Vayelech 5786 Volume XXXIII Number 1

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

A New Beginning

The cycle of the Jewish year has already begun. We've approached Almighty G-d and asked him for forgiveness, beseeching Him for a year of health and prosperity. For the Jewish People, the High Holy days represents a time of renewal; a time for a new beginning.

I often wonder how we are able to approach Almighty G-d with the same yearly requests, given the fact that we are essentially the same people we were a year ago and probably didn't change much over the course of the year. Yet we approach G-d as if our slate has been wiped clean and we can begin anew, fresh and invigorated as if this was the first day of our lives. What a remarkable thought!

The possibilities are endless, and the opportunities allow us to envision for our families and ourselves the possibility of erasing our past and starting fresh. This ability to look ahead and not necessarily to look back at the past is truly a G-d given talent; To somehow forget the past and to believe that the future will bring new and exciting possibilities without the influence of our misdeeds of the past; To see a person as good despite his/her past actions; To give them a second chance knowing full well that they might ultimately fail again.

We find this same concept in Jewish Education as well. When we begin the year educators should project the theme of Rosh Hashanah to all their teachers and students- the theme of a new beginning; a chance to start fresh and to right the past. Teachers tend to label children at a young age. Most times this label remains with the children throughout their lives, frequently stifling their growth and more importantly, their ability to change. I often overheard teachers talk negatively about students as early as the first day of school. Remarks such as "Oh yes I know him very well, he's a handful and he never does his work" resonate when they receive their student rosters. While their comments are meant as friendly warnings to their co-workers, their statements have a profound negative effect on any possibility that there is any hope for change in the future for this child.

Though we know our children intimately, and we know who are studious and who are discipline problems, we owe it to ourselves and our students to look at each student as beginning a new slate. In the past, when I began my first Staff meeting of the year, I often told my teachers that this is the approach we should have when starting the school year. As difficult as this sounds, given the past record of a particular child, it nevertheless becomes incumbent on all educators to make the attempt and to allow the child to feel that he/she is given a new beginning, to start fresh and forge a new path for their future.

Though Judaism holds accountable the past deeds and misdeeds of an adult, they are nevertheless given the opportunity to assemble on Yom Kippur and ask Almighty G-d for forgiveness. Children, as well, must be allowed to feel that there is a chance for them to change despite their past actions. As Teachers and Educators we owe it to them to attempt with all our passion, love and understanding to give them this chance. *Rabbi Weiss was involved in Jewish education for over forty years, serving as principal of various Hebrew day schools. He has received awards for his innovative programs and was chosen to receive the coveted Outstanding Principal award from the National Association of Private Schools. He now resides in Israel and is available for speaking engagements. Contact him at ravmordechai@aol.com*

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in loving memory of my dear parents Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakauhen Paul Kahn and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehauschua Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt by Fernand Kahn

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

The parsha of Vayelech is the parsha that contains the smallest number of verses – only thirty – of any other parsha in the Torah. It also is the parsha that usually coincides with Shabat Shuva, the holy Shabat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The words of the parsha are part of the last testament of Moshe uttered on the day of his passing from this earth.

As is his wont, Moshe minces no words regarding the fate of the Jewish people in its future story. Thus the shortest parsha of the Torah is also one of the most powerful of all of the parshiyot of the Torah. In effect Moshe warns his people Israel that the Lord will hold them accountable to the terms of the covenant of Sinai and that that covenant is irreversible and

unbreakable.

It will take a long time and much twisting and turning by the Jewish people before they accept that reality of covenantal responsibility. But Moshe assures them that eventually the message will set in and that this will be the basis for the Jewish return to God and His Torah. This is the essence of the parsha's content and the brevity of the parsha only serves to enhance the power of its message.

There are certain self-evident truths that need no extra words, explanations or language. This parsha especially gains in power and relevance as Jewish history unfolds over thousands of years. Every deviation from the covenant of Sinai has eventually brought with it angst and pain if not even disaster in the Jewish world. Just look around at Jewish society and history and Moshe's words are clearly vindicated by circumstances and events.

Personal repentance and return is far easier to achieve than is national repentance and return. The Jewish people or at least a significant part of it has strayed very far away from the covenant of Sinai. The situation here in Israel is far better than it is in the Diaspora where intermarriage, ignorance, alienation and false gods have eroded Jewish faith, family, self-identity and values. How is it possible to hope for a national return to the covenant of Sinai under such circumstances?

Our short parsha seems to indicate that it will be a process and not a sudden epiphany. The prophet in the haftorah indicates that such a process will be incomplete without the recognition that the false gods and temporarily popular ideals all have led nowhere. He echoes Moshe's words in our parsha that return and repentance in a national sense can only occur if there is a realization how badly we have gone astray.

The great challenge, of the modern culture upon us, is how pervasive it is in every facet of our lives. The confusion that this engenders in the Jewish people prevents clear thinking, accurate judgment and honest assessments of true Jewish values versus current faddish correctness.

Our parsha is short but our way back is long and rigorous. In this good and blessed year that has just begun let us start - and continue that journey that leads back to Sinai and forwards to complete national redemption.

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

By now Moses had given 612 commands to the Israelites. But there was one further instruction he still had to give, the last of his life, the final mitzvah in the Torah: "Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Deut. 31:19)

The oral tradition understood this to be a command that each Israelite should take part in the writing of a Sefer Torah. Here is how Maimonides states the law: "Every male Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, 'Now therefore write this song,' meaning, 'Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song,' since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll." (Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 7:1)

There is something poetic in the fact that Moses left this law until the last. For it was as if he were saying to the next generation, and all future generations: "Do not think it is enough to be able to say, My ancestors received the Torah from Moses. You must take it and make it new in every generation." And so Jews did.

The Koran calls Jews "the people of the Book." That is a great understatement. The whole of Judaism is an extended love story between a people and a book- between Jews and the Torah. Never has a people loved and honoured a book more. They read it, studied it, argued with it, lived it. In its presence they stood as if it were a king. On Simchat Torah, they danced with it as if it were a bride. If, God forbid, it fell, they fasted. If one was no longer fit for use it was buried as if it were a relative that had died.

For a thousand years they wrote commentaries to it in the form of the rest of Tenakh (there were a thousand years between Moses and Malachi, the last of the prophets, and in the very last chapter of the prophetic books Malachi says, "Remember the Torah of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel"). Then for another thousand years, between the last of the prophets and the closure of the Babylonian Talmud, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries in the form of the documents-Midrash, Mishnah and Gemarra-of the Oral Law. Then for a further thousand years, from the Gaonim to the Rishonim to the Acharonim, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries to the commentaries, in the form of biblical exegesis, law codes and works of philosophy. Until the modern age virtually every Jewish text was directly or indirectly a commentary to the Torah.

For a hundred generations it was more than a book. It was God's love letter to the Jewish people, the gift of His word, the pledge of their betrothal, the

marriage contract between heaven and the Jewish people, the bond that God would never break or rescind. It was the story of the people and their written constitution as a nation under God. When they were exiled from their land it became the documentary evidence of past promise and future hope. In a brilliant phrase the poet Heinrich Heine called the Torah "the portable homeland of the Jew." In George Steiner's gloss, "The text is home; each commentary a return." (George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," in The Salmagundi Reader, 99-121)

Dispersed, scattered, landless, powerless, so long as a Jew had the Torah he or she was at home-if not physically then spiritually. There were times when it was all they had. Hence the lacerating line in one of the liturgical poems in Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein lanu shiur rak haTorah hazot, "We have nothing left except this Torah."

It was their world. According to one Midrash it was the architecture of creation: "God looked in the Torah and created the universe." According to another tradition, the whole Torah was a single, mystical name of God. It was written, said the sages, in letters of black fire on white fire. Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, arrested by the Romans for teaching Torah in public, was sentenced to death, wrapped in a Torah scroll that was then set on fire. As he was dying his students asked him what he saw. He replied, "I see the parchment burning but the letters flying [back to heaven]" (Avodah Zarah 18a). The Romans might burn the scrolls but the Torah was indestructible.

So there is immense power in the idea that, as Moses reached the end of his life, and the Torah the end of its narrative, the final imperative should be a command to continue to write and study the Torah, teaching it to the people and "putting it in their mouths" so that it would not abandon them, nor they, it. God's word would live within them, giving them life.

The Talmud tells an intriguing story about King David, who asked God to tell him how long he would live. God told him, that is something no mortal knows. The most God would disclose to David was that he would die on Shabbat. The Talmud then says that every Shabbat, David's "mouth would not cease from learning" during the entire day.

"When the day came for David to die, the Angel of Death was despatched, but finding David learning incessantly, was unable to take him-the Torah being a form of undying life. Eventually the angel was forced to devise a stratagem. He caused a rustling noise in a tree in the royal garden. David climbed up a ladder to see what was making the noise. A rung of the ladder broke. David fell, and for a moment ceased learning. In that moment he died." (Shabbat 30a-b)

What is this story about? At the simplest level it is the sages' way of re-envisioning King David less as a military hero and Israel's greatest king than as a penitent and Torah scholar (note that several of the Psalms, notably 1, 19 and 119, are poems in praise of Torah study). But at a deeper level it seems to be saying more. David here symbolizes the Jewish people. So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, it will not die. The national equivalent of the angel of death-the law that all nations, however great, eventually decline and fall-does not apply to a people who never cease to study, never forgetting who they are and why.

Hence the Torah ends with the last command-to keep writing and studying Torah. And this is epitomized in the beautiful custom, on Simchat Torah, to move immediately from reading the end of the Torah to reading the beginning. The last word in the Torah is Yisrael; the last letter is a lamed. The first word of the Torah is Bereishit; the first letter is beit. Lamed followed by beit spells lev, "heart." So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, the Jewish heart will never stop beating. Never has a people loved a book more. Never has a book sustained a people longer or lifted it higher.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Based on a series of verses in this week's Torah reading, "The Lord said to Moses…write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:16–30), our sages of the Talmud have extracted the command upon each Israelite to write for himself a Torah Scroll (Sanhedrin 21b). Clearly the Talmud believes that the Pentateuch, the five Books of Moses, is a song (Shira).

A song? This book of 613 specific do's and don'ts which direct an individual's life from the moment he gets up in the morning until the moment he falls asleep? If anything, the conventional wisdom of the non-observant see our Shulchan Arukh (compendium of Jewish laws) as a burden, a yoke which suggests far more of a dirge than a song.

According to a famous Midrash, when God created the world, the dove, representing the bird kingdom, complained bitterly: "Look how big the other animals are – they'll kill us!" So the Almighty recognized the justice of the complaint and fashioned for each bird a pair of wings.

But the next day the dove returned, still upset. "Look what You did! We may have been small, but at least we were light and nimble. Now we have these two burdens which actually serve to prevent us from running quickly when we're being pursued!" The Almighty smiled and explained to the dove that those wings, when used properly, would enable them to fly higher than any of the other creatures and soar to the heavens, close to the Almighty Himself.

And so, getting back to the "song," – that's how the Bible sees the commandments, as enabling the individual to ennoble and sanctify himself. In the same way that each of us enjoys a great high when we accomplish a difficult task and perform it well, so too does the song of the Bible allow us to rejoice in the potential of human nature and the ability of the human being to achieve a life of morality and holiness.

Recited on this Sabbath of Repentance, these biblical verses give us a clue to why Yom Kippur, which many see as nothing but needless deprivations, is actually the happiest day of the Jewish calendar. Even with all the fasting and the hours and hours spent in the synagogue, nevertheless the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once said, "On Tisha B'Av I can't eat because I'm so sad. On Yom Kippur I have no need to eat, because I'm so happy."

Yom Kippur is not a fast of sadness. It's a demonstration of the great power that we didn't know we had, that we can spend twenty-five hours like the angels who never need food or drink, soaring close to God Himself, transcending the physical and showing only our spiritual side, that we're worthy of forgiveness and that we'll be able to keep the Torah, if only given another chance. And the custom, in just about every yeshiva which conducts Yom Kippur services, is to ecstatically sing and dance with renewed vigor and dedication after the last Shofar blasts are sounded at the end of the Ne'ila prayer, at the conclusion of the fast. The excited students are declaring with their enthusiasm: Behold, we have transcended our physical selves, we have climbed upwards into the divine embrace, we feel Your gracious compassion, we are ready and worthy to attempt to perfect ourselves and the world.

While Christianity believes its founder son died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity, in order to gain absolution for humanity, Judaism continues along the path it's always walked, celebrating the Day of Forgiveness on the tenth of Tishrei, each Jew needing no intermediary. We believe that each person can rise above his transgressions and failures, control his passions, and redeem himself.

In direct opposition to those religions which question the capability of the individual to redeem himself and rise above his physical desires comes along the song of the Torah and praises the human being for his capacity to rise above his weaknesses and transgressions, recreate himself, and redeem his society. And just as a good teacher never gives his student an assignment he can't cope with, and a concerned parent never entrusts a child with an obligation he can't fulfill, God would never have given us a Torah unless He knew that we could live in accordance with its precepts. *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.*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

I Can No Longer Go and Come In

In the beginning of our parasha, Moshe acknowledges to the people that he will not be able to lead them into the Land promised to their forefathers. The Torah states: "Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Yisrael. He said to them, 'I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go and come in, and Hashem has said to me, "You shall not cross this Jordan." Hashem, your Elokim – He will cross before you; He will destroy these nations from before you, and you shall possess them; Yehoshua – he shall cross over before you, as Hashem has spoken. Hashem will do to them as He did to Sichon and Og, the kings of the Amorite, and their land, which He destroyed, and Hashem will deliver them before you; and you shall do to them according to the entire commandment that I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid and do not be broken before them, for Hashem, your Elokim – it is He Who goes with you, He will not loosen [His hold on] you nor will He forsake you.' And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him 'Be strong and courageous, for you shall come with this people into the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. Hashem – it is He Who goes before you; He will be with you; He will not release you nor will forsake you; do not be afraid and do not be afraid.'"

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that after the blessings and the curses, which Moshe spoke to the people earlier in this Book, Moshe could now turn "to say farewell to his people, to present his successor to them, and to say a few words of encouragement to him." Moshe chose not to call the people to him with the trumpets like a royal decree. Instead, he "went to the assembled people, in the simplest manner, quite in the way which characterized the most modest of men, to bid farewell to them."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks a question similar to HaRav Hirsch, wanting to know why Moshe went to the people instead of calling them with the trumpets as he was commanded by Hashem previously. HaRav Sorotzkin tells us that our great Rabbis learned from this that there is no governing on the day of one's death. Moshe had heard from Hashem that he would die this day and not enter the land. The Ohr HaChaim says that he went from where he had been addressing the people to the Mishkan where he spoke to the elders of each tribe separately. The Ohr HaChaim also quotes the Ramban and others

who say that he went from the Camp of the Leviim to the Camp of the Tribes of Yisrael. HaAmek Davar says that he went from tribe to tribe because he was slowly losing the strength to address them when all were together.

After the Torah tells us that Moshe was one hundred twenty years old, Moshe says, "I can no longer go and come in." HaRav Hirsch explains that this phrase is a common idiom meaning that he could no longer carry out the leadership of the people. Rashi states, "One might be able to think that his (Moshe's) strength had waned." But Rashi goes on to say that "his eye did not dim, and his moisture did not leave him." Rashi explains that Moshe was really saying that he no longer had the authority given him by Hashem to cross into Israel and lead the people. The Kli Yakar uses this idea to argue that Moshe "went out" to each tribe to prove to them that he was bot strong and capable but did not have permission to "go and come back." That authority was now given over to Yehoshua. HaAmek Davar explains that Moshe said, "I can no longer go (out to war) and come in (returning in peace)."

HaAmek Davar states that there are four different ways in which watching over the B'nei Yisrael is described: (1) "He will cross before you", (2) "He Who goes with you", (3) "He Who goes before you", and (4) "He will be with you". Each of these descriptions is different and exact. "He will cross before you" must be understood with the idea that the word "oveir, cross before" is tied to the idea of making a blessing before doing the act (oveir laasiatan). HaAmek Davar explains that this means that the B'nei Yisrael were prepared to enter the land, but Hashem would not enter before them until they were ready. "He Who goes with you" refers to Yehoshua taking an equal role in conquering the land. "He Who goes before you" refers to Yehoshua going before the people, which indicates that Yehoshua would lead only when the B'nei Yisrael were prepared to follow him into battle. "He will be with you" once again refers to Hashem, as Yehoshua would be accompanied by Hashem in battle much as Moshe was aided by Hashem in leading the B'nei Yisrael out of Egypt.

When the B'nei Yisrael crossed the Red Sea when leaving Egypt, Moshe told the people that they should remain silent and watch while Hashem would do battle for them against the Egyptians. There they did not participate in the battle that would ensue. Here, however, the B'nei Yisrael were told, "do not be afraid and do not be broken before them." The Ohr HaChaim explains that this command indicates that Hashem would be with the people, but they would have to fight for their land. Hashem's promise was not that they would be allowed to stand and watch Hashem destroy their enemies before them, but instead, they would be prepared for battle and would participate with Hashem. Still, it was incumbent on them to recognize that their efforts alone were insufficient to defeat their foes. Even though they participated in the battle, it was won only by Hashem's strength and His power.

One cannot leave this section without wondering why it was necessary for Moshe to say to Yehoshua, "be strong and courageous." If there was any doubt in Moshe's mind that Yehoshua was quite capable of replacing him as the leader, he should have argued with Hashem immediately upon hearing His choice. Yehoshua had already demonstrated his strength and courage several times, from Amalek to Og. But this time his leadership role had changed. Before, he was a great general and strategist. He made the decisions of how best to carry out the battles; he did not make the decision to go into battle. That decision is significantly harder to make. That would require a new level of courage, and Yehoshua might not have felt comfortable in this new role.

As we get older, we are troubled by the decision to give over our responsibilities to a younger set of leaders. We often push ourselves beyond our limits, only to fail from our diminished strengths. May we trust Hashem to guide our successors as He has guided us throughout our lives.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The ten-day period that begins with the two days of Rosh Hashanah (this year, Sept. 23-24) and ends with Yom Kippur (Oct. 2), are known as the "Aseret Yemei Teshuvah – Ten Days of Repentance." These days are also known as Yomim Noraim or the "Days of Awe." In the United States, these days are commonly referred to as the "High Holy Days."

It is interesting to note that the term High Holy Days rather markedly points to the connection between the words "holy day" and "holiday." The word holiday actually comes from the Old English hāligdæg, from hālig (holy) + dæg (day). Literally speaking, a "holiday" is supposed to be a "holy day."

This concept dates back to the time when the vast majority of humanity toiled just to provide themselves with the basic necessities of food and shelter. Holidays were primarily a religious day of rest and reflection that revolved around attending religious services. These were days set aside for spending time with families and friends and communing with the Almighty.

Not coincidentally, the Hebrew word "shabbat" also means to rest, and for observant Jews Shabbat revolves around disconnecting from their very busy work week lives. For 25 hours every week they go "off the grid" and refocus their energies; attending synagogue, studying Torah, celebrating festive meals with family and friends, and meditating on the meaningful elements of their lives.

(At this point, I must make mention of the late Charlie Kirk. No matter what one felt about his political views, one had to admire his courage to declare his love of God, family, and religion. He was also a staunch defender of the State of Israel. Though a deeply devout Christian, he said, "Every Friday night, I keep a Jewish Sabbath. I turn off my phone from Friday night to Saturday night. The world cannot reach me, and I get nothing from the world. Try it. It will bless you infinitely."

He went on to assert that keeping a tech-free Sabbath reduces anxiety and depression and will improve the emotional health of American families. It is particularly worth noting that his whole business model was based on social media and online interconnectivity – yet he found the space in his life to carve out a full day each week to disconnect.

Non-Jews seeing the innate value and keeping a "Jewish Sabbath" should be a wake-up call to every single Jew to whom God gifted the wisdom and responsibility of observing Shabbat some 3300 years ago. It's your heritage – embrace it.)

As the Western World grew more secular, these "holy days" began to be viewed primarily as vacations from work and about taking trips; thus slowly morphing into holidays. One can only imagine what would happen if a British father told his kids that this year he would be taking them on a very special "holiday" – and then proceeded to take them to church or synagogue for eight hours. They'd probably start looking for another family to adopt them.

In truth, the Jewish concept of "Days of Awe" can be viewed in more than one way. In one sense the word awful just means an extreme; "Jeff Bezos has an awful lot of money." But spending eight or nine hours in a synagogue during the High Holy Days can be either awe-full or awful. The difference really depends on understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these days.

Last week we discussed the primary obligation that we are trying to achieve on Rosh Hashanah. In this week's column I would like to discuss the rest of the "Days of Awe." The Shabbat that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ("Day of Atonement") is called "Shabbat Shuva – Shabbat of Repentance."

Anyone familiar with the liturgy of Yom Kippur is aware that much of the service contains a very heavy dose of demonstrative remorse in the form of breast beating accompanied by a litany of words of confession and regret. Naturally, this leads to an incredibly somber mood and synagogue atmosphere. Refraining from all food and drink certainly compounds the misery.

With this in mind, the following passage in the Talmud (Ta'anis 26b) is nothing short of astonishing. Rabbi Shimon son of Gamliel said; "The Jewish nation has never had more festive days than the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur." The Talmud goes on to explain that on those two days all the unmarried young men and women used to go to the vineyards and search for their mates.

This is quite shocking. Somehow Yom Kippur was one of just two days a year chosen to arrange suitable matchmaking for young couples! What element of Yom Kippur makes this an appropriate day to do such a thing?

Furthermore, how can the Talmud characterize Yom Kippur as one of the two most festive days on the Jewish calendar? This seems like the exact opposite of Yom Kippur's natural tone. From where does the feeling of joy emanate?

Regarding the obligation to repent we find the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (Deuteronomy 30:11). The brilliant medieval Spanish scholar and philosopher known as Nachmanides concludes that this verse is referring to the mitzvah of repentance. Nachmanides continues; "this mitzvah is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Nachmanides' description of the mitzvah of repentance as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. His comment on the ease of repentance is reminiscent of the not quite-yet-reformed smoker who says, "Quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world – I've done it a hundred times!"

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine someone who is very overweight but has committed to a strict diet is suddenly faced with a crucial test: a pizza with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them.

Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people who succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it – I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?" and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. This is because, in their self-definition, they see themselves as an overweight person on a diet. Their commitment to the diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior – and controlling one's behavior, in a vacuum, is extremely difficult.

To be successful, you need to focus on changing your self-definition. You must reimagine who you want to be and redefine your self-identity before committing to being that sort of person. For example, a morbidly obese person who keeps kosher isn't likely to be tempted to eat a pork chop because keeping kosher is integral to his identity. The possibility of eating pork simply doesn't exist in his reality because that behavior

contradicts his very essence. Thus, if you identify as a father on a health journey with a goal of being able to hike, bike, and canoe with your outdoorsy kid, then that pizza and fries suddenly becomes less appealing.

Your mission on Yom Kippur is to ask yourself “Who do I want to be?” and then commit to being that type of person. Once we define our essence we can begin to align our behavior to make that new reality. This is what true repentance is supposed to accomplish. Committing to a way of life creates purpose and change.

By contrast, a person who is mindlessly driven by hedonistic desires or personal insecurities inexorably goes down a vapid path leading to self-destruction. (This is one of the reasons that we are enjoined to disengage from all forms of physical pleasure on Yom Kippur so that we can work on the spirit.)

This is what the Talmud meant. Because Yom Kippur is the day when we search for who we are and commit to living a life that follows our self-definition, it becomes the ideal day for matchmaking. This exercise in self-growth puts us in touch with who we truly are and thus we can understand who we need to marry to have the most amazing life partner.

Ultimately, when the work of the Ten Days of Repentance and Yom Kippur is done correctly, it leads one to self-fulfillment. This is why the Talmud describes it as one of the most festive on the Jewish calendar. Reconnecting with who you truly are leads one to incredible self-satisfaction and a sublime sense of joy.

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky
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The Torah introduces the mitzvah of Hakhel in Parshas Vayelech. Hakhel is a national gathering held once every seven years in which all Jews -- men, women, and children -- come together to celebrate national unity and purpose: "Gather together the people -- the men, and the women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities -- so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they shall fear Hashem your G-d and be careful to perform all the words of the Torah." [Devrarim 31:12].

The Talmud teaches [Chagiga 3a] an intriguing idea about Hakhel: "It was the week when it was the turn of Rav Elazar ben Azariah to give the lesson and the topic being discussed that day was the mitzvah of Hakhel. What did he expound? He expounded as follows: 'Gather the nation, the men, the women and the children...' We understand that the men came to learn and the women came to listen, but what purpose was there to bring the children? In order to give reward to those who brought them!"

The Mei HaShiloach and other commentaries as well expound on this idea of "to give reward to those who brought them". Is it just a question of getting reward for "schlepping" the kids? Perhaps for the same reward, the parents could have been commanded to carry along with them a sack of potatoes? It clearly means something more than that. The Mei HaShiloach interprets "giving reward to those who brought them" to mean that exposing one's children to the events of Hakhel is going to make an impression on the children and eventually the parents will reap the reward of having children who in their youth were impacted positively by the Hakhel ritual.

Imagine what a sight that was! The closest thing we have to Hakhel today also comes out approximately every 7 years -- every seven and a half years to be exact -- the Siyum HaShas. When my children were younger, I made a point of taking them. It is an amazing sight. Even if they are only out there in the concourse buying their kosher hot dogs, seeing tens of thousands of Jews together is impressive. It makes a lasting impression.

A person can ask himself afterwards "Was it worth it? I schlepped him, I took him out of school, I took him on the train, it cost me money. Was it worth it?" The Talmud teaches "to bring reward to those who bring them". Exposing children to such a gathering DOES make an impression. In the long run, it will certainly be worth it! Eventually the parents will realize reward for these efforts.

I know someone who made his own Siyum HaShas (marking the personal completion of studying the entire Babylonian Talmud). I asked him why he made a Siyum HaShas and he told me "My father made a Siyum HaShas when I was a boy and I saw what a big deal it was! I said to myself then, 'When I get older I want to do that also!'"

A parallel Mechilta in Parshas Bo quotes the same story as the Gemara in Chagiga with Rav Elazar ben Azarya, the mitzvah of Hakhel, and the explanation of why we bring the children -- "in order to bring reward to those who bring them." However, the Mechilta adds at the end, "Rav Yehoshua states 'Happy is our Patriarch Avraham who can count Rav Elazar ben Azaryah as one of his descendants.'" Why, we might ask, is Rav Yehoshua singling out Avraham Avinu in this statement? Should not Moshe Rabbeinu have nachas from Rav Elazar ben Azarya? What about Yakov Avinu, Dovid HaMelech, or Shlomo HaMelech? What is so special about Avraham Avinu and his connection to Rav Elazar ben Azaryah?

The answer is that the Almighty told us something about Avraham Avinu -- why He chose him and why Hashem refers to as 'Avraham the one I love' [Yeshaya 41:8]. The Chumash provides the answer. It is no mystery. "For I have cherished him (ki yeda'ativ), because he commands his children and his household

after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice..." [Bereshis 18:19]. The Ramban interprets ki yeda'ativ to mean, "For I have chosen him". I have chosen him, the Almighty testifies, because I know that he will give over the mesorah [tradition] to his children! Therefore, he is the first "patriarch"; he is the first 'Av'. He knows how to preserve Yiddishkeit -- he does it by commanding his children and household.

When Rav Elazar ben Azariah makes the same observation and teaches, "Why did the children come to Hakhel? It is to bring reward to those who bring them!" he is echoing the teaching of the Patriarch Avraham. This is exactly the tradition Avraham instituted in Klal Yisrael. Therefore "Happy are you Avraham Avinu to be able to count Rav Elazar ben Azarya as one of your descendants."

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And you shall rejoice in all the good Hashem, your G-d, gave you and your home, you and the Levite and the stranger in your midst." (Devarim 26:11) Once again, the Torah seems to be dictating our emotions, commanding us to feel a certain way. After one brings his offering, hands it to the Kohain, and recites the declaration, he is commanded to be happy with all the good Hashem has given him and his family. Of course, it may simply be an announcement that once one has done these things, he will feel satisfied and happy, but it seems to be worded like a mitzvah.

We can try to gain more insight from the context of the verse because it includes the others. While Rashi says the Torah is telling us that both the Levite and the Ger must bring Bikkurim, there doesn't seem to be much connection to the happiness mentioned in the posuk. The Targum Yonason says that the Levite and Ger will eat with you which sounds like they are enjoying the bounty you have, which would make sense in the context.

At this point, you might think the word v'samachta, "you shall be happy," can also mean, "you shall make happy," referring to the ones with whom you share your good fortune. However, as Rashi taught us earlier (24:5), it would have to be v'seemachta to refer to making others happy. So, what is going on here?

It would seem the Torah is telling us what kind of joy we are to have, and how to reach it. When one brings his first fruits to the Bais HaMikdash, he begins by discussing all that Hashem has done for him. How he originally had nothing, and Hashem brought us to this land, gave us rain and crops, and is responsible for all we have. One who does this right, is able to share what he has, because he understands it was a gift to him to begin with.

The commentaries highlight that the posuk says to rejoice in "all the good" that Hashem has given, and Chazal say, "Ain tov elah Torah, there is no "good" but Torah." In this vein, we can explain that the way a person is able to appreciate his good fortune, even while giving his money away to the Bais HaMikdash and to other people, is to look at things through a Torah lens. By doing so, one can graciously and joyously part with his wealth, because he knows that's why it was given to him.

It therefore turns out the Torah isn't directing our emotions, that we must feel a certain way, but rather it is directing our actions. We must study Torah and gain its understanding so we get to the point where we can happily share what Hashem has given us. To Rashi's point, we can now also be happy when we see others having success; when the Levi and the Ger have their own gifts to thank Hashem for, we rejoice in that as well, because we don't feel jealous or like anything has been taken away from us.

The Torah's way of looking at the world opens new vistas of humanity for us which enable us to lose our selfishness and think on a larger scale. We begin to see everyone else as part of Hashem's plan for the world, and we are glad they are in our lives. This is so liberating as to be its own reason to celebrate.

A twelve-year old boy decided he would grow long payos, sidelocks, which are a fulfillment of the mitzvah not to 'destroy' the hair of the head at the temples. Though he came from a Chasidic background, this was still highly unusual at the time he did it, back in the 1950's. It wasn't common for Jews to be so "noticeably" Jewish.

He explained his reasoning. He loved Westerns but felt that the movies were a distracting force in his studies. He knew that if he wore long payos, he would be too embarrassed to go into a theater. At the end, this young man grew to be a great Talmid Chacham - because he knew how to force his own hand.