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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

Biblical Israel from the time of Joshua until the destruction of the Second Temple was a predominantly agricultural society. Accordingly, it was through agriculture that the Torah pursued its religious and social programme. It has three fundamental elements.

The first was the alleviation of poverty. For many reasons the Torah accepts the basic principles of what we now call a market economy. But though market economics is good at creating wealth it is less good at distributing it equitably. Thus the Torah's social legislation aimed, in the words of Henry George, "to lay the foundation of a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want should be unknown."

Hence the institutions that left parts of the harvest for the poor: leket, shikchah and peah, fallen ears of grain, the forgotten sheaf and the corners of the field. There was the produce of the seventh year, which belonged to no-one and everyone, and maaser ani, the tithe for the poor given in the third and sixth years of the seven year cycle. Shmittah and yovel, the seventh and fiftieth years with their release of debts, manumission of slaves and the return of ancestral property to its original owners, restored essential elements of the economy to their default position of fairness. So the first principle was: no one should be desperately poor.

The second, which included terumah and maaser rishon, the priestly portion and the first tithe, went to support, respectively, the priests and the Levites. These were a religious elite within the nation in biblical times whose role was to ensure that the service of G-d, especially in the Temple, continued at the heart of national life. They had other essential functions, among them education and the administration of justice, as teachers and judges.

The third was more personal and spiritual. There were laws such as the bringing of first-fruits to Jerusalem, and the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, as they marked seasons in the agricultural year, that had to do with driving home the lessons of gratitude and humility. They taught that the land belongs to G-d and we are merely His tenants and guests. The rain, the sun and the earth itself yield their produce only because of His blessing. Without such regular reminders, societies slowly but inexorably become materialistic and self-satisfied. Rulers and elites forget that their role is to serve the people, and instead they expect the people to serve them. That is how nations at the height of their success begin their decline, unwittingly laying the ground for their defeat.

All this makes one law in our parsha -- the law of the Second Tithe -- hard to understand. As we noted above, in the third and sixth year of the septennial cycle, this was given to the poor. However, in the first, second, fourth and fifth years, it was to be taken by the farmer to Jerusalem and eaten there in a state of purity: "You shall eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your G-d at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His Name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your G-d always." (Deut. 14:23)

If the farmer lived at a great distance from Jerusalem, he was allowed an alternative: "You may exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the Lord your G-d will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish." (ibid., 25-26)

The problem is obvious. The second tithe did not go to poor, or to the priests and Levites, so it was not part of the first or second principle. It may have been part of the third, to remind the farmer that the land belonged to G-d, but this too seems unlikely. There was no declaration, as happened in the case of first-fruits, and no specific religious service, as took place on the festivals. Other than being in Jerusalem, the institution of the second tithe seemingly had no cognitive or spiritual content. What then was the logic of the second tithe?

The sages, (Sifrei ad loc.) focussing on the phrase, "so that you may learn to revere the Lord your G-d" said that it was to encourage people to study. Staying for a while in Jerusalem while they consumed the tithe or the food bought with its monetary substitute, they would be influenced by the mood of the holy city, with its population engaged either in Divine service or sacred study. (See also Tosafot, Baba Batra 21a, s.v. "Ki MiTzion") This would have been much as happens today for synagogue groups that arrange study tours to Israel. (A more extended version of this interpretation ca n be found in the Sefer ha-Chinnukh, command 360.)

Maimonides, however, gives a completely

different explanation: "The second tithe was commanded to be spent on food in Jerusalem: in this way the owner was compelled to give part of it away as charity. As he was not able to use it otherwise than by way of eating and drinking, he must have easily been induced to give it gradually away. This rule brought multitudes together in one place, and strengthened the bond of love and brotherhood among the children of men." (The Guide for the Perplexed III:39)

For Maimonides, the second tithe served a social purpose. It strengthened civil society. It created bonds of connectedness and friendship among the people. It encouraged visitors to share the blessings of the harvest with others. Strangers would meet and become friends. There would be an atmosphere of camaraderie among the pilgrims. There would be a sense of shared citizenship, common belonging and collective identity. Indeed Maimonides says something similar about the festivals themselves: "The use of keeping festivals is plain. Man derives benefit from such assemblies: the emotions produced renew the attachment to religion; they lead to friendly and social intercourse among the people." (Ibid. IIII:46)

The atmosphere in Jerusalem, says Maimonides, would encourage public spiritedness. Food would always be plentiful, since the fruit of trees in their fourth year, the tithe of cattle, and the corn, wine and oil of the second tithe would all have been brought there. They could not be sold; they could not be kept for the next year; therefore much would be given away in charity, especially (as the Torah specifies) to "the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow."

Writing about America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville found that he had to coin a new word for the phenomenon he encountered there and saw as one of the dangers in a democratic society. The word was individualism. He defined it as "a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends," leaving "society at large to itself." (Democracy in America, Book II, ch. 2) Tocqueville believed that democracy encouraged individualism. As a result, people would leave the business of the common good entirely to the government, which would become ever more powerful, eventually threatening freedom itself.

It was a brilliant insight. Two recent examples illustrate the point. The first was charted by Robert Putnam, the great Harvard sociologist, in his study of Italian towns in the 1990s. (Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Nanetti. Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.) During the 1970s all Italian regions were given local government on equal terms, but over the next twenty years, some prospered, others stagnated; some had effective governance and economic growth, while others were mired in corruption and underachievement. The key difference, he found, was the extent to which the regions had an active and public-spirited citizenry.

The other is the experiment, known as the "free rider game," designed to test public spiritedness within a group. There is always a potential conflict between self interest and the common good. It is tempting to take advantage of public facilities without paying your fair share (for example, travelling on public transport without paying for a ticket: hence the term "free rider"). You then obtain the benefit without bearing a fair share of the costs. When this happens, trust is eroded and public spiritedness declines.

In the game, each of the participants is given $10 and invited to contribute to a common pot. The money in the pot is then multiplied, say, three times, and the amount is equally divided between the players. If each contributes $10, each will receive $30. However, if one player chooses not to contribute anything, then if there are six players, there will be $50 in the pot and $150 after multiplication. Each of the players will then receive $25, but one will now have $35: the money from the pot plus the $10 with which he started.

When played over several rounds, the other players soon notice that not everyone is contributing equally. The unfairness makes them all contribute less to the shared pot. The group suffers and no one gains. If, however, the other players are given the chance to punish the suspected cheat by paying a dollar to make him lose three dollars, they tend to do so. The free rider stops free-riding, and everyone benefits.

As I was writing this essay, the Greek economy was in a state of collapse. Years earlier, in 2008, an economist, Benedikt Herrmann, had tested people in different cities throughout the world to see whether there were geographical and cultural variations in the way people played the free rider game. He found that in places like Boston, Copenhagen, Bonn and Seoul, voluntary contributions to the common pot were high. They were much lower in Istanbul, Riyadh and Minsk, where the economy was less developed. But they were lowest of all in Athens, Greece. What is more, when players in Athens penalized the free riders, those penalized did not stop free-riding. Instead they took revenge by punishing their punishers. (Herrmann, B., C. Thoni, and S. Gachter. "Antisocial Punishment Across Societies." Science 319.5868 (2008): 1362-367.) Where public spiritedness is low, society fails to cohere and the economy fails to grow.

Hence the brilliance of Maimonides' insight that the second tithe existed to create social capital, meaning bonds of trust and reciprocal altruism among the population, which came about through sharing food with strangers in the holy precincts of Jerusalem. Loving G-d helps make us better citizens and more generous people, thus countering the individualism that

eventually makes democracies fail. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l © 2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"See, I am giving before you this day a blessing and a curse…" (Deuteronomy 11:26) So opens our Biblical portion, making reference to the covenant at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eybal which dramatically concludes the Book of Deuteronomy and precedes our entry into the land of Israel.

What I would like to analyze in this commentary is a curious and seemingly pedantic detail, a strange grammatical formulation which, when properly understood, will shed light not only upon the nature of this third and final Pentateuchal covenant but also upon a fundamental philosophy of our religious nationality.

Our verse begins with a singular verb which addresses an individual, "re'eh – see," but then continues with a plural pronoun, "lifnehem – [giving] before you," addressing a multitude. This grammatical switch in number – from singular to plural – is especially worthy of note, because when we do find such Biblical changes they take place in the opposite direction, from plural to singular.

In the Biblical portion of the Decalogue, for example, God's introduction addresses in plural form the multitude of Israelites (Exodus 18: 4 ff : "You have seen – re'etem – what I have done to Egypt, and I lifted you – et'hem – upon eagles' wings…"), but then switches to the singular form in the ten commandments themselves (Exodus 20:1 ff: "I am the Lord your God – E-lohekha, singular – whom I took you – hotzeitikha, singular – from the land of Egypt…, You shall not murder, lo tirzah, singular").

Nahmanides explains the switch from plural to singular, and catalogues many other instances when such a transition in number appears, as the desire of God to make certain that His words are being heard not only as a command to the general masses but also as a personal injunction to each and every individual! (Ramban, on Genesis 18:3 s.v. Al na).

In effect, God is thereby appearing as a Hassidic Rebbe rather than as a Congregational Rabbi, in accordance with the common folk understanding of the distinction between the two. When a congregational Rabbi speaks, every individual believes that he is addressing the person next to him; when a Hassidic Rebbe speaks, every person listening knows and feels that he is addressing him personally.

But if this is the case, how can we understand our opening verse, in which God begins with the singular and continues with the plural? I believe that this unusual grammatical phenomenon speaks to the very definition of this third covenant, known as the covenant of arevut, or mutual responsibility (B.T. Sotah 33 b). The Israelites, divided by the tribes in two groups of six, stand together to receive God's blessings on Mt. Gerizim and God's curses on Mt. Eyval, poised before Shekhem and ready to enter the Promised Land.

Our Biblical portion provides the exact location: "Are they not beyond the Jordan, … in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the Aravah, over against Gilgal, beside the oak tree of Moreh?" (Deut. 11:30). And the term aravah, or plains, is taken by the sages of the Talmud as a double entendre (play on words); the Hebrew arev also meaning co-singer, the individual who takes financial responsibility if a borrower reneges on the payment of his debt.

This is the covenant which insists that every Israelite must see himself as part of a whole, as a member of a nation which sees itself as a united organism whose separate individuals feel inextricably and indelibly bound to each other in fate, destiny and responsibility. Hence God begins with the singular and continues into the plural in order to impress upon the individual Israelite that he must in some way merge with the multitude that he must assume responsibility for the entire Jewish people, that "every Israelite is a co-signer, responsible for every other Israelite."

This is what I believe to be the higher meaning of a shomer Torah u'Mitzvot, literally a guardian over the Torah and tradition. It is not sufficient to merely study Torah and to perform the commandments; just as a guardian takes responsibility for the objects in his possession, so must each of us – everyone in his/her own way – take responsibility for the dissemination of Torah and the establishment of proper Torah institutions in his/her community, in his/her generation.

It is recorded that the famed Rav Meir Shapiro of Lublin (early 20th century) was forced into a dispute with a Cardinal concerning the quality of our Jewish tradition. "The Talmud is blatantly anti-Christian," argued the Cardinal. "Does it not state that 'only Israelites are called adam (Hebrew for human beings), whereas Gentiles are not called adam,' and therefore we Gentiles are not considered by you to be human beings?!"

The rabbi explained that there are four synonyms for "human being" in the Hebrew language: gever, ish, enosh and adam. The first three of these nouns have both a singular and a plural: gevarim, ishim, aneshim. Only adam has just one form, both singular and plural, humanity – a compound noun, including everyone together as a single organism. If a Jew is suffering in an Islamic fundamentalist country, or if Israel seems to be in danger, Jews worldwide demonstrate and flock to their homeland. This is a unique Jewish quality, built into our third covenant. In the case of the Jewish nation, the singular merges into the plural, the individual Jew is an inextricable part of

his people. *© 2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is a shift in mood in the book of Dvarim beginning with this week's parsha. It no longer is a review of the events of the desert or of the Exodus from Egypt. Moshe no longer will concentrate on the faults and failures of the generation that left Egypt – a generation that saw their high hopes dashed by their stubbornness and a lack of faith. The past is the past and it cannot be changed. God, so to speak, will not turn the film back again for some sort of replay.

The direction of Moshe is now the future, the entry into the Land of Israel and the establishment of a normative Jewish society in that land. Moshe warns the Jewish people that the lessons of the past should not be forgotten or ignored. Their consequences are likely to be repeated if the Jewish people will backslide again.

Life and death, good and evil, success and failure – these are the choices that lie before the Jewish people. And Moshe advises us to choose wisely, to treasure life and do good and honor tradition and Torah. A positive future always depends upon making wiser choices than were made in the past.

The word re'ah which means "see" is the key word in the parsha. This entails a vision for the future and an understanding as to its new demands and changing circumstances. Moshe turns the attention of the Jewish people to its future in the Land of Israel and to new commandments not mentioned before in the Torah. It appears that these new commandments are brought to the fore to help the Jewish people be successful in their new environment.

The holy days of the Jewish calendar appear in detail in this week's parsha. In the Land of Israel these holy days had a physical and agricultural content as well as their inherent spiritual nature. In the long and dark Jewish exile, the physical and agricultural aspects of the holidays were lost but the spiritual and holy qualities of those days nevertheless sustained the Jewish people.

The early pioneers who returned to the Land of Israel, secularized and Marxist to the hilt but nonetheless Jewish, attempted to reinsert the physical and agricultural qualities of the holidays of the year and at the same time to discard completely the spiritual and Torah qualities. Unfortunately, that experiment has proved to be a dismal failure.

The holidays are bereft of any spiritual content and of any agricultural or national meaning. Moshe would caution us to begin again, to include life, goodness, and tradition into the holy days so that they would have true meaning and impact – and through them to revive our attachment to the holy land and its bountiful produce.

I think that the revival of the true spirit of the holidays is one of the great challenges that face us in our land today. In its own way, it is a key to solving many of the difficulties that bedevil us currently. Moshe bids us to look clearly at all these matters and to decide wisely. *© 2022 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

God's spoken word goes beyond the Torah. Rashi, quoting the Sifrei, makes this point when analyzing the sentence "and you shall slaughter as I've commanded you" (Deuteronomy 12:21).

One would expect clear, specific details of how to slaughter – after all, God says, "as I've commanded you." Yet the technicalities exist nowhere in the Torah. It follows, then, that the details were spoken by God although they are not written in the Torah text (Chullin 28a).

This is not the only place where this phenomenon occurs. The Torah, for example, states, "Observe the Sabbath day" (5:12). Yet the specifics of how to observe the Shabbat are not found in the Torah (Shabbat 97b). These absences point to a divine aspect of the Torah that was given alongside the written text.

Additionally, not only were many of God's words transmitted orally, but also the words of our sages were designated to be passed through the oral tradition. One wonders why it was transmitted orally: why wasn't it all written down from the very beginning? Several answers have been suggested.

Ironically, transmission of law through the generations is more precise, more reliable through the oral legacy. Once written – especially in ancient times when very few copies of books existed – it was easy for one scribe to tinker with texts and change them, whether purposefully or not.

Another possibility: had everything been written down, it would have sent the message that the law was closed and that the process of interpretation halted. The oral transmission sent the message that rabbis in each generation, basing themselves on the Torah and prior rabbinic rulings, could continue to evaluate and contribute new teachings.

One last thought. Had everything been written down, a rebbe (a teacher of Torah) would have been unnecessary – after all, it's all in the book. The oral transmission made the rebbe, a living person who could teach the law, necessary. Ultimately, such personalities enable Torah to be passed down through the generations.

In time, however, the Jewish community was no longer capable of remembering the oral dictates,

and so we were left with no choice but to commit the Oral Law to writing.

The challenge, even as we study the Oral Law from a written text, is to recall the law with precision, to remember that it is ongoing, and to recognize that its study requires a knowledgeable, soulful rebbe, a living role model, to teach it.

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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.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Path to Charity

Moshe continued his final instructions to the B'nei Yisrael with a series of mussar statements and laws that were more relevant now that the Jews were about to reenter their land. He reminded the people that they must destroy all forms of idol worship that were used by other nations. These nations' altars were to be destroyed, and the Jewish people would bring their sacrifices only to the place where Hashem's altar was built. These sacrifices included obligatory, elevated-offerings, meal offerings, tithes, donated offerings and vows. Everything that was given was also shared with the Levi'im because they had no real possessions of their own, since they spent their time serving Hashem in the Temple.

At this point the focus of the Torah begins to shift. According to the Akedat Yitzchak, R' Isaac Arama, man is reluctant to part with his possessions, so man must become gradually accustomed to this concept. The introduction to the concept of Tzedakah involved ma'aser, the tithe of foods which were grown for consumption. Ma'aser was a percentage of the crop which was given by the owner each year. The ma'aser that was discussed here is the ma'aser sheini, the second tithe. The ma'aser sheini was not a donation but a restriction on the use of man's property. Each landowner was to take his ma'aser sheini to Jerusalem and to consume it in the vicinity of the Temple. If one did not wish to transport his produce there, he could redeem the ma'aser sheini for money and spend the money in Jerusalem on food to be eaten there.

The next level of control was ma'aser ani, or the tithe for the poor man. Every third and sixth year in the seven-year cycle, the ma'aser was set aside for the poor. This tithe was given to the Levi'im, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, all who did not have land on which to grow their own crops. Here, the ma'aser was given by the landowner and was not to be used by him for his own benefit. Once man had become accustomed to a restriction on his wealth, he could now comprehend a restriction in which he no longer maintained any use of that portion of wealth and had to share it with others. This prepared him for the next stage in his development.

If a man needed a loan in order to maintain his independence, we are required to lend him that money. Here it would appear that man only loses possession of his wealth for a short time until the ani can repay his debt. This does not seem to be Tzedakah, but a business deal. But there is a complication which could arise with the seventh year of every cycle, which is

known as the sh'mittah year. The Sh'mittah Year is a time when the fields are left fallow. But Sh'mittah Year is also a year in which all loans are to be forgiven. Man is cautioned to continue to lend money, even if he might not be repaid. People find it difficult to lend money just before Sh'mittah, yet the Torah requires man to do so.

The Torah continues with an amazing pasuk, "for the needy will never cease out of this world, therefore I command you saying open wide your hand to the poor and to the needy in your land." It appears that Hashem is limited and that He cannot eradicate poverty. Yet we know this is not the case. It must mean, instead, that there is a reason for poverty and need to always be present. With this simple truth, we can begin to understand the Jewish concept of Tzedakah.

It is Hashem's plan for the world that there will always be wealthy and poor. It follows that there must be a connection between these two groups which must be formed for the betterment of society. Hashem has granted people money so that they will learn from that wealth and comprehend their responsibilities. First Hashem demonstrates that money is not totally in one's control. Ma'aser Sheini indicates that Hashem maintains mastery over our money. The second lesson comes from ma'aser ani. Our definition of ani is expanded to include the Levi'im, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, all people who do not have land because of their circumstances. This is the lesson of community responsibility. Even though this ma'aser only occurs twice during the seven-year cycle, there are other regulations within Jewish law which require us to feed the poor and needy from every field (leket, shichicha, and pe'ah) each year. The third lesson is a lesson of true Tzedakah. As an individual and as a community, we must enable all people to maintain their independence for their own feeling of self-worth. We must lend unselfishly and with an open hand. But we must also be aware that the struggle to pull oneself out of poverty may prove to be even greater than a person may anticipate. Whether a person is poor because of circumstances or poor judgment, he may not be able to achieve a change from that fate, even with a loan. But if someone wishes to make the attempt, we must be there to assist him financially. It is for that reason that Hashem has granted us our money in the first place. It is only when we demonstrate that we are willing to assist Hashem in helping our fellowman without insisting that we maintain our wealth while doing so, that Hashem continues to grant us our wealth.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin poses an interesting question. The wealthy man could easily turn to Hashem and ask, "Does not Hashem do what is best? Let Him bless the poor man in all his endeavors so that he will no longer need." Hashem's answer is our pasuk, "for the needy will never cease out of this world, therefore I command you saying open wide your hand to the poor and to the needy in your land." If the wealthy man does not do as Hashem has instructed, He will call both the wealthy man and the poor man together and reassign their fates. Hashem has created a structure in the land which enables Man to perform his tasks on earth to improve the world and himself at the same time. It is for that reason alone that Hashem has left some people wealthy and others destitute.

May we always be aware of our role in Hashem's plan for the world. We are fortunate to live in a time when most of us are blessed with enough food and shelter for our needs. We live in luxury compared to many previous generations. Yet there are still those among us who are in need. May we remember our responsibility to Hashem and to them with Tzedakah.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"The blessing, that you will listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d… and the curse, if you will not listen..." (Devarim 11:26-27) Moshe tells us in this Parsha that he is placing before us "a blessing and a curse." The choice is ours. If we choose to listen to the commandments of Hashem we will find blessing, and if we don't, we will find the curse. Then, Moshe says that the blessing will be placed on Mount Grizim, and the curse on Mount Eival.

As we know, the blessings and curses placed on these mountains were essentially a list of commandments which one who followed was blessed, and one who didn't was cursed. For example, "Cursed is the man who moves a boundary line to take another's property," and its parallel, "Blessed is the man who does NOT move a boundary line to take another's property." More than this, not much is explained in terms of what the blessing or curse will be for one who listens or doesn't.

Ostensibly, it is possible to say that blessing and curse in this context do not refer to any causative relationships. Rather, they refer to a state of mind; of contentment. The blessing is, "asher tishme'u," that you will listen. Hearing in Judaism is linked to learning, understanding, and gaining insight. The usage here means not simply to listen and follow, but to pay attention, learn, and appreciate.

The word "asher, that" connotes happiness, as Rashi quotes in Vayikra (4:22), on the posuk, "asher Nasi yecheteh, when a leader sins." Chazal say, "Ashrei – happy and fortunate – is the generation whose leader takes steps to rectify his sins." Taken together, this phrase "asher tishme'u" means that you hearkened to what was being said and were happy about it. Therein lies the bracha.

One who understands that the Torah is Hashem's guidebook for life, directing us on how best

to enjoy it and prepare for the next world, will constantly find goodness and joy in existence. What a blessing to have!

However, one who doesn't grasp what is being said; who believes the Torah is intended to constrain us and limit our pleasure, will certainly find life as a Jew to be difficult and cursed.

Moshe was telling us, "I'm giving you the Torah. It remains unchanged regardless of whether you keep it or not, regardless of whether you enjoy it or not. What has to change is your attitude. If you recognize it for what it is, an aid to life, a source of happiness and serenity, then you will see it as a blessing. If you choose to look at it as a burden, something external to yourself, then, unfortunately, it will seem to be a curse. The choice is yours." And it is a choice we can make every single moment; do we want to be happy?

When Hashem told Moshe to go to Egypt and redeem the Jews, Moshe was unsure he was the right fit. He argued, "But they won't believe me and will say You didn't appear to me." Hashem responded by asking, "MaZeh b'yadcha? What is in your hand?" Moshe replied, "Mateh, a stick." Hashem commanded him to cast it down, and it became a snake.

R' Michel Twerski, Hornosteipler Rebbe of Milwaukee, explains what Hashem was teaching Moshe. The question "What is in your hand?" was actually Hashem asking Moshe, "Is anything really in your control [that you legitimize refusing this mission]?"

To that, Moshe responded, "Mateh," from the language of turning. Moshe acknowledged that the only thing he could control was how he turned, i.e., his reaction, to what Hashem sent his way. So, too, Moshe transmitted this message to us, that whatever we get from Hashem, good or bad, all depends on how we view it. © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI E. KOENIGSBERG

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"Acharei Hashem Elokeichem teilei'chu -- after Hashem, your G-d, you shall follow; you shall fear Him, observe His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him and cleave to Him. (Re'eh 13:5)" The word "after" in the Torah can be written either as achar or acharei. Chazal (Bereishis Rabba, Lech Lecha 15:1) explain that achar implies a close proximity in time or place, while acharei denotes a sense of distance. Rashi alludes to this earlier in Parshas Re'eh. The posuk says that the blessing should be delivered on Har Gerizim and the curse on Har Eival. "Are they not on the other side of the Jordan, far, in the direction of the sunset -- acharei derech mevo ha'shemesh? (11:30)" Rashi explains that since the two mountains are far to the west of the Jordan, the Torah uses the word acharei to describe their location.

But if acharei always implies a sense of distance, then why does the Torah use that term when giving the command to follow Hashem? The posuk should have said, "Achar Hashem Elokeichem teileichu," which would imply that one should follow closely after Hashem?

The Chofetz Chaim answers that the word acharei in this context is meant to highlight that even one who feels distant from Hashem should never give up hope. Rather, he should try as best as he can to reconnect with and draw closer to Hashem. The Chofetz Chaim adds that this is the deeper meaning of the words in the tefillah of Mussaf on Rosh Hashana, "Fortunate is the man who does not forget you, the human being who strengthens himself in You." Praiseworthy is the individual who does not forget Hashem despite his challenges, but rather invests effort to draw closer to Hashem.

The navi Yirmiyahu expresses the pain of Klal Yisrael in exile who feel distant from the Shechina. "Meirachok Hashem nirah li -- from a distance Hashem appeared to me. (31:2)" Radak understands that Klal Yisrael is responding to Hashem's statement in the previous posuk, "Matza chein bamidbar -- they found favor in my eyes in the wilderness." Klal Yisrael replies that indeed they enjoyed a closeness to Hashem in the midbar, but that was long ago -- meirachok. Now they are in exile and Hashem is hidden from them. Hashem answers, "V'ahavas olam ahavtich -- I have always loved you with an eternal love." Hashem proclaims that His love for Klal Yisrael is everlasting. It has not diminished despite their sins, and He anxiously awaits their desire to draw closer to Him.

The potential to reconnect with Hakadosh Boruch Hu exists not only on a national level, but on a personal level as well. "Shalom shalom larachok v'lakarov -- peace, peace for the distant and for the close. (Yeshaya 57:19)" Hashem calls out not only to the one who is close, but also to the one who is far away. In truth, anyone who has sinned is distant from Hashem. The Mabit (Beis Elokim, Ch. 1) defines the process of teshuva as "drawing close to Hashem from the distance of sin." But one who is entrenched in a path of wrongdoing naturally feels so estranged from the Ribbono shel Olam in his actions and attitudes, that he cannot see any way forward. "Why even bother trying to do teshuva?" he might ask himself. "Hashem doesn't want me anyway." It is precisely to such a person that Hashem calls out. Hashem never gives up on any individual, no matter how far he has strayed. "For You do not wish the death of one deserving of death...You await him; if he repents You will accept him immediately. (Mussaf of Yom Kippur)" This is the power of teshuva -- to be able to move past prior indiscretions and forge a new path, to establish a new relationship with Hakadosh Boruch Hu.

But how is it humanly possible to draw close to Hashem when one feels so distant? The answer is Hashem promises to help. The Torah describes the

process of teshuva that will take place when Klal Yisrael is in exile. "It will be when all of these things (trials and tribulations) come upon you...then you will take it to your heart...and you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice...Then Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your captivity...and He will gather you in...(Even) if your dispersed will be at the ends of heaven, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you. (Nitzavim 30:1-4)" Hashem assures Klal Yisrael that he will never abandon them. No matter how alienated they are from Him -- physically or spiritually -- He will gather them in and redeem them.

There is always hope to reconnect and strengthen our bond with Hakadosh Boruch Hu. But there is one prerequisite -- that "you will take it to your heart." As a nation and as individuals, we must take the first step. The Midrash (Eicha Rabba 5:21) describes how Klal Yisrael says to Hakadosh Boruch Hu, "It (our teshuva) is up to you, 'Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we shall return.' (Eicha 5:21)" But Hashem responds, "No, it is up to you, 'Return to me and I will return to you.' (Malachi 3:7)" Hashem promises that He will return to us, but only if we begin the process and try to draw closer to Him.

During the month of Elul and the yamim noraim, it is somewhat easier to connect with Hashem. His Presence is more perceptible. He makes Himself more accessible to those who seek Him (Rosh Hashana 18a). The question is, are we ready to take the first step?

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Our Parashah opens: "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse." Rashi z"l explains that the blessing and the curse refer to the blessing and the curse that would be given on Har Gerizim and Har Eval, respectively, after Bnei Yisrael would enter Eretz Yisrael, as described in our Parashah and later in Parashat Ki Tavo. The Torah instructs that six tribes stand on Har Gerizim and the other six tribes stand on Har Eval when the blessings and the curses are recited.

R' Pinchas ben Pilta z"l (rabbi of Wlodowa, Poland; died 1663) asks: Why does the opening verse change from singular to plural--"See (singular), I present before you (plural) today a blessing and a curse"? Also, why did Rashi point out that the blessing and curse referred to here are those delivered at Har Gerizim and Har Eval?

R' Pinchas explains: The Gemara (Kiddushin 40b) teaches that a person should always view the world as exactly half meritorious and half "guilty," such that his next act will determine the fate of the world. How can one person have such an impact? Because, R' Pinchas explains, "Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh B'Zeh" / "All Jews are responsible for one another." [This is why, for example, one person can recite Kiddush for another.] When did this inter-relationship come into being? Only, say our Sages, once Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Gerizim and Har Eval.

In this light, R' Pinchas concludes, our verse can be understood as follows: Each of you should see, and take responsibility for, the blessing and the curse that I am placing before all of you. When? Rashi answers: Once you stand at Har Gerizim and Har Eval. Perhaps, R' Pinchas adds, the purpose of placing six tribes on each mountain was to illustrate the idea that the world is half meritorious and half guilty, such that each person can tip the balance. (Berit Shalom)

"Safeguard and listen to all these words that I command you, in order that it be well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the eyes of Hashem, your Elokim." (12:28)

Rashi z"l writes: "'What is good' refers to that which is proper in the eyes of Hashem. 'What is... right' refers to that which is proper in the eyes of men."

R' Pinchas Naftali Schwartz z"l (1828-1885; Khust, Hungary) asks: How can Rashi write that "What is right" refers to an action that is proper in the eyes of men, when the verse says expressly, "What is good and right in the eyes of Hashem"? He explains:

The Gemara (Chagigah 15b) relates: The sage Rabbah bar Shelah encountered Eliyahu Hanavi and asked him what Hashem was doing at that moment. Eliyahu answered, "He is repeating teachings in the names of all of the sages except for Rabbi Meir." "Why not Rabbi Meir?" Rabbah bar Shelah asked, and Eliyahu responded that it was because Rabbi Meir studied Torah under a heretic. "Nevertheless," Rabbah bar Shelah protested, "Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate; he ate the seeds and threw away the peel" [i.e., he took the good teachings that the heretic offered and disregarded anything inappropriate]. Eliyahu said, "Now Hashem is saying, 'Meir, my son, says..."

Commentaries ask: Surely Hashem knew that Rabbi Meir took only good from his teacher. Why did He wait for Rabbah bar Shelah to say so? They answer: A person must be "clean" not only in the eyes of Hashem, but also in the eyes of men. Otherwise, even Hashem is not pleased with him.

That, writes R' Schwartz, is what Rashi is teaching as well. In order to be "good and right in the eyes of Hashem" you must not only be proper in the eyes of Hashem, but also proper in the eyes of men. (Nefesh Tovah)