

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In the last days of his life Moses renews the covenant between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of the covenant -- how it came about, what its terms and conditions are, why it is the core of Israel's identity as an am kadosh, a holy people, and so on. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a kind of national referendum as it were.

Moses, however, is careful not to limit his words to those who are actually present. About to die, he wants to ensure that no future generation can say, "Moses made a covenant with our ancestors but not with us. We didn't give our consent. We are not bound." To preclude this he says these words: "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today." (Deut. 29:13-14)

As the commentators point out, the phrase "whoever is not here" cannot refer to Israelites alive at the time who happened to be somewhere else. That cannot be since the entire nation was assembled there. It can only mean "generations not yet born." The covenant bound all Jews from that day to this. As the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai*, foresworn from Sinai (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a). By agreeing to be God's people, subject to God's laws, our ancestors obligated us.

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism. Converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands and responsible for our actions, at the age of twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat* or *bar mitzvah* is not a "confirmation." It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with... whoever is not here with us today," meaning all future generations including us.

But how can this be so? Surely a fundamental principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation without consent. How can we be bound by an agreement to which we were not parties? How can we be subject to a covenant on the basis of a decision taken long ago and far away by our distant ancestors?

The sages, after all, raised a similar question about the wilderness generation in the days of Moses who were actually there and did give their assent. The Talmud suggests that they were not entirely free to say No. "The Holy One blessed be He suspended the mountain over them like a barrel and said: If you say Yes, all will be well, but if you say No, this will be your burial-place" (Shabbat 88b). On this, R. Acha bar Yaakov said: "This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the covenant." The Talmud replies that even though the agreement may not have been entirely free at the time, Jews asserted their consent voluntarily in the days of Ahasuerus, as suggested by the book of Esther.

This is not the place to discuss this particular passage, but the essential point is clear. The sages believed with great force that an agreement must be free to be binding. Yet we did not agree to be Jews. We were, most of us, born Jews. We were not there in Moses' day when the agreement was made. We did not yet exist. How then can we be bound by the covenant?

This is not a small question. It is the question on which all others turn. How can Jewish identity be passed on from parent to child? If Jewish identity were merely racial or ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents -- most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition, it is a set of religious obligations. There is a halakhic principle, *zakhin le-adam shelo be-fanav*: "You can confer a benefit on someone else without their knowledge or consent." And though it is doubtless a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Had we not been Jewish, we could have worked on Shabbat, eaten non-kosher food, and so on. You can confer a benefit, but not a liability, on someone without their consent.

In short, this is the question of questions of Jewish identity. How can we be bound by Jewish law, without our choice, merely because our ancestors agreed on our behalf?

In my book *Radical Then, Radical Now* (published in America as *A Letter in the Scroll*) I pointed out how fascinating it is to trace exactly when and where this question was asked. Despite the fact that everything else depends on it, it was not asked often. For the most part, Jews did not ask the question, "Why be Jewish?" The answer was obvious. My parents are

Jewish. My grandparents were Jewish. So I am Jewish. Identity is something most people in most ages take for granted.

It did, however, become an issue during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel says, "What is in your mind shall never happen -- the thought, 'Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.'" (Ez. 20:32). This is the first reference to Jews actively seeking to abandon their identity.

It happened again in rabbinic times. We know that in the second century BCE there were Jews who Hellenised, seeking to become Greek rather than Jewish. There were others who, under Roman rule, sought to become Roman. Some even underwent an operation known as epispasm to reverse the effects of circumcision (in Hebrew they were known as meshukhim) to hide the fact that they were Jews. (This is what R. Elazar of Modiin means when he refers to one who "nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham", Avot 3:15.)

The third time was in Spain in the fifteenth century. That is where we find two Bible commentators, R. Isaac Arama and R. Isaac Abarbanel, raising precisely the question we have raised about how the covenant can bind Jews today. The reason they ask it while earlier commentators did not was that in their time -- between 1391 and 1492 -- there was immense pressure on Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity, and as many as a third may have done so (they were known in Hebrew as the anusim, in Spanish as the conversos, and derogatively as marranos, "swine"). The question "Why stay Jewish?" was real.

The answers given were different at different times. Ezekiel's answer was blunt: "As I live, declares the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you." In other words, Jews might try to escape their destiny but they will fail. Even against their will they would be known as Jews. That, tragically, is what happened during the two great ages of assimilation, fifteenth century Spain and nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. In both cases, racial antisemitism persisted, and Jews continued to be persecuted.

The sages answered the question mystically. They said, even the souls of Jews not yet born were present at Sinai and ratified the covenant (Exodus Rabbah 28:6). Every Jew, in other words, did give his or her consent in the days of Moses even though they had not yet been born. Demystifying this, perhaps the sages meant that in his or her innermost heart even the most assimilated Jew knew that he or she was still a Jew. That seems to have been the case with figures like Heinrich Heine and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived as Christians but often wrote and thought as Jews.

The fifteenth century Spanish commentators

found this answer problematic. As Arama said, we are each of us both body and soul. How then is it sufficient to say that our soul was present at Sinai? How can the soul obligate the body? Of course the soul agrees to the covenant. Spiritually, to be a Jew is a privilege, and you can confer a privilege on someone without their consent. But for the body, the covenant is a burden. It involves all sorts of restrictions on physical pleasures. Therefore if the souls of future generations were present but not their bodies, this would not constitute consent.

Radical Then, Radical Now is my answer to this question. But perhaps there is a simpler one. Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is even possible for a monarch to abdicate. But no one chooses to be heir to a throne. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God himself said, "My child, my firstborn, Israel" (Ex. 4:22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It may be both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to think that the only significant things about us are those we choose. For the truth is some of the most important facts about us, we did not choose. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are no longer here, and the question for all of us is: will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory the words of Moses continue to resonate. "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with... whoever is not here with us today." We are part of that story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

One of the shortest and smallest prashiyot of the Torah is this week's parsha of Nitzavim. Nevertheless the parsha is one of the most important in terms of eternal messages to the people of Israel.

In it is the final oration and words of Moshe to

his people after more than forty years of leadership. These words are not only meant to be heard by the actual listeners at that time but by all later generations of Jews as well.

Moshe reminds all that there is an eternal covenant between God and Israel. The Lord will not allow the Jewish people to wriggle out of that commitment. Many strange things will happen to the people of Israel over its many centuries of existence. There will be events that are beyond human understanding or comprehension.

God's mind and actions, so to speak, remain inscrutable and beyond our judgment, let alone our rationalism. Moshe warns us that "the hidden things are the matter of the Lord but what is clear and revealed to us is that we are to remain faithful to this covenant [of Sinai and of Moshe.]"

No matter how the Jewish people twist and turn to avoid their end of the covenant, they are always ensnared by its consequences and results. Moshe warns them that eventually the price for their abandonment of the covenant would be exacted from the Jewish people.

He cautions them not to be too clever regarding the matter. Times change, technology improves and there are new discoveries in God's world but the covenant of God with Israel remains as it was.

Understanding and accepting this truth is the only way to deal with Jewish history and with all of the issues of Jewish life - past, present and future.

The word "nitzavim" itself is important in conveying the above message to us in clarity and perspective. The word means not only present and accounted for but it also means erect and formidable.

Moshe fears that the Jewish people will somehow feel unworthy and not strong enough for the rigors of the covenant. He reminds them of their true strength and capabilities. Moshe knows that a lack of self-confidence will automatically defeat the intent and goal of the covenant.

If someone says that: "I cannot do it," then that certainly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Moshe reminds the Jewish people that they are "nitzavim" – strong, capable, resilient and can stand up to all crises and problems. Moshe appeals to their self-image and inner strength.

This attitude is certainly necessary and correct in this period of time before the High Holy days. One cannot appeal to God so to speak on the basis of personal incompetence and weakness of will and vision. It is like requesting further cash flow from lenders into an obviously failing venture.

When we pass before our Creator, with the Days of Judgment just ahead, we should do so with bent backs and strong hearts. We can and should say "Continue to invest in me and my family and generations. We will not desert the covenant nor shall

we fail You." © 2025 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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 SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You are all standing before God your Lord – the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your bailiffs, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water. [The purpose is that] you should enter into a covenant with God, and into His oath, that He is making with you today." (Deuteronomy 29:9–11) We read a bit further on, in the book of Joshua (8:33–34), "And all of Israel and its elders, its heads of tribes and its judges.... Priests and Levites, half facing Mount Gerizim and half facing Mount Eyal... Joshua read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse." Why must Moses make a covenant with the nations "today," in the plains of the Moab, so similar to the Covenant which will soon be made with Joshua on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eyal?

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

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

What initially strikes us about the Third Covenant – and the manner in which it clearly differs from its predecessors – is its democratic element. Every single Israelite is summoned and included, from the chairman of the board to the lowly water carrier: "the heads of your tribes... your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water" (Deut.

29:9–10).

In terms of the ancient world, what could possibly be more all-inclusive and democratic?

This town-hall meeting is in sharp contrast to the Sinai covenant, as recorded in Parshat Mishpatim: “All of you must bow down at a distance. Only Moses shall then approach God. The others may not come close, and the people may not go up with him” (Ex. 24:1–2). The extraordinary demonstration of God’s transcendent presence upon Mount Sinai necessitated warnings and boundaries. The Revelation was clearly aimed for the entire nation, but God spoke to Moses in a special and unique way; the rest of the nation was warned to keep its distance from the frenzied fire of faith, which has the capacity to consume as well as to construct. Hence it was Moses who received the bulk of the Revelation, and he served as the intermediary to convey the divine will to the nation (Deut. 5:4, 20–25).

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

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

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

Years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 29, 1947, an earlier plan was offered which would have given the aspiring state a very meager parcel of land. David Ben Gurion, the chairman of the Histadrut HaTzionit, was unsure as to whether or not to accept the offer. He greatly respected Yitzhak Tabenkin, a leading Labor Zionist of that period, and so

he uncharacteristically agreed to abide by Tabenkin’s decision. Tabenkin asked for another twenty-four hours, insisting that he must first seek counsel with two individuals. The next day, he advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. “I accept your decision,” said the modern-day Lion of Judah, “but just tell me by whom you were advised?” “I had to ask two very important individuals,” said Tabenkin, “my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet born.” Yitzhak Tabenkin fully understood the significance of the Covenant of Arvot Moab, the Third Covenant. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Devarim: Moses Bequeaths Legacy, History and Covenant, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinDevarim. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Crossing the Line

Parashat Nitzavim begins with a gathering of the people before Hashem to establish a renewed covenant. The people ranged from the heads (leaders) to the “hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water.” The promise of this covenant extended even to future generations who were not yet present, standing before Hashem. The covenant speaks also of the people as witnesses to the abominations of the other nations, especially the abomination of their idol worshipping, and the Torah cautions those who will be drawn to these idols.

The Torah states, “Perhaps there is among you a man or a woman, or a family or a tribe, whose heart turns away from being with Hashem, our Elokim, to go and serve the gods of those nations; perhaps there is among you a root growing gall and horehound. And it will be that when he hears the words of this oath, he will bless himself in his heart, saying, ‘I will have peace, though I go as my heart sees fit’ – thereby adding the drunk with the thirsty. Hashem will not be willing to forgive him, for then Hashem’s anger and His wrath will smoke against that man, and the entire imprecation written in this Book will come down upon him, and Hashem will erase his name from under the Heavens, Hashem will set him aside for evil from among all the tribes of Yisrael, like all the imprecations of the covenant that is written in this Book of the Torah.”

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why here the Torah speaks of “a man or a woman” when most laws are spoken of as “a man” sinning even when the Torah wishes to include a woman. HaRav Sorotzkin quotes Yirmiyahu (44) that women have a greater spiritual connection to the Divine as was evidenced by their lighting incense while they were in exile. Women were also excluded from the punishment of the spies in that

none of the women over twenty died. HaRav Sorotzkin qualifies that statement by saying that they did not die because they had not received a warning, and a death penalty cannot be inflicted without a proper warning.

The Kli Yakar explains that this entire section is not talking about someone who actually worships idols but is thinking seriously about it. That is why the Torah speaks of a person's heart turning away from Hashem and a person blessing himself in his heart. The heart is thought of as we think of the mind today. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the active worshipping of idols was not taking place, or it would have been obvious. Instead, he says, "Even today there could be an individual or a family or tribal circle amongst you whose mind already today turns away from Hashem and inclines toward heathenism, or such a misleading thought might not yet have been definitely formed, but is today just a shresh, a root, just a beginning out of which only later on, perhaps only in the descendants, bitter fruit might grow." The Ohr HaChaim supports this view from the phrase "poreh rosh v'la'ana, growing gall and horehound." At the moment, the thought is only in one's mind, a root, but if not stopped, it will grow and become gall and horehound. The Ohr HaChaim continues by emphasizing that any time a person plants in his own mind (the root) that "throwing off the yoke of heaven" might be a desirable option for him, it can easily grow to become gall and horehound." HaRav Hirsch translates this as "a root which will bear as fruit a poisonous herb and wormwood."

HaAmek Davar explains that this entire section is not so much about worshipping idols as it is about wanting to rid oneself of the "yoke of heaven." Man wishes to be free, both free from Hashem and free from idol-worship. The reason why idol-worship is preferred is because idol-worship does not carry with it any yoke. HaRav Sorotzkin clarifies that "I go as my heart sees fit" indicates that this person is not drawn to worship idols in place of Hashem, believing that these idols are more powerful than Hashem, but instead that he wishes to be free from all responsibility to Hashem. What HaRav Sorotzkin adds is from the word "hayom, today." The one who rebels from Hashem by deciding in his heart "today" to turn away from Hashem and "to go and serve the gods of those nations," will be led "tomorrow" to worship idols, not just rebel against Hashem's Laws and restrictions. The yeitzer hara, the evil inclination, will not only lead one to worship idols but to encourage others to join his rebellion.

The Torah states, "thereby adding the drunk with the thirsty." The Ramban explains the word "rava" to mean satiated, not drunk. He explains that one who is satiated may have given in to temptation, but now is satiated, or so he may think. The yeitzer hara will cause that temptation to recur until one justifies his sin and encourages others to do the same. Rashi states

that this means: "For I shall add on a punishment for him for that which he had done until now unintentionally, and I would have overlooked them, but now he has caused that I should combine them with that which was intentional." Originally his rebellion was only against Hashem but not truly replacing Him with idol worship. Now, however, he intentionally causes others to follow his direction. Hashem would have forgiven him his first, unintentional turning towards idols, but now he will be held accountable for that sin added to the punishment he will receive for his intentional sin. Before he was as if he were a drunk, acting without intent. Now he will be punished for that which he intended as well as that which was unintended. The concluding words of our section make this clear: "Hashem will not be willing to forgive him, for then Hashem's anger and His wrath will smoke against that man, and the entire imprecation written in this Book will come down upon him, and Hashem will erase his name from under the Heavens, Hashem will set him aside for evil from among all the tribes of Yisrael, like all the imprecations of the covenant that is written in this Book of the Torah."

It is difficult to observe all the Laws of the Torah. The six hundred thirteen commandments are supplemented by the Oral Law which details how these commandments are to be observed. It is easy to be tempted away from observing a law once, but that temptation can foster and lead to encouraging others to rebel if one does not do teshuva, return to Hashem. We are approaching the time when all sins can be forgiven if we return to Hashem. May we return to Hashem and His Laws, and may we be worthy of Hashem's forgiveness. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

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Hakhel

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"Gather (*hakhel*) the people – the men, women, children, and the strangers in your midst, in order that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your G-d" (*Devarim* 31:12). This refers to the mitzva of *Hakhel*, which takes place on Sukkot at the conclusion of the *Shemita* year. The Torah specifies the categories of people who are obligated to attend. Nevertheless, the verse's inclusion of women may be limited, as we shall see.

Our initial assumption would be that women are not obligated in *Hakhel*. Since it takes place once every seven years, it seems to be a positive time-bound commandment (from which women are exempt). Yet the Mishnah tells us that *Hakhel* is an exception to the rule. There is another reason why women would still be exempt. According to many opinions, the obligation of attending *Hakhel* is connected to the obligation to travel to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals. Only property owners are obligated to do so.

Someone who does not own land is exempt from both the pilgrimage and *Hakhel*. Thus, it is possible that the verse's inclusion of women in *Hakhel* is limited to the small minority of women who own land.

There is a disagreement about who is included in the category of children (*taf*) for this purpose. Some say that even the smallest children, namely nursing babies, must be brought to *Hakhel*. Others maintain that only children of educable age must be brought. According to this second opinion, who is watching over the little ones when all the parents are gathered in the *Beit HaMikdash*? If most women are exempt because they do not own land, this problem is solved. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the whole nation gathers to hear and study the word of G-d, while leaving all the little children to run wild (or under the supervision of non-Jews, or impure Jews who are forbidden from entering the Temple. This is further support for the possibility that most women stayed at home for *Hakhel*. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

There is idol worship and there is idol worship. As Rav Elchonon Wasserman wrote, even today, when the urge to worship literal idols is absent, there are a number of "isms" that represent still-beckoning idolatries of the modern era.

In warning against assimilating other nations' idolatries, Moshe Rabbeinu tells our ancestors that "You saw their abominations and their detestable idols, of wood and stone; of silver and gold that were with them" (Devarim, 29:16).

Rashi explains the separation (reflected in the cantillation notes) of the phrases "of wood and stone" and "of silver and gold" by noting the latter's proximity to "that were with them." He explains that the idolators of old had no compunctions about exposing their wood and stone statues to public view but took pains to protect their valuable metal ones by keeping them "with them," under lock and key.

I wonder if there may be another way of reading the pasuk's separation of the phrases.

The "silver and gold" phrase doesn't explicitly mention idols, although it's certainly reasonable to assume that the early reference to "abominations and... detestable idols" refers as well to the final phrase of the pasuk.

But maybe that last phrase can also be read as a discrete reference, not to idols per se but, rather, to literal "silver and gold" - in other words, to other nations' infatuation with precious metals, with amassing wealth.

With, in other words, one of the modern idolatries, one of the "isms" that would tempt Jews in the future: materialism.

The Midrash in Koheles Rabbah (1:13)

observes that: "One who has one hundred [units of currency] wants two hundred"; and implies that the progression only continues on from there.

Aspiring to being able to provide for one's family's needs is obviously proper, as is aiming for wealth to support good causes. So, in the modern economic system, is saving for the future.

But aspiring, when one has "100," to attain "200" simply for the sake of having more - and billionaires have no need to double their wealth - is something else. It may reflect the aspiration of societies around us, but it should have no place among Jews. We are not to imitate others in either their literal idolatries or in their addiction to "silver and gold." © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Pain. Even the kind we choose to experience, we'd do without if we could. Yes, we do feel better after persevering and succeeding despite the pain, but if you ask most people, they'd still prefer the painless route to success.

Let's not forget that our bodies are wired for pain to let us know when something is going wrong. It's our body's way of saying, "Don't do that or you'll really hurt yourself." The idea of, "No pain, no gain" is something we have to live with, but not something we choose to live by. It's just that we human beings also like to gain in life, and that forces us to face the pain.

In fact, we make heroes out of people who do, at least for the "right" reasons. The Torah calls it *mesiras Nefesh* -- self-sacrifice, and when done for the right reason and in the right way, it increases a person's reward in the World to Come and gets them positive Divine attention.

It is easy to fear pain, and all of us do, though some more than others. The Torah counts on it when threatening us with curses for disobedience. Let's face it, fear of pain is one of the best motivating factors to overcome our inertia when it comes to fulfilling certain responsibilities. A lot of people get out of bed to make it to minyan on time because of what they'll suffer if they don't.

Fear of pain stops being something positive when it becomes a daily nightmare, or debilitating. Life is a process of development that includes taking at least some minor risks from time to time. The average person who has yet to become too obsessive about avoiding pain will take those risks when they can't be avoided, like a critical operation. But they may not take the ones they can choose to avoid even though they represent an important opportunity for personal growth.

President Roosevelt was quoted as saying during the Great Depression, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." It's a great line, meant to encourage Americans at the time to not let circumstance sap them

of all their life force. Despite the dark cloud hovering above and the negative economic forecast, people would only be able to turn things around by creating and using opportunities to make things better. Just as their losses had been real, they had to believe that their gains would be as well if they took the necessary steps to make them so.

Rosh Hashanah is next week, b"H. Yom HaDin -- Day of Judgment. Who takes this seriously and is not concerned about their outcome? And even though we give the holiday a festive spin, at the end of the day it is a life-and-death decision. Even if we have "escaped" judgment until now, enjoying better results than anticipated, we know there are no guarantees for the upcoming year. People around us are dying. They're getting sick or suffering major setbacks, and if we're honest, we know we can't explain why them and not us.

Then there are the people who are already going through Gihenom. They've suffered greatly and perhaps still do. Will next year be better, worse, or the same? It's a terrifying question to think about, especially if you already feel you're doing everything you can to make God ease up and it still hasn't helped.

The Torah's answer at all times, but actually in this week's parsha: "You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live" (Devarim 30:19). Yes, it means do not stray from Torah and live a zombie secular life. But it also means, do not let anything block you from the opportunity to enhance your life. Nothing. Not ta'avah (too much desire for material pleasure) from one side and not fear from the other.

In both cases, of ta'avah and pachad (fear), it is not a question of psychologically beating them back. That rarely works. It is a question of out-prioritizing them. A parent afraid of the water will jump in anyhow to save their child. A lazy person will go out of their way for the woman or man of their dreams. One person may not be able to push down a wall, but many perhaps can.

Focusing on a problem only prolongs it. Focusing on its solution, or even just something more positive solves it, or keeps us going long enough for it to solve itself. Serving God with joy is easy to do when you're already happy. Serving Him with joy while depressed is not only a great mitzvah and Kiddush Hashem, but therapy itself.

And you know what? If we keep track of blessings instead of our curses, we find out that they greatly outnumber the bad things in life. Happiness is a state of mind, one that is easily influenced by our perception of reality. I can speak from personal experience that playing "The Happiness Game," as basic and childish as it seems, has very grown-up results. It is amazing how seeing pages of blessings that we live with every day, even see when we look in the mirror but don't take note of, can lift a person's spirit just by seeing them listed.

The good news is that you don't have to be happy and successful to be great, or to come out of Rosh Hashanah with a good report card. You just have to make a point of recognizing opportunities for greatness, big and small, and use them. The rest will take care of itself because God will take care of the rest. © 2025 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"When he hears the words of this curse he shall bless himself in his heart and say, "All will be well with me when I follow the guidance of my heart..." (Devarim 29:18) Last week, the Torah unleashed a litany of curses and warnings upon those who would scorn Hashem's mitzvos and ignore them. Now, the Torah tells us that if someone pats himself on the back and says, "I will follow the dictates of my heart and all will be well with me," he should be warned that his sin will be unforgiveable.

The commentaries offer a number of explanations here. Some say that the fellow declares, "I will simply not accept these curses, and then I cannot be held accountable for them. I will act as I see fit, and will not agree to perform the mitzvos." This is a mistake for he is bound by the mitzvos of Hashem which we all accepted at Sinai.

Others discuss that the curses in Ki Savo are given in the singular form, referring to Klal Yisrael as a single entity. This man, by announcing that he will follow the dictates of his heart, tries to separate himself from the Jewish People, and thereby escape punishment. This is not possible, and will lead to more punishment because he is brazenly flouting Hashem's commands.

With Rosh Hashana upon us, and Hashem's judgment, this is a poignant reminder that there are consequences to our actions. We are responsible to act like good Jews and if we don't, we will be liable for even the inadvertent sins, because even were we to know about them, we would commit them anyway because we don't care. This is a truly grave crime.

But there is one positive and inspiring message here as well. When a person sins and says, "I will be fine because I follow my heart," he is wrong and will pay the price. But, if he tells himself he will be fine, "because Hashem will have compassion on me," though this is the wrong approach, it may very well work. If we approach Hashem on Rosh HaShana and throw ourselves on the mercy of the court, we have a chance of getting off the hook, as long as we commit to be better.

When we recognize how kind and gracious Hashem is, understanding it is because He loves us, it is a merit for us and can help sweeten our judgment. However, if we simply feel Hashem is a pushover, who will look away from our misdeeds, He will not stand for

that, and full judgment will come upon us. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbos Hagadol distinguished itself, then, in that regard. All the great miracles associated with the Exodus had already flowed from Heaven on that day, placing them in position for the fifteenth of Nisan when they would become manifest.

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

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

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

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

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

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