voices (B.T. Bava Metzia 59b) and “the Sage is to be preferred over the prophet” (Bava Batra 12b); our religio-legal system, albeit based upon a law which we believe to be the word of the Living God, nevertheless is interpreted and developed in each generation predicated upon logically sound principles and analytically sound explications. Reasoned Responsa are open to scholarly debate, and no one can claim the

forensic edge because he heard a voice from Heaven. Hence the continuity of our tradition remains insured, with legal interpretations based upon traditionally ordained logic no one has the ability to undermine our sacred texts by a newly revealed addendum or substitute.

I believe that there is an even more profound reason for our rejection of fortune tellers, even deeply religious fortune tellers who do not use their “gifts” to undermine our tradition. The Bible itself teaches “the secrets are for the Lord our God and that which is revealed is for us and our descendants forever to perform all the words of this Torah” (Deut. 29:28). Our task is not to second-guess God, or to use our religion or our religious leaders to make our lives easier or more certain, to remove human doubt or vulnerability. The commandments are here for us to serve God, not in order to attempt to have God serve us. Hence the Mishnah teaches that “we are to serve our Master not in order to receive a reward” (Avot 1), but because it is right to serve Him and will ultimately make for a better world – not necessarily an easier individual life. Faith is not a guarantee that my life will be comfortable and cancer – free, if I do what the Torah commands; faith rather demands faithfulness to God’s desired life-style no matter how difficult or challenging my individual life may be. As Yossele Rakover, supposed victim of the Warsaw Ghetto poignantly writes in his last Will and Testament: “You have done everything possible to make me stop believing in You and maintaining your commandments. But, my wrathful God, it will not avail You in the least. I will never stop believing you, never stop loving You. Who then shall I believe in, the cruel God (or non-god) of my enemies? Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokenu, Hashem Ehad.”

Similar to this must be our attitude to Prayer. We believe in a Higher Being who can certainly make the miraculous occur, but who only guaranteed that the Jewish people would never be completely destroyed, and that eventually the world will accept a God of peace and moral justice emanating from the ethics of our eternal Torah. Otherwise in large measure, the world operates according to its natural design. Yes, “even if a sword is dangling at your throat, do not despair of God’s compassion,” but – at that same time – “do not rely on miracles.” Pray for the best, but prepare for the worst.

The very practical Talmudic passage in Berachot (B.T. 32b.) teaches us that “one who prays too long and intensively will come to a pained heart,” and the Tosafot commentary interprets this to apply to an individual who expects his prayer to be answered. What is the repair for such a broken heart?, queries the Talmud. Occupy yourself in the performance of the commandments to serve God and try to improve society.

Our religious community must close its ears to

future predictions of all sorts, no matter how pious the source. Ultimately we have but one Source, and He teaches us that “the secrets are for the Lord our God alone, and that which is revealed – to perform all the words of this Torah – is for us and our children”. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

To Moshe, life choices are clear and self-evident. He tells the Jewish people to merely look, and they will see the difference between life and death, good and evil, eternity and time-burdened irrelevance. He implores the Jewish people to use their common sense, to pay attention to the experiences over the past 40 years in the desert, and their story. Then, they will be able to clearly see their choices in life, and what basic decisions they must make regarding what should be visible and obvious to them.

Yet, we know that even when people are aware of the consequences of their behavior, when, so to speak, they actually do see the differences and choices that lie before them, they will often choose to sin and take the wrong turn in life. People know that all addictive drugs and immoral behavior inevitably lead to personal disaster. The evidence for this is so abundant that all of us know cases and people that somehow willingly and even voluntarily choose this path of self-destruction. None of this holds people back from themselves.

The story is told about a man who was becoming an alcoholic, who was taken by his children to visit skid row where the victims of alcoholism reside on the street in their drunken stupor. One of the drunks was wallowing in the gutter amidst the filth that permeated the area. His children – those of the potential alcoholic – said to him: “Father don’t you see where excessive drinking will lead you?” However, the man went over to the drunk in the gutter and whispered to him: “Where did you get such good and powerful whiskey?” We always see what we want to see. What is perfectly obvious to the sane and rational mind, is not seen by one captured by the evil instinct, affected by social pressure, and suffering from a lack of self-discipline

All parents and educators know you may lead someone to a fountain of fresh water, but you cannot make that person drink from it, unless the person wishes to do so. It is hard to convince people to see what they do not want to see, and to believe what they do not wish to believe. All the exhortations of the prophets of Israel were of little avail in the times of the first Temple, simply because the people refused to see the obvious consequences of idol worship, and the abandonment of Torah and its teachings.

The only hope for parents and educators is to improve the eyesight, so to speak, of their children and

students, so that those individuals themselves will be able to perceive the clear difference between life and death, right and wrong. This is a slow and painful process, but with persistence it can be successful and lifesaving. Good eyesight requires tenacity of focus as well as excellent peripheral vision. Jewish tradition and Torah values within both the family and society help provide the good vision which enables productive choices, that will lead to eternal life and goodness. ©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

While a prophet may not change Torah law, he may override it temporarily – except in the case of idolatry. No prophet may advocate idol worship, no matter the circumstances. If he does, he is considered a navi sheker – a false prophet – even if he is able to perform miracles. (Deuteronomy 13:2-6)

The obvious question is, how can a false prophet have the ability to perform miracles? Several answers are offered.

Rabbi Akiva contends that when the Torah speaks of a prophet performing miracles, the prophet was then a true one. Only after deflecting to the wrong path, becoming a false prophet is he no longer able to perform miracles. (Sanhedrin 90a)

The message: Notwithstanding one’s achievement or spiritual level, there is always the possibility of later falling. Rabbi Akiva’s comment may be predicated on his life experiences. Having risen from illiteracy to become the rabbis’ rabbi, he understood that people can dramatically change — for the better or for the worse.

Two other approaches need mention: Rambam argues that the false prophet may perform what appears to be supernatural, but is not. What one sees is nothing less than a deception. In Rambam’s words: “And we may be sure that those signs [brought about by the false prophets] were performed with trickery and sorcery.” (Rambam, Fundamentals of the Torah, 8:3)

Ramban sees it differently. What one sees may have occurred. When considering that most human beings only use a small portion of their brain, it follows that this false prophet may have mastered how to use a slightly larger portion which allows him to perform the supernatural. The talent to use one’s ability more fully than others is not indicative of being a true prophet. (Ramban, Deuteronomy 18:9)

This disagreement between Rambam and Ramban follows their pattern of discourse. Rambam was a rationalist. He, therefore, could not entertain that a false prophet could do the miraculous — it’s a deception. Ramban on the other hand, was of the

mystical bent. The false prophet can perform the supernatural – but so what? Some people have that ability. But that is not enough to prove they are authentic.

Still, what Rambam and Ramban have in common is that miracles (or acts that appear miraculous) are not the criteria to prove that a prophet is truthful. In the words of Moses Mendelssohn: “According to the laws of my faith, miraculous acts are no touchstone of truth, and a miracle cannot be accepted with moral certainty as evidence that a prophet has been sent by God.”

Nechama Leibowitz, who presents Mendelssohn’s words, adds, “It is...the content of the prophet’s message which is the decisive factor, and if it violates the principles enunciated in the Torah, we must not give it credence.” ©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

The Right Alternative

Our parasha begins: “See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that you shall listen to the commandments of Hashem your Elokim which I command you today. And the curse, if you will not listen to the commandments of Hashem your Elokim, and you turn from the path that I command you today to go after other gods whom you do not know.” This text has several anomalies that are only seen in the Hebrew as the English translation often adds words or does not distinguish between the singular and plural forms of the word “you”. These nuances can affect our understanding of the texts as reflected in the commentaries.

Professor Nechama Leibovits quotes the Malbim concerning the use or lack thereof of the word “im, if” in the p’sukim above. To paraphrase the translation, one might say: a blessing that you obey the mitzvot and a curse if you do not obey the mitzvot. The Malbim writes: “‘A blessing that you obey’, implying then that the very obedience to the Divine commandments constitutes the blessing. Do not imagine that there is any this-world reward outside the mitzvah itself. It is not like the case of the master who rewards his servant for loyalty and punishes him for disobedience, where the servant’s due is dependent on the master’s whim and is not inherent in the action itself. The parallel is to the doctor who assures his patient that he will be well as long as he adheres to the regimen he prescribes and that otherwise he will die. The consequences are here inherent in the deed itself.” The sense of accomplishment that one feels when he is able to “kovei’a itim l’Torah, set aside a regular time for Torah study”, is more important than the praise one might receive from others for this achievement.

Rabbeinu Bahya focuses on the use of the word “asher, that”, when dealing with the blessings and the word im, if, when dealing with the curses. He tells us that the punishment for not observing the mitzvot is conditional like the word if. Im is an expression of doubt, whereas asher is an expression of certainty. When one performs mitzvot the act is automatically stored for reward later even before this person proves his righteousness and therefore his deserving of reward. When Hashem created the world, He gave us a blessing even before we began to exist. That blessing was for as yet unproven behavior so that we would taste the blessing and thank Hashem by fulfilling His command. This understanding accords with HaEmek Davar who writes, “The Almighty, in His abounding grace, provides His creatures with one single good prior to the deed, as an incentive to good works.” In contrast, for the one who does not observe the mitzvot, the punishment waits until after this breach of behavior has occurred.

Several of the commentaries notice the difference in “person and number” of the singular re’ei, you (s) see, and the plural lifneichem, before you (p). The Baal HaTurim indicates that this was a command given to each individual. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin gives a different interpretation based on the words of the sages. Each individual must look at himself and his own accomplishments as if he is a middle-of-the-road person. He should view himself as filled with half mitzvot and half sins. If he performs one more mitzvah, he now becomes righteous. If instead he does one more sin, he is an evil person. His action may be the ultimate balance of the Jewish people as a whole at any given time. The judgment, while individual, has an effect on the collective punishment of the Jewish People.

The concepts of blessing and curse need further study. HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the word b’racha, blessing, is related to the word parak, to unload or load up someone else. It is also related to the word barak, lightning, which is the unloading of energy and the loading of electricity from the clouds. From there we go to the word berach which is the knee joint, “the essential lever for moving forward.” The word b’racha is also related to the word breicha which is a pool of water or a water supply. In summary, a b’racha is a gift from Hashem which propels a person forward and is vitally tied to water (Torah). The fact that this gift moves one in a positive direction and is governed by the Torah and its values makes this the most important gift that a person can receive.

The word k’lalah, curse, “is not merely the opposite condition of lack of progress, of remaining isolated without prospering further.” The term k’lalah comes from the Hebrew word kallal or kal which means light or completely without weight. The person who is

cursed with a k'lalah becomes unimportant as if they do not exist. According to Hirsch it is "the positive loss of all one's own value, the retrogression to absolute zero of one's position in life." This can only come with disobedience of Hashem's Torah. We must remember that we are not talking here about belief in Hashem; we are talking about observance of His mitzvot.

We have been presented here with two alternative lifestyles, namely, a life of Torah or a life devoid of Torah. It is a life not just possessing Torah but in some ways being possessed by it. To "own" the Torah is not just to have it and to study it but to live it, daily striving to live one's life according to the mitzvot. Our choice will have an effect on our entire People. It is not a simple matter for us to understand that our actions, which we look on as being our own individual decisions, can have such a wide-ranging effect. We seldom think of ourselves as being so significant. It is rewarding to know that our positive observance of the Torah can save so many people, yet it is daunting to grasp that our lack of observance can cause such destruction. We do not have the luxury of claiming that we are only hurting ourselves. We are therefore faced with a choice between alternative lifestyles. We are told in advance the consequences of our actions, and we must individually decide how we will proceed. As Hirsch explains, "the alternative between these two conditions is 'placed before us' with Hashem's Torah, it depends on us to create the one or the other for ourselves." May Hashem guide us to understand the benefits of His mitzvot even were we to receive no reward. May Hashem enable us to make the right choice for us and our People. ©2020 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Bal Tosif

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

It is forbidden to add onto the *mitzvot*. This includes extending a mitzva in time (such as adding an extra day to a holiday), increasing its quantity (such as adding a fifth species to one's *lulav*, or a fifth biblical text inside one's *tefillin*), or creating a new mitzva. An obvious question arises: how then could our Sages prohibit actions that were not prohibited by the Torah, such as eating chicken with milk?

Some answer that the prohibition of *Bal Tosif* applies only if those making an addition claim that it is a mitzva in the Torah. No one ever claimed that eating chicken with milk is biblically prohibited.

Others state that the law of *Bal Tosif* applies only to adding positive commandments. In contrast, our Sages were allowed to prohibit additional things. This answer, though, does not explain how the Sages were permitted to create the holidays of Purim and Chanukah.

An example of extending a mitzva in time is sitting in the *sukkah* on Shmini Atzeret, the day which

follows Sukkot and on which there is no mitzva to sit in the *sukkah* (at least in Israel; it is more complicated in the Diaspora). Some *Rishonim* write that one may do so if he makes sure there is a *heker*, something unusual, to make it clear that he is not trying to fulfill a mitzva. Along the same lines, Rav Kook states that a *heker* was necessary for the rabbinically-added holidays, so no one could confuse them with biblical *mitzvot*. Thus, Purim is celebrated on different dates depending upon whether or not one lives in a walled city. There is no comparable rule for any other mitzva. And Chanukah lighting has different levels of observance – the minimal requirement, the enhanced level, and the extra-enhanced level. This too is unique.

Two types of additions do not constitute a problem of *Bal Tosif* according to most opinions. One type is adding in frequency. For example, performing the same mitzva numerous times a day is not prohibited. A second type is broadening the ranks of those who perform a mitzva. For example, a woman is allowed to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt. Nevertheless, there is an opinion that even these two types transgress the prohibition of *Bal Tosif*, if the person performing an extra mitzva mistakenly believes the Torah mandates it. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"You shall surely give him (a pauper) and your heart should not be upset when you give him, for it is because of this thing that Hashem blesses you..." (Devarim 15:10) This parsha contains many directives in regard to tzedaka, charity, as well as other financial matters such as tithes and loans. The Torah has many regulations in regard to these topics and indeed, money is a primary focus of much of our lives. Knowing how to properly use it is key to being a Torah Jew.

In this posuk, when directing us to care for our needy brother (a hint that if we do not give, we will become "brothers" in poverty) by giving him a loan even as the Shemitta year approaches in which all loans will become nullified and uncollectible, the Torah adds another level. It tells us that not only should we give the loan, but we should not be displeased when doing so. It begs the age-old question of how the Torah can tell us what we should feel.

Let us set the stage for why we might be upset with doing this "good deed." The double verbiage of giving, says Rashi, teaches us that even if we have to help him privately a hundred times, we should do so. Wouldn't we start to imagine that maybe G-d wants him to be poor? Further, a loan at this time is almost certainly a guarantee that we're not going to get the money back, so why call it something it isn't? We're not even getting "credit" for giving tzedaka!

Hashem says, "Don't give yourself the chance to be perturbed." From the moment you agreed to help him, Hashem already blessed you. When you opened your hand, you weren't giving him from your own, but from the money Hashem gave you to give to him, much as an adult will give a child money to put in the pushka in order to train him to give.

This concept is taken further in the next pesukim, when we are told to send away our Jewish servants, at the end of their time of servitude, with gifts from our flocks. We are to recognize that the reason we have these things is to give them. When Hashem blesses someone with wealth, what He is providing them with is the opportunity to do good to others and act as Hashem's emissary of beneficence.

Just as a person on a business trip will spend money more freely to entertain clients when the boss is paying for it, so are we to remember that the money we give was entrusted to us for just this purpose. And, on the contrary, we are getting the "credit" or acknowledgment for it which is not really ours, but Hashem's.

When we give, and we should give, it should make us happy that we're able to act as Hashem's agents and not chas v'shalom resentful. The Torah is teaching us that if we're not happy about what we're doing when we give as the Torah commands, then we don't understand what we're doing. Only when we comprehend "the whole mitzvah" of Hashem do we truly fulfill it, and then we are worthy of blessing.

Baron Rothschild had purchased five apples from a grocer and as he walked down the street with his young grandson, a beggar asked for some food. Mr. Rothschild handed the man two apples then asked his grandson, "How many apples do we have?"

The boy, proud to show off the math he was learning, said, "We had five apples and gave away two, so we have three." His grandfather corrected him.

"We have two apples," he said. "The apples we will eat will be gone in a few moments, but the apples we gave to that poor man will live on as a merit forever." He paused for emphasis as he looked into the boy's eyes: "We only have what we've given away."

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RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Re' eh includes the precepts of tithing and giving charity to those in need. The passuk (verse) tells us that the result of helping those less fortunate is that we will be blessed (15:10). The Lekach Tov asks: Would it not make more sense to reserve the blessings for those less fortunate so that they don't need the help of others?

The Lekach Tov answers that the blessing that the giver receives is that very ability to help others, a benefit that would not be available if there was no one

to give to. There is a symbiotic relationship between a giver and a receiver, where they cannot exist without the other. Rabbi Yochanan Zweig asserts that perhaps that is why the Hebrew word for giving "natan" is a palindrome -- the giving goes in both directions, where everyone involved benefits. ©2020 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI HERSCHEL SHACHTER

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The Torah mentions several times that Bnei Yisroel are the am hanivchar. What exactly does that mean? Does it mean that just like parents sometimes favor one child over the others Hashem favors Klal Yisroel, and therefore we can get away with all kinds of mischief? This is clearly not the intention! First of all, the Gemorah points out (in the first perek of Messechet Shabbos) that the chumash clearly teaches us that it is improper for parents to have a favorite child, and the Torah clearly implies that all of the trouble surrounding mechiras Yosef and galus Mitzrayim came about because Yaakov Avinu treated Yosef differently than the other brothers.

Furthermore, our tradition has it that Bnei Yisroel are held to a higher standard than the umos ha'olam (see the midrash quoted by Rashi in Parshas Toldos on the possuk, "v'yitain lecho Elokim"). In general, one who is closer to Hashem has a greater degree of hashgocha protis both l'tav and l'mutov (good and bad); on the one hand the possuk tells us "raglei chassidov yishmor", i.e. that Hashem will protect one who is closer to Him in an unusual fashion; and on the other hand Hashem is m'dakdek im tzaddikov k'chut ha'saarah. For example, even with the ten explanations quoted by the Ohr Hachaim Hakaddosh we still don't know the exact nature of Moshe Rabbeinu's aveira which prevented him from entering Eretz Yisroel; all we know is that if anyone else would have done the same thing that Moshe Rabbeinu did, it probably would not have even been considered an aveira; but since he was so much closer to Hashem he was held to a much higher standard.

So what does it actually mean when the Torah tells us that Am Yisroel is the am hanivchar? The simple understanding seems to be that Bnei Yisroel are obligated to serve as an ohr lagoyim -- a light unto the nations, as the novi Yeshaya mentioned on several occasions. Even before yetzias Mitzrayim Hashem referred to Bnei Yisroel as "beni bechori -- my first born child". Does that possuk mean to say that all the nations of the world are bonim lamokom and Bnei Yisroel is the first born? The mishna in Pirkei Avos clearly rejects this understanding and states that only Bnei Yisroel have the cherished status of bonim lamokom. Only the neshomos of Bnei Yisroel carry in their "spiritual DNA" the middos of elokus in a manner similar to children carrying the physical DNA of their

parents. The neshomos of umos ha'olam are fundamentally different, and as such the Zohar teaches us that when a nochri is misgayer it is literally true that ger sh'nisgayer k'koton sh'nolad domi because his old neshoma is replaced with a new one.

The notion of Bnei Yisroel being the first born, the bechor, means that just as a first born child is expected to help his parents raise their younger children, so too Bnei Yisroel are called upon to influence the other nations of the world. The avos, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, were proactive in publicly preaching the lessons of monotheism. Apparently this charge was conveyed to Avrohom Avinu by Hashem when he told Avrohom, "V'nivrichu becha kol mishpichos ho'adoma" that all of the other families of the world should join along with you, just as one would graft a branch from one tree onto another (See Rashbam that the root of the word "v'nivrichu" is the word havracha, grafting).

After all of the shevotim were born, Yaakov Avinu understood that his responsibility to serve as an ohr lagoyim no longer required him to be proactive but should be fulfilled in a more passive fashion. Specifically, we can succeed in impressing upon all the nations of the world the values of honesty, integrity, and decency by acting properly ourselves and thus serving as a good example.

The Torah tells us in Parshas Ki Savo, "v'holachta bid'rachav" that we should preserve our tzelem Elokim by going in the ways of Hashem and then "when all of the nations of the world will see that you have succeeded in preserving your tzelem Elokim, they will learn from you how to act with yiras Shomayim" (see Aderes Eliyahu). The umos ha'olam also have tzelem Elokim and they can preserve that tzelem Elokim by following the ways of Hashem.

Hashem selected one nation to serve as a role model for all the others regarding how to go in His ways. The novi Yeshaya says, "am zu yotzarti", i.e. that the am ha'nivchar was a distinct creation of Hashem. According to nature, Klal Yisroel really should not exist, since the Chumash tells us that the imahos were akoros (unable to bear children), and the Talmud tells us (in Yevomos perek He'oreil) that Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Yaakov were akorim as well. As such, the whole existence of Klal Yisroel is l'maaleh min hatevah.

This probably explains the mysterious phenomenon of anti-Semitism which persists throughout all generations. A body naturally rejects foreign objects (and therefore when surgeons do an organ transplant they have to be concerned about the organ being rejected), and Klal Yisroel does not fit in to the natural system which makes up the rest of the world; Klal Yisroel was created as a separate yitzira which is l'maaleh min ha'teva. Thus we can understand quite well why all of the nations of the world, which are all part of teva, would naturally reject the "foreign body"

of Klal Yisroel which does not fit in with the natural scheme of things!

We ought to cherish and appreciate the responsibility of being the am hanivchar, i.e. serving as the ohr lagoyim -- the role model for all other nations. © 2014 Rabbi H. Shachter & TorahWeb.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (8:34-36), "Ashrei / Praiseworthy is the person who listens to me [i.e., the Torah], to hasten to my doors every day, to the doorposts of my entranceways. For one who finds me finds life and elicits favor from Hashem. But he who sins against me despoils his soul; all who hate me love death." Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (Spain; died 1263) explains: "Ashrei" refers to the highest form of praise that can be given. For this reason, King David opened the book of Tehilim with Ashrei. Likewise, the chapter in Tehilim known as the "eight-faceted praise" [because it repeats the aleph-bet eight times] begins with Ashrei. The word "Ashrei" is in the plural form because it can never be applied to a person who has only one good trait, only to someone who is well-rounded with good character traits.

R' Yonah continues: King Shlomo writes, "Ashrei is the person who listens to me," because one's willingness to hear what the Torah has to say is the source of all life [i.e., it is the basis for proper mitzvah observance and character improvement]. "Me" can mean not only the Torah in general, but the book of Mishlei (Proverbs) in particular. On the simplest level, the lessons in Mishlei are the key to a happy, successful life in this world, while on a deeper level, they bring a person to Olam Ha'ba.

King Shlomo continues: "All who hate me love death." R' Yonah explains: The goal of Torah study is to inherit life in this world and the next. This is a choice that man has, as the opening verses of our parashah tell us, "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing--that you listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today..." (Drushei U'perushei Rabbeinu Yonah Al Ha'Torah) © 2013 S. Katz and torah.org

